

"You have the words of eternal life."

A sermon for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost

John 6:56-69

You have heard this text. They is important words. You is thinking that, I can tell. You is thinking that they is important.

How can you say "You is" "They is"? These examples show something about language. In the Seventeenth Century, the time of Shakespeare, the upper and lower classes had no trouble saying: "You is."

These usages were lost in the Eighteenth Century when the middle class became powerful and wanted to be "correct." But in German, French, and Latin, and Greek and many other languages, that difference between "you" singular and "you" plural continues. "They is" is found in Ebonics. The question is: Is Ebonics a proper, separate language? Is it a variety of English, or something we call argot or slang?

We ask ourselves: What is language? The dictionary says this or that, but a dictionary is a history book. It is not something that has the authority of final meaning.

What about grammar? You have been taught "this is good grammar" and "that isn't." But when you look at languages and how they develop, even some of the grammar changes. When we look at other languages, we wonder: How did they develop? They are very different.

For example, in World War II the Navajo language was used for code speech because the Japanese didn't have anybody who could translate it. (The problem isn't that the Navajo language is unique; it is part of a larger family called the Athabaskan.)

What about that unique language that is found only in Finland, Estonia, and Hungary? It turns out that that is probably part of a larger family called the Turkish family. One is surprised to find out that the language in India called Hindi (and they have two proper languages in India, English and Hindi) is related through Sanskrit to English. It's part of the larger family of Indo-Iranian languages.

The biggest problem is that little language for the people living between France and Spain, the Basque family. Nobody is able to find that it has any relation to any other language.

How does language develop? Is it purely a matter of usage? Of the relativization of communication? Or is there something in us that is innate, and that's the way it should be, that there is a sort of right way and wrong way, a universal grammar (Chomsky)? Linguists debate this. The majority view is that the grammatical shape of language is a matter of usage.

Questions of religion are entirely different. Questions of religion, because they deal with the ultimate, what is forever, have one final meaning. And it really is, of course, the question of salvation. The way to sort that out is stated by Luther and many others: Whatever is final for you, whatever ultimately is decisive is, for you, God.

Generally what we think is: I've got to live. Survival. That then, health and all the rest, becomes, perhaps for you, God. Or it may be success. Or it may be fitting in so I can be like everybody else. Keeping up with the Jones', whoever the Jones' are in your context.

It is very common today to say that religion is like a cafeteria. Pick and choose. What's going on there is that **I pick and choose**. Whatever happens, whatever is final, that truly is God for you and me.

Very commonly among us it is said: "Well, it's just a matter of usage and history." There are three reasons that is not true.

1. The first has to do with science. It goes back to Aristotle, but it's succinctly stated today by the philosopher Karl Popper: "If everything is true, nothing is true." That's a basic principle of science. It does not apply to language, but it does apply to religion.
2. The second: If everything is true, if everything is relative, there's no justice. There is no "right," because whatever is, is right.
3. Third: If everything is true, there is no hope, and there is no meaning. After all, if there is no problem, there is no solution, and we're in the swamp.

John Calvin, the other major Reformer of the Sixteenth Century, stated: "Our hearts are idol-making machines." All of us fail to choose God. We choose whatever idol we cherish. Thank God, as the text today points out, it doesn't depend on us because he takes care of it. It has to do with his Word.

The sixth chapter of John, the concluding section, verses 56-69, speaks to all of this. The Gospel of John is the second most difficult book in the New Testament (after the Book of Hebrews). It has so many levels of meaning, overtones, and other themes, but they all are meant to be there. Three examples:

1. Many people know what is called "the little Gospel" in John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." And the next verse more or less repeats that. But then in verse 18, which people overlook, it states: "He who believes in him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." That's clearly not relativism or pan-grace-ism in which everything is love.

2. John 4:24 states: "God is spirit and they who worship him must worship **in spirit and truth.**" We, then, without thinking about the rest of the Gospel, say there is some kind of vague spirit, whatever God is. But you recall in John 14:6: "I am **the Truth.**" And then in John 14:26, 15:26, and 16:13, **the Spirit** means Jesus Christ present among us.
3. John 13:35: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples: If you love one another." It's all about us having to do something. But in John 15:5-6: "I am the vine; you are the branches. . . . Apart from me you can do nothing."

All of this helps us understand the sixth chapter of John. It starts out with the feeding of the 5,000. That's 5,000 males. That means there were about 20,000 people there including women and children. People were very excited. Bread and fish. But later in the chapter, it's evident that what is being described is not "miracle faith," but something far greater.

John 6:56: "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you cannot inherit the kingdom of God." And then John 6:60 shows the reaction: "Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?'" Then John 6:62: "They were offended at him. And John 6:66: "After this many of his disciples drew away and no longer went about with him." Instead of 20,000, there were only twelve and a few more.

What was the problem? What were they offended at? What they were offended at was that this was not a God who suited them. This is a God who said: "I am Lord, and I come to you in my body and blood."

And then in John 6:62: "What if you see the Son of man rising to heaven?" That's obviously talking about the cross and resurrection. That's not what they were thinking about. They were thinking of restoring the kingdom of David over against Rome.

What happened then? We have begun to see how the Gospel of John develops.

It states in John 6:64: ". . . '[T]here are some of you who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who those were that **did not believe . . .**" And then in John 6:69: ". . . **we have believed** and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God."

It seems very simple: You have **got to believe.** Yet here the Gospel of John takes a turn. It states in John 6:65: "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." Already that has been said in John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." That's because our hearts are idol-making machines. We never choose or decide for the true God. By ourselves we always inevitably go wrong.

But the Father does it! And he does it his way. How does he do it? John 1:13 states that believers are those "who were born, not of blood nor the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (Also John 5:21: "For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so

also the Son gives life to whom he will," and John 15:16: "You did not choose me, but I chose you.") There is more of the same in this text. It says "through his words." John 6:63: "It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; **the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.**" Or as Peter then says: "Lord, to whom shall we go? **You have the words of eternal life**" (John 6:68).

At the beginning of the sermon today we talked about "You is" and "You are." That is in the original Greek in our text: "You" singular. John 6:68: "**You** have the words of eternal life."

The Gospel of John begins: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Then John 1:14a: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." And John 1:29: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

Our Christian faith is not a matter of agreement, or understanding, or decision-making, because we always produce idols. Rather, he does it! He does it through his Word and Sacraments. As we then celebrate receiving the Lord's Supper, it is he who in this way, through his Word, his body, gives us life.

- John 6:68: "You have the words of eternal life."
- John 6:63: "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."
- John 6:51: "I am the living bread...."

Amen