

Rev. Seth D Bode + Sermon 281 + Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

"Lord God, You have appointed me as a bishop and pastor in Your Church, but You see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked Your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon Your Word. Use me as Your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all."

"Sir, we would see Jesus."

JESUS' YEAR OF POPULARITY ENDS IN A DAY

Gospel -- John 6:60-69

60 When they heard it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching! Who can listen to it?" 61 But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, asked them, "Does this cause you to stumble in your faith? 62 What if you would see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 The Spirit is the one who gives life. The flesh does not help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning those who would not believe and the one who would betray him. 65 He said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is given to him by my Father." 66 After this, many of his disciples turned back and were not walking with him anymore. 67 So Jesus asked the Twelve, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

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How to clear a room. You may know that feeling during a conversation. You say something that just makes everyone uncomfortable -- politics, religion, a double meaning you did not intend. Slowly everyone fades into the walls. Suddenly you're the last person standing in a conversation of 1. Was it something you said?

Do you know that feeling? I was born with it. Well, let's just say it's happened once or twice. You'll be happy to know that it's biblical. Even Jesus could clear a room. Many of Jesus' followers didn't like what He had to say. To them, Jesus came off as obnoxious, caustic, toxic, uncomfortable. That's because what He had to say was personal, invasive, and it was taken as a threat. In one day the true Christian Church lost a majority of its members. Not only that, but it was recorded. It's on the books. Would you have included this in the Bible? What would you have done with this information?

By this time there 72 followers of Jesus, in addition to the Twelve, who preached, worked miracles, and baptized in His name. With compassion, healing, blessings ... Now they changed their minds and began to dislike and unfollow Him.

WAS IT SOMETHING JESUS SAID?

1. The part about the free gift

Really, if you understand what Jesus had to say, you wouldn't go.

Jesus sensed their concern. He wasn't just aware of it, but "He knew it in Himself." He could tell His words were the kind that made a sinner with imperfect reasoning trip. The particular hangup that Jesus knows is bothersome is that He has compared normal daily bread to something that spoils; and He has called Himself real food with real substance.

But now that they were offended, Jesus didn't back off, as if He had said something imperfect. Instead Jesus pressed the matter, saying that "the flesh counts for nothing." They had worked and worked and worked in a merits-based system that barely met them halfway, and Jesus was saying all their fleshly effort was for nothing if they didn't have their eternal souls figured out -- if they didn't get Bread of Life. There was something greater than everyday necessities, and that was eternal necessities. Focusing on everyday necessities means you eat the cost. What cost? The cost of always being unsure of what happens after all this.

Here is the trouble: People are resigned to the false notion, the false hope, of self-salvation. But the flesh, or sinful nature, does not help. It cannot bring you there. If you've pressed your flesh to the task of self-saving, you come to realize you have to follow a set of laws and do good in the world around you. As soon as you seem sure that you've done something good, you have to wonder if you've done enough. What if God isn't satisfied until you've done a little more? You put your flesh to it and it turns out you do a few more nice things, you help out at another food shelter or you donate some blood. But then you wonder if you've done enough still, all the people you could have helped. Meanwhile, you've blazed a trail of sins by not being there for your family and flaking out on a commitment with friends. Sooner or later one of two things happens: You think you've done enough and you swell up with pride; or you realize you can never do enough so you deflate into despair. That's your endgame when you fall into the strategy of self-salvation.

If you don't know the endgame of living in the false notion of self-salvation, getting by on your works, you'll try it. That's the danger. In trying to do it, you effectively walk away from Jesus too. You're not going for Jesus; you're going for pride or despair, neither of which gets you to God.

Why?

He wants to do it for you. Why? He has done it for you. Finally in verse 64, Jesus came down to the point that some of them would just not believe that He was the promised Holy One. That would only happen "if it was given to them by [His] Father."

What could it mean that it would be given to them by the Father?

