

August 15, 2021  
Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

“The Words You Follow”

John 6:51-69

*“After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the Twelve, ‘Do you want to go away as well?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.’”*

Notice the big difference here. We’re at the end of the Bread of Life discourse and Jesus has spoken much. His words have caused not only the crowd, but also many of his own followers to turn away from him. Yet, when Jesus turns to the twelve and asks if they want to leave, Peter answers for the group and it is those very words of Jesus that are the reason they will stay: *“You have the words of eternal life.”*

And here’s a little tidbit we don’t catch—this is the first time John uses the term “the twelve” in his Gospel. Remember, twelve isn’t just a number; it’s the number of tribes in Israel and it indicates that “the twelve” who will found Christ’s church as apostles represent the new Israel of God; God’s new chosen people. And what is it here that sets them apart? The acceptance of Jesus’ words and recognition of who He is—the Holy One of God.

Quite often we read about the early church in the book of Acts and we get kind of jealous of the divine spiritual gifts that fell upon those early believers—speaking in different languages, healing, prophecy and other flamboyant signs of the Holy Spirit that spurred on the growth of the church. But really, this simple truth received and believed is what most of them had—Jesus is the holy one of God who gives the words of eternal life. This is exactly what you and I receive and believe, and thus we possess the very bread of life that is Christ himself. We are members of God’s chosen people, the New Israel.

Having these words of eternal life then, we must be careful to stick with them, hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them not only because they are the bread of life, but because there are other words all around us clamoring for our attention and acceptance—and they are worthless, dangerous words.

St. Paul says, *“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”*

This is a real warning because, let’s face it (and I don’t mean to insult anybody), we can find ourselves believing a whole lot of stuff that is simply untrue, often stuff that is obviously false when you pause long enough to examine it in the light of reason.

Seemingly normal people have lost thousands of dollars because they actually believed an email from a Nigerian widow-heiress who wanted to share her millions. Many, many smart people on Wall Street were convinced everything was true that this corporation Enron said about itself, and then the house of cards came tumbling down. And we’ve seen it in this weird time of Covid on both ends of the spectrum—remember when the talking heads were all agreeing with Fauci that if wearing one mask was good, wearing three at a time would be even better! Then just the other day I read a post forwarded to me as if serious news saying that everybody who received the vaccine was going to drop dead in 2040. People believe empty words.

And I’m not placing myself above the fray here. My point is that anybody...everybody is at risk of falling for the right words foisted on one at the right time in the right manner. We all are at risk of falling for empty words—especially in things spiritual, because we have a fallen

nature that really doesn't want to accept Jesus is the holy one of God because that fallen nature wants the number one spot for itself.

And let's face it; we're eager to jump after some empty words if those words seem to point toward something we desire! Our impulse is to say "Sure, I'm on board" and run with a leading toward something we want when, if we would just slow down and consider what we're doing, we might think better about what we're getting ourselves into. But before we know it, we done something that ought not be done.

Of course I can point to lots of examples of this in a myriad of Christian denominations where they've twisted or simply nullified the Word of God to either make sin acceptable or make we mere humans somehow responsible and able to gain ourselves salvation—both of which trample over the Gospel words of eternal life. But I'm not talking to them; I'm talking to you. And you do this too; we all do.

Think of somebody you dislike or even hate. When you regard them in thought, do you do so looking for and finding reasons to justify your attitude? It's what we do. We perceive being wronged and then our fallen nature finds all sorts of good reasons to justify a lack of love. And those reasons might make perfect sense according to the world. But those reasons are indeed the world deceiving you with empty words. Regard that same person according to the words of eternal life that Jesus speaks and you have no choice but to love and forgive, because that's what the holy one of God has done for you.

We do it a lot with our money. The word of the world is, "It's yours. You earned it. You should use it for you---your wants, your desires, your happiness." It makes sense according to the world. What's worse is we start believing happiness and the good life is attainable through wealth...and that's the beginning of putting our trust, hope and faith in wealth. It's the road we're led to by empty words of greed and it always ends in the same place; death—where all wealth is loss and the only gain to be found was in Jesus' words of eternal life where one should place that trust, hope and faith.

But Jesus' words of eternal life are tough to swallow because they're pretty clear—not your wealth, it's all God's, and that doesn't sit well with worldly thinking. But if you accept and believe it gets pretty darned sweet, knowing that a loving got has blessed you with eternal life and on top of it entrusting you with this earthly wealth to use to His glory! Thankfulness and praise surely follow! So again, examine your financial thinking according to the good words, the words of eternal life, and act accordingly.

And most especially, and maybe most difficultly, keep these words in the midst of your trials, suffering and approaching of the end of this life. The empty words are truly, truly void of any benefit in this area.

Earthly thinking rails against suffering and sacrifice, claiming any means to avoid it is justified. The words of eternal life include "pick up your cross and follow me" pointing to the faithful suffering Christ endured on His road to glory and making it clear that some of that may come upon us as we faithfully follow. We may suffer loss and hardship for the sake of the Gospel we hold dear.

Earthly thinking holds onto this life as the best life, and I've seen dying folks putting all their hope in doctors and medicines to save it. Doctors and medicines are great and we give thanks to God for them. We still die. Christ did. Earthly words are empty. The words of eternal life lead us past this broken life to see the perfect life yet to come, the life to which Jesus rose and there now prepares a place for us.

As you regard your life as a whole, regard the passing on of those you love around you, regard the family you will one day leave behind, as you regard your own impending death; consider which words you are hearing, believing and receiving. Step back from yourself, maybe picture yourself outside of you looking at yourself from a distance, and consider your attitudes.

Check your standing when it comes to how you are thinking, what words you are counting as credible and reliable. Is what Jesus says and more importantly what Jesus promises at the forefront of your thoughts as you tackle the stuff of this broken life? Or is the world and its way of regarding things doing all the talking? It talks a good game...until this life ends...and then it has nothing to say...forever.

*“You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”*

Peter’s words stand true. Jesus: His life, His death, His resurrection, His coming again, is delivered to you in His Word and Sacraments—the bread of life. Only this continually delivers the forgiveness that reconciles you with your Creator and opens the gates to His presence. Receive, believe and live in these words and, baptized into Christ, you also are made the holy one of God, the new Israel, and you have today the blessed reality, the words of eternal life.

Amen.