

**August 26, 2018 Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan**  
**Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

**GOSPEL**

**John 6:56-69**

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the sixth chapter.  
**Glory to you, O Lord.**

[Jesus said,] <sup>56</sup>“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. <sup>57</sup>Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup>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.” <sup>59</sup>He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

<sup>60</sup>When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” <sup>61</sup>But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? <sup>62</sup>Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? <sup>63</sup>It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup>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. <sup>65</sup>And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

<sup>66</sup>Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. <sup>67</sup>So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” <sup>68</sup>Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup>We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

The gospel of the Lord.  
**Praise to you, O Christ.**

“Alleluia. Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia.”

This line of music is one of the first parts of the liturgy I have a memory of singing. Maybe it is a deep memory for others here.

Though...if it isn't...If Peter's words at the end of today's gospel reading are new to you...they might sound a little odd bracketed by “alleluias.” It really all depends on how Peter said what he said...

Especially that first part: “Lord to whom shall we go?” The second part wants much more theological unraveling. What the “words of eternal life” might be is interesting to think

about. The writer of John is much more interested in “eternal life” than any other Bible writer. It’s a phrase that only exists in the New Testament...and over 30% of the times it appears (17 out of 50), it’s in John’s gospel.

But I want to shift that phrase to the backburner...and think about what Peter might mean when he says, “Lord, to whom shall we go?”

Jesus has just kept doubling down on this teaching that his followers have to eat his flesh and drink his blood...he repeats it more and more in increasingly uncomfortable and graphic terms. And it is too much for some of the people who have been following Jesus...who saw the miraculous feeding of thousands...who have listened to his teaching...

Everyone has their breaking point. I love Elisabeth Moss...and maybe even Tom Cruise...until you get to Scientology bit. Then, I’m out. And some of these followers of Jesus seemed to feel that way.

So, Jesus turns to Peter to ask if he’s reached his breaking point...if he’s going to leave, too.

And he says, “Lord, to whom shall we go?”

And he could be saying any of a number of things, “Where else could we go? Who else would take us?” “It’s not like we have any better offers...”

Or, “Yes. This is the hardest thing we’ve ever done...harder than we could ever have guessed...but there is also nothing like it in the world.”

The meaning of that phrase could range from, “I’ve got nothing better to do...to...I’ve got nowhere else to go...to there’s nowhere else I’d rather be...” And I imagine there were times it was somewhere in between....

On the one hand, Jesus’ friends must have never imagined where they would end up...that Jesus would do and say things like he did. I think they stuck around even through confusion and disappointment. Our heroes very rarely fulfill our exact expectations.

Of course, Jesus is working from a different script than all of us. So our disappointment or confusion with him is different than other people in our lives. But I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately. Because our heroes are rarely uncomplicated in their heroism.

Those who honor the memory and legacy of John McCain today might wonder how to remember him in his complexity...He was a hero...and a human...he made many choices that impacted many people...and I'm not sure that there is anyone who was pleased with every single choice he made.

This past week news broke that Asia Argento, one of the faces of the #MeToo movement raising awareness about the prevalence of sexual assault...and how many people can hear the story of a victim and say "me too"...was implicated in an assault as a perpetrator. And so we are reminded that victims often become perpetrators...that we may have to hold support and accountability in tension at times.

And, in the past few weeks, there are yet more headlines about abuses within the Catholic church...as well as other denominations...and our own is not immune. These abuses sometimes are uncovered on a scale that might make us wonder whether the church has any moral authority left at all. If the church is meant to bear the image and message of Jesus, then it has failed...If there are meant to be heroes of faith within the church's leadership...well...then we know the church has failed over and over again.

I was at a lecture this week where the instructor was saying how she lived off of the previously named Robert E. Lee Road...which is now Azie Morton Road - named after the first and only (so far) black U.S. Treasurer. She was musing that she understood the change...but had also begun to wonder if we should just stop naming things after people. It seems like everyone falls from grace eventually...if they are meant to stand in history on their own flawless moral record.

I used to make fun of the suburbs for naming everything "Oak Something" or after natural features that have since been mowed down to build rows of nearly identical houses. Laurel Ridge...right...I don't see many laurels anymore...

But...maybe taking natural features is a safer choice, as I think about it.

Even Jesus isn't the hero that people expect him to be. And today, it sends some of them packing. It got too complicated and difficult and strange...(and it's going to get worse before it gets better). But Peter seems to know that he's where he's supposed to be.

I am so glad he leaves space for us to say how hard it is though...

Lord, to whom shall we go? It feel almost impossible to stay...but it's more impossible to leave...

Lord, to whom shall we go? You took us in when no one else really thought we were worth much...

Lord, to whom shall we go? This is so difficult...and I don't know if I understand what you mean...but your words are electricity...and they open up a space inside my heart that I didn't know was there...

Lord, to whom shall we go? It's hard...everywhere...I don't know how to do this...and I'm exhausted and confused...but I'm still at home when I'm with you...

I had a colleague respond to my announcement of my plan to go to seminary by saying... "Good. Great. If you feel called, you will have a great adventure. But I'll tell you one thing...If there is anything else you think you want to do...anything else you can do instead...do that."

I was taken aback. It was not the kind of enthusiastic and affirming advice I was expecting.

But he was showing me another way of naming Peter's path, I think.

There is nowhere else that is like this. Nowhere as hard. Nowhere as confusing. And nowhere as close to really being alive. Nowhere as close to heaven and eternity.

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

Alleluia.

Amen.