

Order of Worship for August 18, 2024

Prelude

P: The Lord be with you.

C: And also with you.

Opening Hymn: “O Word of God Incarnate” - Hymn #523

Confession and Absolution p. 203

Service of the Word

Entrance Psalm:

P: The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.

C: His praise endures forever!

P: Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,

C: in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

P: Great are the works of the LORD,

C: studied by all who delight in them.

P: Full of splendor and majesty is His work,

C: and His righteousness endures forever.

P: He has caused His wondrous works to be remembered;

C: the LORD is gracious and merciful.

P: He provides food for those who fear Him;

C: He remembers His covenant forever.

P: He sent redemption to His people; He has commanded His covenant forever.

C: Holy and awesome is His name!

ALL: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

P: The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.

C: His praise endures forever!

Kyrie: (Lord Have Mercy) p. 204

Gloria in Excelsis: (Glory to God in the Highest) pg. 204

Salutation:

P: The Lord be with you,

C: and also with you.

Prayer of the Day:

P: Let us pray... Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us to know Your Son, Jesus, to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow His steps in the way that leads to life eternal; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and

the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: Amen.

Old Testament Reading: Proverbs 9:1–10

R: Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table. She has sent out her young women to call from the highest places in the town, “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!” To him who lacks sense she says, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight.” Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

R: This is the Word of the Lord.

C: Thanks be to God.

Epistle: Ephesians 5:6–21

R: Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not associate with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

R: This is the Word of the Lord.

C: Thanks be to God.

Alleluia and Verse: p. 156

Holy Gospel: John 6:51–69

P: The Holy Gospel according to St. John, the 6th chapter

C: Glory to You, O Lord

P: [Jesus said:] “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My

blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on Me, he also will live because of Me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as He taught at Capernaum.

When many of His disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” But Jesus, knowing in Himself that His disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray Him.) And He said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to Me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

After this many of His disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him. So Jesus said to the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that You are the Holy One of God.”

P: This is the Gospel of the Lord.

C: **Praise to You, O Christ.**

Sermon Hymn: “*Blessed Jesus at Your Word*” - **Hymn #904**

Sermon: “*To Whom Shall We Go?*” – **John 6:51-69**

On July 21, 2024, First Baptist Church of Mount Vernon, Illinois held its last service. That isn't necessarily unusual – more and more churches are closing every week, especially small, aging, rural churches like that. What made it notable was that their pastor has been notable for his work on religious demographics. Ryan Burge began there in the fall of 2006, while also working on a graduate degree in political science. Since then, he's become an associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University and author of "The Nones," a book on the growing number of religiously unaffiliated Americans. For him, the rising number of "nones" and the dwindling number of religious is not simply a statistic, but a fact that he's been witnessing in his own parish for the past 16 years.

In an article he wrote about the closing of his church, he said: “I am having a hard time wrapping my head around the fact that I get asked all the time, by pastors, denominational leaders and interested observers, about ways to grow a church. I guess people assume that since I spend my days digging through religion data, that I should have been able to uncover the secret to getting people back into religion. It takes everything in my power to not say to them, “My church went from 50 people to less than 10 under my watch. If I knew anything about how to grow a church I would have done it by now.”

Today in our Gospel lesson we hear a similar idea, from Jesus Himself, as he watches crowds go away from him. While we spent the summer looking at familiar Sunday School stories that aren't usually a part of the lectionary, the series of readings we hear in worship, we've missed the last few weeks that have focused on John 6. In this chapter, we find the feeding of the 5000,

Jesus walking on water, Jesus comparing himself to Moses who provided manna in the wilderness for the people of Israel during the Exodus, and he begins to talk about the bread of life. There had been some controversy earlier during these teachings. The crowds wanted to make Jesus king, but only in the hopes that he would continue to provide food for them, but they went away when Jesus refused to be their bread king. The hostility grows as those who knew Jesus as the carpenter's son from Nazareth refused to see him as one sent down from heaven. Now, in these closing verses, we get even more hostility. Instead of drawing crowds to him, almost everyone went away, even some of those who had been following him before. "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" As his words sank in, one by one the crowd of onlookers and followers slouched away, leaving only the twelve.

What made these words of Jesus so hard? Was it the fact he was talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood? Outside of the cannibalism idea condemned by most cultures, just drinking blood of anything would have been deeply offensive for the Jews Jesus was speaking to. Blood was life. Blood represented the life given by God to people and animals. Blood needed to be drained from an animal before it could be cooked and eaten, according to the Jewish dietary laws. Even as the early church later debated how "Jewish" Gentile converts had to be to become Christian, the prohibition on drinking blood remained.

But more than that, Jesus' words were hard because they pointed to his death and how those who follow him would be joined in his death. Many went away from Jesus, but some remained. In any and all circumstances, the disciples in John's gospel are committed to being with Jesus. "Where else would we go?" asks Peter "You have the words of eternal life." To be with Jesus, to know Jesus is to be in the best place. It is to be in the presence of eternal life. It is to have life.

