

## **His word, his body**

A sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

John 6:56-69

You have heard the Gospel text for today. They is important words. You is thinking that, I can tell. You is thinking that they is important.

Maybe you're really wondering if I'm losing it. How can I say that? You "is" They "is"? It says something about language. In the Seventeenth Century, the time of Shakespeare, the lower classes had no trouble saying: You "is."

This usage was lost in the Eighteenth Century when the middle class rose 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 today in Ebonics. The question is: Is Ebonics a proper, separate language? Is it a variety of English, or slang?

We ask ourselves: What are languages? If you look a word up in a dictionary, it says this or that is the meaning of that word, 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 wasn'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. It is not related to other known language families.

How does language develop? Is it purely a matter of usage? 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 has been that the grammatical shape of language is a matter of usage.

Questions of religion are entirely different than questions about language. 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. After that then health and all the rest become, perhaps for some, God. Or it may be achievement in my particular field. Or it may be being respected in a certain group so I am one of them.

It is very common today to think that religion is like a cafeteria. Pick and choose. What's going on in this mindset 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," as it is with languages. There are three reasons this is not true.

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.

Second, if everything is true, if everything is relative, there's no justice. There is no "right," because whatever is, is right.

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 next to Luther, stated: "Our hearts are idol-making machines." We imagine or fashion God as we want him to be. 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. When we deal with the Gospel of John, we remember that it is the second most difficult book in the New Testament (after the Book of Hebrews) because it has many levels of meaning, overtones, and other themes. They intertwine, and they all are meant to be there. Three examples:

First, the Gospel of John is sometimes misunderstood as an everything-is-love message. Many people know "the little Gospel" in John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." The next verse more or less repeats that. But then John 3:18 says: "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.

Second, in the Gospel of John the Holy Spirit is not a mystical spirit. Rather, the Holy Spirit has a specific identity and job. John 4:24 states: "God is spirit and they who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." Without thinking about the rest of the Gospel, we can mistakenly think there is some vague, ethereal spirit that is meant here. But John 14:6 says: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Then in John 14:26, 15:26, and 16:13, the Spirit is Jesus Christ himself present among us.

Third, it may seem that the Gospel of John says we have to do it; it's up to us. John 13:35 states: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." It's all about doing it. But shortly after this verse it says in John 15:5-6: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for 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, (5,000 males). That means there were about 20,000 people in all, including women and children. People were very excited about plenty of bread and fish. A miracle! But later in the chapter, it's evident that what is being described is not "miracle faith," but something far different, far greater.

John 6:56 states: "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you cannot inherit the kingdom of God." And 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?'" They took offense at this. John 6:66: "After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him." The big movement dwindled. Instead of 20,000 followers, there were now 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 it goes on 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 about restoring the kingdom of David over against Rome.

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."

On the surface it seems very simple: "You gotta believe." Those are the words on the page. That's why we need to think carefully about the Gospel of John and how it is used.

It goes on then very specifically 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."

This message that God does it (election) is found in other places in the Gospel of John. John 1:13: The children of God are those "who were born, not of blood nor the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." John 5:21: "For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, so also the Son gives life to whom he will." John 15:16: "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

On our own, we inevitably go wrong. Our hearts are idol-making machines. We never choose or decide for the true God.

Rather, the Father does it, and he does it his way. How does he do it? That is also here in this text. It says through the Word. In John 6:63 it says: "It is the spirit that gives life and the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." 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." In this text for today it is "you" singular. As John 6:68 says: "You have the words of eternal life." You, Jesus, are the Christ and no one else.

What does the Gospel of John say? We remember how 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." He is the Word.

In this text Peter says to Jesus: "You have the words of eternal life." And in John 6:63 we read: "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

And then John 6:51: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

It's not a matter of understanding, or agreement, or decision-making, because we are idol-making machines; we always produce idols. Rather, it's a matter that 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, through his body, gives us life.

Amen