



Southwestern Minnesota Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Sermon by Bishop Dee Pederson

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**August 25, 2024 is the 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, and Lectionary 21 - Year B readings. The preaching will focus on the Gospel text, and will draw upon the readings from Joshua and Ephesians, as well.**

**First Lesson – Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18**

**Psalm 34:15-22**

**Ephesians 6:10-20**

**Gospel: John 6:56-69**

[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.”

### **Sermon:**

Sometime during last 3 mo. many of us traveled somewhere. It may have been:

- by taking a freeway around the region or across country;
- taking a slower-paced scenic route on 2-lane roads;
- following a winding gravel path where few traveled before you.
- This summer – many of us took many paths to travel to the ELCA Youth Gathering... some in planes, trains, vans, and cars.

If you’re like me, at one time or another, you’ve had the experience of knowing where you want to GO, but sometimes even w/ GPS – have no idea the WAY to get there!

The story we just heard tells us that at one time, the followers of Jesus saw in HIM a path of life that nobody else could deliver, even as they were more than a little uncertain about what the path following him would look like.

This reading marks the LAST of a series of readings from John 6, beginning with the story of Jesus feeding 5,000 people w/ 5 loaves & 2 fish, to his telling them again & again:

- *“I am the One who came down from heaven....I AM the bread of life... And the bread that I’m giving you is my FLESH.”*

And that’s the point at which the people who were following Jesus got really confused & upset. If you hear those words for the first time, they can: Send you running, or scare you! In fact, Jesus. said, *“Do these words offend you?!”*

Because yes, these words are confusing!

So what does the way of life/path of following Jesus really *look like*? Why would we follow in the way of Jesus, when there are so many other paths, other ways out there today – paths that can be slick as a freeway, or peaceful as a country path? How is the way of Jesus different than any other bill of goods society would try to sell us, or that we hear about today?

Sometimes it's hard to tell!

Way back in the time of Joshua, the Hebrew people were faced with a time of decision about how **THEY** would live. Each tribe worshiped its own god. In today's first reading, Joshua gathered the people for a moment of decision – reminding them of God's justice and mercy, compared to the gods of different locales, and he says, "People, there are a lot of choices for gods out there. I don't know about you, but everybody in **MY** family is going to serve the **LORD**. And **YOU** are going to have to decide which god it is that you're going to serve!"

We would have no trouble naming the various things that **WE** would put in the place of "god" – money, power, popularity, politics, leisure, work, stuff.

Sometimes it's hard to tell!

But some of the roads we choose to walk in life are pretty obviously **NOT** good. When St. Paul wrote to Christians in Ephesus 2,000 yrs. ago, he spoke to some of those challenges that Jesus followers struggle with every day, seeking to walk in His Way.

- Paul began his letter with a beautiful vision that: *God intends to unite everything in the universe through Jesus Christ.*
- And then he went on to provide ample evidence from daily experience of how there is this struggle going on around us and in each of us; how we contend against: *"the wiles of the devil...not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness."*

That sounds pretty creepy, so I checked to see how The Message Bible puts it, and it reads like this:

*“This is no afternoon athletic contest that we’ll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels. Be prepared! You’re up against far more than you can handle on your own. So take all the help you can get, so that when it’s all over but the shouting, you’ll still be on your feet.”*

It’s still pretty challenging out there! So what was that about?!

People back then were worshiping the gods and goddesses of Rome; people believed in the forces of astrology, in demons they saw behind every corner; they were contending against rulers who would keep others in chains and feed you to the lions for professing the story of Jesus, crucified and risen.

You and I may use different words than Paul, but we know that there are forces at work in our world that go BEYOND human power and that all too often seem to have the upper hand.

- Martin Luther called those forces *SIN, DEATH, and the POWER OF THE DEVIL*. They are anything that is out to destroy *God’s intentions of uniting everything in the universe through Jesus Christ*.
- These forces might take the shape of the things that come from our hearts or mouths, ideas, desires, obsessions, actions, such as:
  - theft, murder, adultery, lying, slander, pride;
  - the struggles we have to face individually in illness, grief, addiction, shame, jealousy, greed, rejection, or despair;
  - the sins of whole communities - like economic injustice, racial hatred, violence, abuse, or dehumanizing those with whom we disagree on a political or religious spectrum.

St. Paul said that the human suffering and brokenness we face are just too complicated, too deep, and too far beyond our ability to control them on our own. And who HASN’T thought this when you hear stories of the pain that we inflict on each other? And so St. Paul takes language

familiar to people in this violent world, turns it on its head, and tells us to put on the new self that God created and gave to us in Jesus, marked by: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, prayer, the gifts of the Spirit, and courage. THIS is the way of following Jesus. It is the only road, the one path that meets the challenges that come our way each day. And it's the way of life not simply for us as individual Christians, it is the way of our life together as a community - as the church.

Reminding them of God's justice and mercy, compared to all the other the gods out there, Joshua said, "People – there are a lot of choices for gods out there. I don't know about you, but everybody in MY family is going to serve the LORD. And YOU are going to have to decide which god it is that you're going to serve!"

Every morning when we get up, we are faced with a host of ideas, things, people, who would wish to be our god, TRY to be our god - the thing that we believe and trust in above all else.

St. Paul said, "*Be strong in the Lord....put on.... truth, righteousness, peace, faith, prayer.... that you may be able to stand.*"

And that's what you and I are about as we follow Jesus today.

- We follow a road of discipleship, behind the One who called us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow; to forgive our enemies, and love our neighbors.
- We believe that we, as Christians, are called to do more than talk the talk, we also have to walk the walk.
- We live in a time when following in that way of Jesus is NOT the normal, natural, thing to do.
- So we worship to be equipped & strengthened to follow the path of Jesus - in a world that is far from living out the mind of Christ, following in the way of Jesus.

Sometimes we KNOW where we want to go, but we don't know HOW to get there. Who can show us? Well, Simon Peter, in today's Gospel, voices for us both the question and the answer: *"Lord, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life."* Alleluia!