The words of Jesus are hard for us, as well. It's hard for us to commit to a Christian view of sexuality when the world is straying in any number of directions away from that. It's hard to commit to a Christian view of the value of all life when the lives of the elderly, the unborn, and the infirm are seen as insignificant. It's hard to commit to self-sacrifice when we're surrounded by messages that tell us to take and buy and get. It's hard to love our enemies when we're surrounded by messages saying we need to defeat or remove those who disagree with us.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried." We still reject Jesus when following him would be difficult. We reject Jesus when it would affect our identity, when it would affect how others see us. We reject God's commands on how to care for the world around us. We reject God's commands and fail to care for God's servants, persecuting them when they say something uncomfortable or unsettling. The hard words of Jesus are a stumbling block for us as they were for the disciples who left Jesus. The words of Jesus offend, defy logic, and are absurd.

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked them in a tone somewhere between plaintiveness and resignation. As usual, Simon Peter spoke up: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" Author Philip Yancey writes "That, for me, is the bottom-line answer to why I stick around. To

my shame, I admit that one of the strongest reasons I stay in the fold is the lack of good alternatives, many of which I have tried. Lord, to whom shall I go? The only thing more difficult than having a relationship with an invisible God is having no such relationship.”

But...but at the same time St. John's picture is also one of belief, of courage, and of faith. For as John writes, after many disciples drew back and no longer followed him, "Jesus said to the twelve, 'Will you also go away?' [And] Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'"

Peter, you see, knew where to look. That's it; that's what makes him and the other eleven disciples different--it's not their brains or their ability or their status or even their faith: they simply know where to look. They knew to look to Jesus and they keep their eyes fastened on him. And this, according to many Christians through the centuries, is what makes church, Christians gathering together for worship to hear God's Word and receive God's gifts to us, so important, so vital. Because each and every week, through the preaching of the Word and the sharing of the sacraments, we're offered again the Words of eternal life.

Through preaching and through the sacraments, Jesus' real presence is made manifest in our world, and we are pointed to the one place amid all the tumult and upset of this world and life we share that we can look to and know for sure that we will find God in Christ there...for us.

Martin Luther once said very much the same. "Although [God] is present in all creatures," Luther wrote, "and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for he certainly is there, yet [God] does not wish that I seek him there apart from the Word, and [thereby] cast myself into the fire or the water, or hang myself on the rope. [God] is present everywhere, but does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope rather where the Word is, and there you will lay hold of [God] in the right way" (LW 36:342).

"Grope where the Word is." What a vivid way to emphasize the importance of the regular gathering of the people of God around the Word of God. Given the challenges we face, I know that preaching and teaching, baptism and communion can seem like small, even paltry things. No wonder disciples then and now had a hard time believing. Yet God has determined to be made most clearly known through neither the grandeur of nature or the accomplishments of humans, but rather through what the Reformers called the "weak" word of the gospel that we might cling to nothing other than God's word in times of plenty or need, in times of celebration or sadness, in times of triumph or despair.

In a mysterious way that I don't quite understand, the Holy Spirit uses God's Word to give us faith in Jesus and all the rest of God's amazing promises. The Bible assures us that God loves us, that Jesus died for our sins and rose again, that there is life after death, and that there is hope for this life through the Lord's will and ways. But the words of Jesus also bring eternal life. And those words are found nowhere else. Where else could we go?

And so we come together. We come together even as the nones, those who don't believe anything in particular about God, increase in number. We come together even though it seems

strange and out of step with our culture. We come together because we know there's nowhere else we can go. This is where God promises to be. This is where God is. And this is where we will be, too.

Creed: The Sacrament of the Altar (paragraphs 1, 3 4) p. 326

Prayer of the Church:

P: Lord, in Your mercy . . .

C: Hear our prayer.

Sharing Our Ministry:

Offering and Voluntary:

Service of the Sacrament p. 208

Preface: p. 208

P: It is truly good, right, and proper that we should in all times and places give thanks to You, Almighty God, heavenly Father, for in Your Son, Christ Jesus You have given us the very Word of life. Therefore with angels and all the army of heaven we praise and make great Your holy name, evermore praising You And singing . . .

Sanctus: (*Holy, Holy, Holy*) p. 208

Prayer of Thanksgiving:

P: We give thanks to You, Lord God, for all Your blessings to us. Help us always to always seek Jesus alone for the answer to our lives. Send Your Holy Spirit on us now as we come to receive the Word of life as Jesus gives us true body and blood in Holy Communion for the forgiveness of sins. Hear us as we pray the prayer He taught us . . .

Lord's Prayer, The Words of Our Lord, and Pax Domini: (*Peace of the Lord*) p. 209

Agnus Dei: (*Lamb of God*) p. 210

Distribution of Holy Communion:

"O God, My Faithful God" - **Hymn # 696**

"Lord Jesus Christ, Life-Giving Bread" - **Hymn # 625**

Nunc Dimittis: (*Now let us depart*) p. 211

Prayer after Communion:

P: Almighty and ever-living God, You have given great and precious promises to those who believe. Grant us the perfect faith which overcomes all doubts, through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. **C: Amen.**

Benedicamus and Benediction: p. 212

Closing Hymn: *"You Are the Way, through You Alone"* - **Hymn # 526**

Postlude