

Sermon: Words of Eternal Life

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles PC, August 22, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The federal election is in full swing. In a month or so, Canadians will be asked to vote for their preferred party, thus forming the next government of Canada. As party leaders fan out across the country on the campaign trails, an interesting exchange caught my attention a few days ago. Facing the latest release of inflation number for the month of July, coming in at 3.7%, a reporter asked the Liberal leader Justin Trudeau whether the government plans to direct the Bank of Canada to raise interest rate in order to fight this ever higher inflation. Trudeau replied somewhat impatiently, “When I think about the biggest, most important economic policy this government, if re-elected, would move forward, you’ll forgive me if I don’t think about monetary policy.” Trudeau then added, “You’ll understand that I think about families.”

That comment was widely criticized by the media and opposition leaders as arrogant and misinformed — as higher inflation does eat into the purchasing power of Canadian families. A look at all of our recent sky-rocketing grocery bills should illustrate that point.

Could this slip by Trudeau be viewed by voters as arrogance? Would this faux pas be in the same league as the one that Kim Campbell committed during the 1993 election, when she infamously stated, “an election is no time to discuss serious issues” — a statement that pretty much sank her chance of re-election. We will have to wait and see. One important take-away from this episode in politics is that politicians cannot afford to be seen as arrogant, as losing touch with the common voters, or as alienating one’s core base of support.

With that in mind, allow me to say this: Jesus, I think, makes a terrible politician! His teachings sometimes were hard to understand. He seldom took time to explain to his followers. When he did, he often came across as arrogant.

The Scriptural text that was read earlier, Gospel of John 6:51-69, is the continuation of a discourse, in which Jesus proclaimed to his followers that he is the bread of life. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Keeping in mind that prior to this discourse, Jesus had recently and miraculously fed five thousand, with only five loaves of bread and two fish—a miraculous sign that had drawn many in the region to seek out this prophet, this man of God, so to be fed this new manna from heaven.

However, starting from verse 51, Jesus began to teach that the bread of life he is offering is his own...flesh and blood! As in verse 53, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you". As one could imagine, to the Jews (or to anyone else), eating human flesh and drinking human blood would be viewed as repulsive, repugnant, and simply wrong, ethically, morally, and spiritually. To make the matter worse, Jesus taught this in public, in the synagogue of Capernaum.

Capernaum was a small town near the shore of Galilee. The Gospel of Matthew 4 describes Jesus leaving Nazareth and settling in Capernaum. Both Mark and Luke contain stories of Jesus regularly teaching and healing in that synagogue. The synagogue of Capernaum could be rightfully viewed as the 'campaign headquarter' of the earthly ministries of Jesus, and people in and around the town were his core supporters. One should never alienate one's own base, shouldn't it?

In the early 2nd century, when the Christian faith was starting to spread across the Roman Empire, Christian apologist Marcus Minicius Felix penned down a dialogue on Christianity between the pagan Caecilius and the Christian Octavius at the Roman port of Ostia. In it, Caecilius lobbed a string of charges against Christianity, including incest, poor lower class, self-righteousness, atheism, novelty, lack of patriotism, cause of gods' anger, and of course cannibalism.

Listen to his accusation: *"You Christians are the worst breed ever to affect the world. You deserve every punishment you can get! Nobody likes you. It would be better if you and your Jesus had never been born. We hear that you are all cannibals—you eat the flesh of your children in your sacred meetings."*

Listen now to the reply from Octavius, *"That story is probably based on reports that we share together a meal of the body and blood of Christ. That we do. But it is not human flesh we eat. It is bread and wine we consecrate to commemorate our Lord's death."* He followed it up a bit later, *"We do not expose our children, and you are well aware how so many of the little ones that have been left out to die have been rescued by Christians and given a home. So it's just the opposite of what you accuse us of, Caecilius. We don't consume human life; we rather protect and defend it."*

In the following dialogue, Octavius skillfully diffused each charge and politely provided rational explanations, even humbly invited Caecilius and other non-believers to join a Christian gathering and see for themselves. It is a fine piece of apologetic writing, defending and explaining the Christian faith, much of its content still relevant today.

If only Jesus would do some of the same thing in John 6. Rather, on the central issue of eating flesh and drinking blood, facing a mild and polite objection

from some of his disciples, *“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”* Jesus retorted, in verse 61-64 *“Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.”* He then added a bit later, *“For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”*

With such display of arrogance, many disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. Like I stated earlier: Jesus makes a rather terrible politician!

What do we make of Jesus, seemingly unwilling to provide a fairly simple explanation to a truly difficult teaching? Seemingly going out of his way to challenge his followers, to alienate, to even antagonize? Should we chalk it up to a moody Jesus having a bad day? Or of him lacking, perhaps needing some modern techniques in opinion poll, focus group, or hiring a PR firm?

Might I suggest that Jesus knew full well what he was doing. His action intentional, his words deliberate. Jesus was separating the wheats from the chaffs, he was winnowing the crops, he was putting his followers through refining fire, to burn up impurities so what remains will be pure, strong, and good.

So Jesus asked the twelve, in verse 67, *“Do you also wish to go away?”* Simon Peter answered him, *“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”*

Note here not only who remained, but why they chose to remain: You, Lord, have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God. Hallelujah, praise be to God, for such a statement of faith could only come from God. A statement of faith that is surely need in our time.

During the past five weeks, as the church gave me some much needed rest, I spent time at the Gracefield Christian Camp, first as family retreat, then volunteering as chaplain, ministering to the staff still working at the camp. I also spent time in Montreal, visiting a few congregations, connecting with some old friends. I had an interesting conversation with Joel, a fellow pastor who has been ministering in a fairly vibrant congregation for the past decade.

Joel is a tireless worker, faithful to the words of God. On top of congregational ministry and presbytery responsibilities, Joel also presides over funerals, on average 2-3 times a week, due to that fact that his church is nearby to a local cemetery, and Joel is registered as a stand-by Presbyterian minister. In that capacity, he is often thrust into dialogues with grieving family members who have lost loved ones. Many were former Catholics who had lost faith, lost contact with the church, yet still needing and wanting a minister to preside over

funerals and burials. He noted that often in the first half-an-hour of those initial meetings, conversations often revolve around their resentment of the church, why they had left the faith all together. Joel thought of his role as simply providing a pastoral presence in those conversations, allowing family members to vent in their grieving process. He would pray for them and with them. Perhaps through such ministering, he could 'move the needle' so those resentments, whether personal, institutional, or historical, could be lessen somewhat.

The pandemic has certainly impacted his church, in terms of Sunday attendance. We shared some challenges and joy of ministering in such a unique context, traded some best practices on how to 'build back better', prayed and blessed each other. It was good for me to witness the faithfulness in Joel, knowing there are fellow ministers working tirelessly for God's kingdom, in our respective corners.

Jesus proclaimed that "I am the bread of life" in chapter 6, he had earlier proclaimed that he is the living water in chapter 4. Allow me to leave with you the other significant "I am" statements of Jesus, as arranged in the Gospel John:

I am the light of the world (8);
I am the door of the sheep (10);
I am the good shepherd (10);
I am the resurrection and the life (11);
I am the way, the truth, and the life (14);
I am the true vine (15).

Yes Lord Jesus, indeed to whom can we go? We have chosen to follow you, and you have the words of eternal life. You are the Word of eternal life, the living Word. We have come to believe that you are the Holy one of God, Lord of the Church, our Saviour, Redeemer, Counsellor, and our Friend. There is none like you. So we follow, we pray, and we bless, we act, we wait, and we hope.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.