



northminster presbyterian church

2400 old alabama road
roswell, georgia 30076

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SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 6:10-20 John 6:56-69

SERMON: To Whom Can We Turn? (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

The American Dialect Society was founded in 1889, and is dedicated to the study of the English language in North America, and of other languages, or dialects of other languages, influencing it or influenced by it. ADS members are linguists, lexicographers, etymologists, historians, grammarians, academics, editors, writers and independent scholars in the fields of English, foreign languages and other disciplines. The society publishes the quarterly journal American Speech, but gets most publicity when it announces its annual choice of the word of the year. The Word of the Year 1999 was Y2K. The Word of the 1990s Decade was web. The Word of the Twentieth Century was jazz. The Word of 2000: chad.

Their 2005 word of the year is the word "*truthiness*." Truthiness is defined as "the quality of stating concepts one wishes or believes to be true, rather than the facts." In making this choice, the group also suggested that until our society finds a way to bring truth and facts back together again, there is not much hope for progress.

Today, as we conclude our journey through the 6th Chapter of John's Gospel, we hear Jesus speak using words that are extremely graphic, "*in your face*", straight to the point! Without equivocation, Jesus engages in some extremely plain talking about flesh and blood, specifically about His flesh and His blood, including the need for those who follow Him to eat and drink His Flesh and Blood. No speech writer or spin doctor had the chance to temper Jesus' words. No one was able to suggest a gentler way of Jesus saying what needed to be said. No ifs and buts were added; Jesus lays everything on the line. Those who first heard this outburst from Jesus heard not truthiness, *but the truth*. In what they heard and in what we hear for ourselves today, we encounter the truth as Jesus offers it to us, not to the truth as we might wish or imagine it to be. There is a direct and clear link between who Jesus is and what Jesus says. There is absolute consistency and continuity from Jesus' person and Jesus' words.

This is not to say that the truth of which Jesus speaks cannot be misread or mis-interpreted. Talk like this of flesh and blood, in part, led us to a doctrine of *transubstantiation*, the traditional Roman Catholic view which describes the transformation of the bread and wine into the actual fleshly body and blood of our Lord. An alternative way of understanding what we hear Jesus say that I have found helpful, is this: When we hear Jesus say: Eat my flesh and drink my blood, this means that we need to be ready eat what Jesus ate and to drink what Jesus drank. In other words, as followers of Christ, we need to be prepared to eat the dust of the road, the meal offered in hospitality, the opposition of those who oppose Jesus and even the bitter pill of condemnation and crucifixion. What Jesus ate and drank was devotion to God and God's plan for living and the shocking consequences that resulted from following this plan, as Jesus was despised and rejected by all but a very few.

Seeing what Jesus expected of them, we heard that there were some who decided there and then that they were not prepared to eat and drink. They clearly deciding that such complete and utter commitment to Jesus was not what they wanted for their lives. Turning away and turning aside from Jesus because their hunger for God was not sufficient to cause them to accept and respond to Jesus' call. On that day there were some people who discovered that to be a Christian meant to live like Jesus. They are shocked, they are repulsed and they no longer wish to follow Jesus. Likewise today, there are people who might or who would follow Jesus if things could just be toned down a little, if the demands were not so excessive and all-consuming; if they could only apply *truthiness* rather than hear truth they would be sitting beside you today.

The kind of commitment envisaged here is what Rabbi and Theologian, Abraham Heschel had in mind, when he declared, *“God is of no importance unless God is of supreme importance.”* God is of no importance unless God is of supreme importance.

Unless and until God is the ultimate figure in our lives, God is not God. If God is not supreme in our lives, then whatever is supreme is our god. If eating the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ is not the diet we will feast upon, then that which we eat and the purposes to which we put that nourishment, will dethrone our Lord, making Jesus no more than one player among many in our lives.

Thinker and teacher and activist, Jim Wallis is someone that I believe is carrying on an important ministry for the contemporary church. Wallis, the founder of the Sojourners Community and the Call to Renewal, and author of the perceptive book, *God's Politics*, is willing to face the real world and seek to state the truth of our faith. To my mind, Wallis seeks to think and act out of his specific, consistent and compassionate awareness and understanding of Jesus Christ. In his 1981 book, *The Call to Conversion: Why Faith Is Always Personal but Never Private* Wallis writes, “Jesus is not so much concerned about how we might bring him into our lives, but how we might bring our lives into his.” I repeat: *“Jesus is not so much concerned about how we might bring him into our lives, but how we might bring our lives into his.”*

So much talk about Jesus, so much so-called theology, so much God-talk and God-speak, so much of what goes by this name places the human and the human experience at the center instead of the One who is the Living Bread.

