

Sermon: To Whom Can We Go?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, August 25, 2024)

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

It is good to be back to work. After a period of summer rest, a bit of travel to Taiwan with my family, and serving as chaplain at Gracefield Christian Camp. It's good to be back, wrestling with the Scripture, discerning the words and the will of God for us, in this time.

The Lectionary passages for the past few weeks have been honing in on John 6, the declaration of Jesus in one of the seven 'I Am' statements of this Gospel, particularly in verse 35 where Jesus said, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*"

For those of you who have been worshiping jointly with our neighbouring congregations during the past few weeks, a wonderful arrangement might I add, where we could sample the worship styles of different congregations. You might've caught Pastor Frank at Southminster, his reflection on how the teaching of Jesus empowered the emancipation movement of the 19th century, where the bread of life became a symbol of the struggle for justice and equality, for the enslaved people of African origin. You might also have caught Pastor Susan at Glebe-St. James, sharing on how Jesus as the bread of life inspires awe, and how awe transforms us to embrace the wonder of life.

You might've caught my reflection two weeks ago here at St. Giles, on reading John 6 in a sacramental way, of Jesus' invitation to 'eat his flesh and to drink his blood'. It is not an invitation to cannibalism, but to remember what he has done for us on the cross, through partaking in the Holy Communion—a sacrament which we will be sharing a little bit later.

That is also where I want to pick up today, as we chew on the words of Jesus in John 6 one last time. So, allow me to organize my thoughts in the following three insights.

First, the invitation to 'eat his flesh and to drink his blood' truly is strange. This text does not permit us to forget how strange the message of Christian faith really is. Eat his body? Drink his blood? With these few words, Jesus managed to offend just about everyone and alienated himself

from many disciples. With those words, the great crowd Jesus gathered around him dwindled, until only a few of his closest disciples remained.

Yet the strangeness doesn't end with shunning the literal reading of his invitation. The spiritual or sacramental reading of this invitation takes us to embrace the death and resurrection of Jesus, and to follow his manner of living and dying for the sake of others. The more one thinks of it, the stranger it becomes, and the more one realizes how difficult the journey of faith is.

The elements of bread and wine may represent the body and blood of Christ, but it is the self-sacrificial love of Christ that is really being consumed in a communion. By eating Jesus, we become Christ like. By eating Jesus, we invite him to abide in us as we abide in him. By eating Jesus, we join with him in a mystical communion. Our calling is more than skin deep. Once consumed, it reaches beneath the surface of our lives and into our minds, our ethics, or morals, our vocation, workplace, family relationships, daily schedules, eating habits and all the other ways we choose to live and die in Christ, all the many ways we live and die for our neighbours.

The second insight arises out of the confession Peter makes in verse 68-69. When seeing many of his disciples had turned back from following him, Jesus asked the remaining twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" It was a test, a test of loyalty and fidelity, a test of faith to see if the remaining twelve would stand firm or crumble.

To this test Simon Peter answered, "*Lord, to whom can we go?*" It is hardly a ringing endorsement of Jesus. Surely there are many places Peter and his friends could have turned. The Jesus movement was hardly unique amongst the many prophets and rabbis of the 1st century Judaism. They could have turned to John the Baptist, who was at this point in the Gospel narrative, arrested but not yet beheaded. They could have returned to their roots, that is fishing. If not fishing, perhaps exploring another business opportunity. Peter also had family obligations, a wife to support, a mother-in-law to care for, the comfort of home, the security of social status. There is always another adventure in life, another area yet to explore. Possibilities are endless, gates are wide open.

But Peter knew what he had found. In following Jesus, he came to believe that Jesus was the Holy one of God, who alone has the words of eternal life. For indeed, the gate is narrow and the road is hard. The few who enter to it, find life.

There is a third and final insight worth pursuing in this text, and that is life. Life is worth pursuing. The Gospel of John is very different from the other three accounts of Jesus, in so many ways. The words of institution that we are familiar with, that is 'Take, eat this is my body, given for you. And this cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.' These words do not exist in the Gospel of John.

Instead, what we have in John 6, is the words of Jesus declared not privately during the Last Supper, but publicly in the synagogue at Capernaum, where he said in ver 56-57, "*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.*"

The bread of heaven is Jesus, and those who consumes him, consumes life, and will live forever. Yes, self-sacrifice is called for. Yes, death may be encountered. But they are simply means to an end, and the end is always life—life abundant, life eternal. I am always reminded of these words of Moses, in Deuteronomy 30:19, "*I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life!*" That's it, choose life!

When the closest disciples of Jesus, represented by Peter, chose not to turn away but to walk forward with Christ, they became the 'Twelve'. This is the first time in the Gospel of John that the disciples are referred to in that way. The community of faith is thus born. It is not based on a particular creed, mission statement, or worship style. It is not based on nationality, ethnic origin or language spoken. What unites them as the body of Christ is their professed willingness to follow Jesus Christ.

In the same way, by following Christ, we too chose life and are thus called the people of God.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. **Amen.**