

John 6:56-69  
August 22, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Our puppy, Charlie, is 10 months old now. His training is ongoing and just when I think he has finally mastered a command, something distracts him and it's as if he has forgot everything. Maybe it's his playful exuberance that he just can't contain sometimes. Maybe it's one of the many flies buzzing around he just can't seem to catch. Maybe it's a passerby on the sidewalk, a loud noise, or something else that catches his attention. Maybe it's another dog when we're out for a walk. Whatever it is, in that moment words such as "sit" or "stay" or "heel" seem to be but a distant memory. So, we work on it again. "Sit Charlie." "Good boy" and I reward him with a small treat. "Stay Charlie" and the process is repeated. Over and over again until hopefully he learns, these words become etched in his brain and the next time something distracts him he responds accordingly.

It wasn't all that long ago I was learning Greek the first semester of seminary. I would write a word and its definition on the page multiple times before it finally began to sink in or a group of us would sit at a table in the library turning flash card after flash card to engrain these words to memory.

Educators use a variety of strategies to fire the brain cells, so students learn and retain information. Repetition is certainly one of those tools. A quick internet search told me it may take hearing something 7 times or more to remember it. I read it takes hearing a song 5 times before one can sing along with it the next time.

This is our final week of dwelling in the sixth chapter of John after beginning that journey back on July 25<sup>th</sup>. We've sat in and observed from afar as Jesus fed the multitudes and 17 times in this chapter, we've heard John and Jesus' repetitive use of the word "bread." I am ready to throw my hands up in the air and say, "Enough already. We get it guys. Jesus is the Bread of Life."

I contemplated focusing on one of the other texts this morning to free myself from trying to preach yet another bread of life sermon. What more can be said? Yet, I felt the Spirit's nudge to remain focused on John. Sight set on Jesus. Ears open and attentive to the words spoken by our Lord. Having recently been one of the lucky ones to attend the MLB at Field of Dreams Game it was kind of like hearing a voice speak softly from the Iowa cornfields, "Preach it and they will listen."

Many did listen to Jesus' teaching. Hundreds, maybe thousands of ears heard "this hard teaching," as some of his disciples deemed it. Even Jesus says some will find his teaching

offensive. They listened and many turned back and stopped following Jesus. Peter seems to get it as he proclaims words the church continues to use today gathered for worship, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Yet, Jesus knows as do we the very words Peter will utter from his lips as he gets distracted by fear, self-preservation, powers of the flesh that draw him away from Jesus and his words of life. “I am not” when asked if he knew Jesus and was one of his disciples.

One cannot help but read John and get a sense of just what his community may have been going through. Distracted by competing theologies. Outside voices that said Jesus was not sent from God, born from above, was not the Word of God manifest in human flesh but simply a mere mortal wise beyond his years with the teachings of God. Others that denied his humanity altogether as if he was a mere apparition or angel from on high. Or perhaps distracted from the fear of the unknown, what the future held for a fledgling young church amidst a chaotic world and the ever-lurking mighty reach of Roman rule. It’s hard not to imagine some were turning back and discontinuing this difficult teaching and the challenges of following Jesus.

So, John does his best to stimulate their neurons with Jesus’ words of life. Jesus jumpstarts our brain cells to believe and to recollect, when the going gets tough, just who it is that has the “words of eternal life.” Both know the power of the flesh to draw us away for Jesus’ words. Jesus’ use of flesh here is not a diminishment upon our humanity for we recall God created flesh and called it “good.” We recall Jesus took upon human flesh, was baptized and God said, “This is my Son, the beloved of whom I am well-pleased.” When Jesus says, “the flesh counts for nothing” he is speaking to something embedded within humans which cannot give eternal life. Call it sin. Call it greed. Call it jealousy. Call it contempt. Call it inward focus only on self. Call it idolatry. It goes by many different names, but ultimately all lead to the same thing Jesus reminds us, and we witness played out repeatedly in history of the story of God’s people. They lead death. They lead us away from the Bread of Life. They turn us from hearing his words of life and rather held captive by words that do just the opposite.

The Spirit never stops her work of drawing us back to hear these words softly blowing in the wind, spoken week in and week out as the body gathers to worship, written on our hearts and reminding us of our purpose and identity when we may get lost. Peter may get it wrong several chapters later, but he gets it so right today and gives us an example of discipleship and a question the church would do well to ask every time it gathers, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Those words are the compass that steer us through the fog. His words are the laser that point us always to God. Jesus words bring life. Even his words that are challenging to hear, that run counter to the ways of the world, always have the same goal ... to lead God’s people back into the loving relationship with their Creator. To free us from the captivity of sin and death. To remind us of our calling and our mission.

Jesus reminds his disciples, his church of why he has spoken these things and why he has repeated teachings such as “bread of life” many times over in saying in the sixteenth chapter, “I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling.” (16:1 NRSV) Shortly after Jesus was raised from the dead, we are told the disciples remembered what Jesus had said [that is the difficult, even offensive, foretelling of what would happen to him] and they believed scripture and the words Jesus had spoken. Jesus tells us to “remain in me and my words.” (15:7) Jesus says, “whoever hears my words and believe in him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.” (5:24). Jesus says, “whoever obeys my word will never see death.” (8:51) Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (13:34-35) John begins his gospel with these words:

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (1:1-5)

So, we hear again and again and again ... “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” (6:51) We feast on these words. They keep us from stumbling.

We receive Jesus through his words spoken and breathed into us by his Spirit. The words he has spoken are full of Spirit and life. Words of grace, love, and truth. We receive, but Jesus words always move us outward. His words are the spark that ignite our mission, our calling as he states in the fifteenth chapter, “<sup>16</sup>You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. <sup>17</sup>This is my command: Love each other.” The fruit Jesus longs for us to bear is love for one another. The fruit Jesus has chosen us for is to “testify”, to proclaim the good news. As John closes his gospel, Jesus tells Peter, “Feed my sheep.” This too, through the grace we have received through the Word made flesh, is the fruit we are called to bear. Jesus words give us life and they also give his church purpose. May we be reminded of them often, live in them, and live by them and when we struggle, lose our way, stumble, wonder where to go next, may we always pray, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”