

**August 22, 2021 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis**

Let us pray,

Open us to your life-giving Word, Holy God. Help us set aside all that confuses the clarity you can bring. Focus our attention on the Word read and proclaimed so we might hear and know your truth. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 6, verses 56 through 69. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

*56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” 59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. 60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65 And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” 66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can 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.”*

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

“Lord, to whom can we go?” Simon Peter’s word’s to Jesus have echoed in my mind all week. “Lord, to whom can we go?” “Lord to whom *shall* we go?” (as some translations put it) It’s a short, perhaps deceptively simple question - yet each time I come back to it - it takes on a different meaning.

It can be said in despair - Lord to whom can we go for we are lost and have nowhere else to turn. A dramatic, desperate cry for help when all hope seems lost - to whom can we go??

It can be rhetorical - Lord, to whom can we go - in other words, there is no-one else we can go to, no-one else we want to go to.

It evokes confidence - confidence that the decision to go to the Lord is the right decision. The only decision.

It can be said in confusion - a genuine curiosity of wanting to know who else there is to turn to if not the Lord? What else, who else is out there?

There are so many ways to say these simple words - so many emotions to fuel them - so many implications from them.

Simon Peter says them, says these words in response to Jesus's question to the disciples: do you also wish to go away?

You see, Jesus had just finished a long, complicated discourse, teaching the disciples that he is the bread of life and they must eat the bread and drink the cup to have Christ abide in them.

Now all of this is language that would have sounded extremely foreign to them, unlike any concept they had ever heard before.

Christ as bread abiding in them - what does that mean? Why would they even want that? And so they say so - they say this is difficult to understand to accept. And then because they don't understand and don't want to accept, some leave.

Thus Jesus turns to the 12 remaining and asks, "do you also wish to go away?" And Simon Peter answers with the question: Lord, to whom can we go?

But then he immediately says the answer he already knew: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

I'd like to think that Peter's response to Jesus encompasses all of those different meanings and implications and emotions.

A question said in despair, in confidence, in confusion, in desperation - because while it is hard for the disciples to accept and understand these teachings from Christ, it is hard to understand who this Jesus the Christ is - they know he is the answer.

Christ has the words of eternal life - Christ is the word made flesh.

It's a dilemma that causes tension. The tension of faith still felt today: that while we follow Christ, while we go to Christ - we often do not understand Christ.

Christ, fully human, fully God in all ways, he is outside the grasp of our mere human understanding yet we know he speaks the words of eternal life.

We know Christ is the answer we crave. "Lord, to whom can we go - in other words - maybe we wish to go to a Lord we CAN understand and accept and always makes sense to us and doesn't challenge us.

The lords of power, money, greed, materialism, social status, and so many more - yet we know these other lords do not have the words of eternal life..

We know the answer - but instead holding that answer we try desperately to piece apart the question.

It's a tension that undergirds so much of the tension we find in our lives. The tension of knowing the answer yet desperately clinging to the question - hoping for an easier answer that fits nicely in our simple logic.

We feel this tension right now as we stare yet another surge of Covid straight in the face.

Was it not just a few weeks ago that life almost felt normal again, yet here we are: cases are rising. In some areas of the country they are the highest they have ever been.

We know the answer: wear masks, get vaccinated, follow the health and safety guidelines set by our officials. Stay at home when and if we need to.

Yet I still feel myself asking, “Lord to whom can we go?” Give me an easier answer Lord, make it go away.

No doubt this new surge of Covid will also affect our mental health. The fear of isolation once again: “Lord, to whom can we go?”

Yet again, we know the answer. Reach out to those who can help, seek community, prioritize your health.

But still: to get there sometimes seems an insurmountable challenge. Paralyzed by the tension of knowing what to do yet being unable to simply do it: “Lord, to whom can we go?”

Yes, it’s often hard to accept the teachings - even when we know it’s the answer.

But is this not the nature of Christ: to know him, yet not understand.

To affirm and believe that in Christ is eternal life, yet still struggle to accept.

For this tension, Christ offers no answers. Only a certainty: that Christ abides within us.

A certainty that we’re reminded of each and every time we eat the bread of life and each and time we drink the cup of salvation we know that Christ abides within us.

Both within us individually, and within us as a community.

Life is living in the uncertainty, grounded in the certainty of Christ.

One of my favorite books is “Letters to a young poet”. It’s a collection of letters written by the famous poet Rainer Maria Rilke to a young man.

The young man wanted to become a poet himself and so reached out to Rilke asking him to critique his work. Asking him if Rilke thought he had what it took to be a successful poet.

In these letter Rilke refused to do that, He refused to critique the young poets work. He instead gave the poet advice on how a poet should feel, love, and seek truth in trying to understand and experience the world around him.

Rilke writes: “I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything that is unsolved in your heart and to try to cherish the questions themselves, like closed rooms and like books written in a very strange tongue. Do not search now for the answers which cannot be given you because you could not live them. It is a matter of living everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, one distant day live right into the answer.”

The young poet was clinging in desperation to the question: Am I a poet? Am I good enough?

And Rilke offers no certainty, only begs him to embrace the questions themselves. just as they are - questions.

Are we not all the young poet - writing to Christ, praying to Christ - to critique our work, our life - to give us explicit guidance and direction - “Lord to whom can we turn?”

And perhaps Christ's answer is to live it all. Cherish the despair and confusion and confidence that comes with life's questions and uncertainties.

That comes with the mystery of trying to understand who Christ is and what we're to do about it. To do so in the confidence that Christ abides within us through it all.

It's a question we'll do doubt ask over and over again throughout the course of our lives. And sometimes we'll get it right and listen, and other times we'll get it wrong and turn away.

Take Simon Peter. The one who asks the question and immediately answers the truth: Christ has the words of eternal life. Yet later it is Simon Peter who denies Christ, not once, not twice, but three times.

Yet later still it is Simon Peter who helps spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each and every step of his life begs the question: "Lord, to whom can we go?" And every time he knew the answer, whether he accepted it or not.

Christ abides within him through it all.

This fall, these next few months, well, really our whole lives lived, will no doubt bring a lot of uncertainties.

Potentially cancelled trips and plans, heartaches, joys, grief, love - we don't yet know.

Lord, to whom can we go?

Each way we ask it: whether in despair, in confidence, in desperation, in hope: the answer is the same.

Christ, the words of eternal life, abides within us through it all.

Perhaps that is freedom - the freedom to embrace the questions as we live into the answer. And for this freedom: thanks be to God. Amen.