It is not us *but Jesus, the Bread of Life who is the center of our world and all life.*

It is not my life, with its joys and struggles, nor is it your life with its ups and downs, that is the beginning and end of all things, *but the flesh of Jesus.*

It is not the blood that courses through our veins, *but the blood of Christ is what alone can bring life and hope.*

As Presbyterians and Reformed Christians, we understand the need to persevere in our faith, to be devoted and dedicated. But at the same time we never, ever to forget that all that we do is only on the basis of the grace of our God expressed in and shared with the world in Jesus Christ. Our decision to go God's way is itself a decision that we can only take because of God's grace, pledged to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

I read this quote this past week, *“We make our decisions, and then our decisions turn around and make us.”* Having decided that we will follow the way of eating of the flesh of Jesus, and drinking His blood; having decided that we will eat what Jesus ate and drink what Jesus drank; having made that decision we are remade in the likeness of our Savior, nurtured to live renewed lives, empowered to dedicate ourselves to seeking first God's Kingdom, free of all truthiness.

Maybe we don't know it, maybe familiarity breeds a sort of dullness, but each Sunday when we gather in this space, the why and how of our relating with and to God through Jesus Christ is right before our very eyes. The design of our Sanctuary and the symbols it uses remind us of exactly why and how God commits to us and we commit to God. Let me remind you: There are three main round windows, one each for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We live, and can only live sustained by our relationship with God - revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The windows along the Old Alabama Road side of the church tell us the incredible story of the incarnate and immortal life of our Savior Jesus Christ. They take us through the story of Jesus, from the stable of Bethlehem, through Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan, through Jesus as Teacher, and Jesus hailed as King on Palm Sunday, through the Last Supper, to the dread of the cross, through the empty tomb and the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is in this story that gives meaning to our story. It is this divine drama which needs to become the center of our lives, by which Jesus, the life, the truth, the way, *provides the Living Bread for all people.*

Behind the choir we also see two smaller windows that celebrate the two Sacraments instituted by Jesus so that the followers of Jesus through all time and history would be able to celebrate and know that they belonged to Jesus. Through Baptism we are welcomed into the Christian family which is the Church. In sharing Communion we pay attention to the One who welcomed us here. Baptism and Communion mark us out as being ready to faithfully follow, as being consistently committed, as being lovingly loyal. These two Sacraments define who we are and define our belonging to God through Jesus the Christ.

Over on this wall we see the nine banners that represent the nine Presbyterian Creeds and Confessions to which we pay close attention in explaining who we are to ourselves and to others. These creeds and confessions are the lineage of our faith. They provide the contents of the faith we share and proclaim and they underscore the connectional nature of our church life across time and around the world. The Creeds and Confessions remind us of the great gifts we have received, of our need to understand and express our faith in different ways when we encounter different circumstances.

The centrality of the pulpit underscores that the Word read and preached from here is not just mere words, but in faith and with prayer can become *the very Word of God for us, by the grace of God*. As such, we are called and expected to pay very, very close attention to the Word read and proclaimed.

And finally we can also see what I think about as our “windows on the world.” There are some windows that are clear and through which we can see the world around us. These windows are clear not because we ran out of donations to complete the task, but because we took a deliberate decision to retain some windows through which we could see the beauty of the world and the needs and pain of that world. You see what we do here, inside, is to be repeated out there, and what we do out there allows us to be better focused on all that God would say to us in here.

Faced with all that Jesus said and meant, Peter opts for Jesus! “To whom can we go?” says Peter but to Jesus the One in whom Peter has discovered the words of eternal life. Here Peter chooses to say to Jesus, “you have the words of eternal life” now, later Peter chooses Jesus all over again, “Lord, I will lay down my life for you”. But just a few months later, in a courtyard outside the interrogation place of Jesus, huddled around a bonfire, Peter chooses to deny Jesus. Three times, Peter walks away from Jesus.

Following Jesus, bringing our lives into the life of Jesus, takes an act of will; an act of will that needs to be made again and again. The good news for us is that even when we fail to bring our lives into the life of Jesus, when our choices and wills betray us, *God’s grace does not*. Grace does not excuse our failings, but grace means that there will always be a welcome from God for all those who ask “to whom can we go?”

“*To whom can we go?*” My friends, we can go to Jesus! In Jesus our motives can be sorted out, our desires corrected, our desires cleansed, our questions received, our mistakes forgiven. We can go to Jesus, not because it is the traditional thing to do, for that may or may not be true; not because it is the acceptable thing to do, for that may or may not be true; not because it will mean that we will be part of a growing and vibrant community, for that may or may not be true. We can go to Jesus because *in Jesus we find the words of life*, and in the One who shares those words we discover the grace for living, the grace from God for all of us, for all time. *To whom will you go?* Go, please go, again and again, every day and in every way, go to The Living Bread, to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who meets us always and *who will this day meet us once again in the feast to which we have all been invited. Amen.*

Ephesians 6:10-20

10Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17Take the

helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. **18** Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. **19** Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, **20** for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

John 6:56-69

56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. **57** Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. **58** 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.” **59** He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. **60** When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” **61** But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? **62** Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? **63** It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. **64** 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. **65** And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” **66** Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. **67** So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” **68** Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. **69** We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

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