See His "what if" statement. Verse 62: "What if you would see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?" What if salvation was laid out for you? What if it was done for you? What if you saw Jesus at the finish line? What if He were humiliated and exalted, ascended for all to see? What if the Father gave it to you on a silver platter called His Son, and by faith in Him, salvation was simply given to you?

Jesus had spoken so definitively about spiritual things. His very words were definitively spiritual, not just information but reformation. Eating of faith so far exceeded the eating of good works. Not only that, but Jesus had to say these words if "the many" were ever going to open their ears and hearts. The Spirit inheres in His Word, there is no shaking the Holy Spirit out of Jesus' Word. In the mouth of Jesus were the final answers.

But that is the scandal of it all, the stumbling block. Once the answers are there, there is no guessing anymore, no wondering if it is enough. There is nothing to claim for yourself, and there's no reason to be sad about it. You can't go back and save what Jesus has already saved. You can't make yourself the main point.

That is one way of expressing grace alone through faith alone -- there is no salvation unless the Father gives it to us, gives us what we need. We only love because He first loved us. It's by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves. It is the gift of God. Not by works so that no one can boast.

Would you take hold of free and certain salvation if it was done for you? Or would you languish that you did not get to do it yourself? If you languish, you're a part of "the many." If you take hold of it, you might as well be Peter or one of the Twelve. That's right, as weak as their faith was, Peter and the other Twelve held ever so tightly to this part and, oh ... that other thing Jesus said ...

2. The thing about eternal life

Jesus must have been heartbroken that these 72 went away. I don't know how you hear this verse 67, but I imagine He says it slowly and sadly, "You don't want to leave too, do you?"

It's almost like t-ball. He set them up for the perfect confession, and Peter knocked it out of the park. "Where else are we gonna go? Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life." How did they get this so right when the others got it just so wrong? Peter and those who stayed understood something about Jesus. He was there to fix life. Jesus had come to break death's dominion and put life into its unbroken timeline once again.

If you only know a life that culminates in death, and that's the way it is; if you won't allow for the possibility in your cranium of life after death, you won't allow for the possibility of Jesus in your *corazon*. But the many resigned themselves to the false notion that death is the way it is. No room for eternal life in the head, no room for the Lifegiver in the heart.

If what Jesus had to say here was true, then His words can't be appraised, judged, or measured by human reason. He can't be probed or scrutinized. As Paul would later write, "God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." Of course eternal life sounded foolish, but that is the message of salvation.

If you get a chance to look at other world religions, sometimes you expect more of a fight on this one. You suggest that most religions don't culminate in eternal life. The honest and very relevant response is that most religions don't even offer eternal life. They've given up on offering something that their own set of rules can't achieve. In other words, many people aren't even interested in eternal life. I find that fact fascinating.

Book by C.S. Lewis, "the Great Divorce" suggests that if heaven was there for the taking, the people wouldn't even want to go there. There is a bus that people seem determined to miss. There is a field to cross that makes them doubt heaven is on the other end. There are bad habits people don't wish to leave behind. And if you get to heaven, you better like the idea of God being in charge of everything, because eternal life means you are with him forever.

Now we understand what Christianity really has to offer -- an eternal God with no beginning or end; a good God who loves us enough to speak His words of Spirit to us; a plan of salvation we don't have to sweat, bleed, or incarnate; a loving Jesus who sweat, bled, and was God incarnate on our behalf. These were hard words for the crowd. But if you want these things, to whom except Jesus will you go?

As Isaiah said, "God's Word will not return to Him empty, but will accomplish the purpose for which He sent it" (55:11).

He even said, "The stone that causes men to stumble and rock that makes the fall" (Isaiah 8:14). Many of them will stumble.

After all, it was something Jesus said. To the One who sent the Son, from the cross He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." To the one whose flesh had only a flicker left, He said, "Today you will be with me in paradise." To the crowd who was about to leave, He said, "My words are spirit and life." To you He says, "Don't go. Like my Twelve friends, know me and believe. We're only just getting started."