

BEAUTIFUL WORDS OF LIFE

John 6:60-69

Comedian Drew Carey once said something that I think is quite funny. I hope no one will think it's sacrilegious. Carey asks, "So what's the Pope doing with bodyguards and bulletproof glass? Is he afraid someone will shoot him? [Is he afraid] he'll die and go to heaven? That would be horrible, huh?" Then Carey adds, "If the Pope's afraid to die, what chance do we have?"

Interesting thought: I doubt that the Pope is afraid to die. I'm sure the bulletproof glass is so he can continue leading the Church as long as possible. But he is a human being, and most of us want to hold on to life as long as possible. That's why today's lesson from God's Word is so important.

Jesus' popularity was beginning to ebb. Those who had followed him in the beginning were falling by the wayside. Perhaps the novelty had worn off. Perhaps, with opposition rising, people were becoming afraid to be identified with the Man from Galilee. Undoubtedly, some of the things he had to say were hard to hear. Whatever the case, it was a time of decision for those who were left.

Jesus surveyed those who had deserted him. Then he asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"

As so often, it was Simon Peter who answered for the rest, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Peter hit it squarely on the head: "You have the words of eternal life." Make no mistake--this is why hundreds of millions of people of every nationality, race and color bow at the name of Jesus. He has the words of eternal life.

The shocking truth of the matter is: **We live in a dying world.** We shall not linger on this too long. It is too depressing. But everything about us is dying. There is nothing in this world that stays the same. There is death and decay built into every particle of this universe.

When we are younger we think life can go on forever. But as we get older, we see it is not so. Some humorous soul has compiled a list of hymns for the crowd that's getting on in years--not that anyone in this congregation qualifies! Anyway, here is his list:

1. Precious Lord, Take My Hand, and Help Me Up
 2. It is Well with My Soul, But My Knees Hurt
 3. Nobody knows the Trouble I Have Seeing
 4. Just a Slower Walk with Thee
 5. Count Your Many Birthdays, Name them One by One
 6. Go Tell It on the Mountain, But Speak Up
- And my favorite:
7. Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah, I've Forgotten Where I Parked

As we get older we start seeing changes in the world around us--and sometimes these changes are unwelcome. Friends die. Neighborhoods die. Even an entire way of life can die.

Even when we're young, we can grow disillusioned with a world of uncertain values and unfulfilling lifestyles. Many young people feel alone and afraid. Some even feel ashamed because they are part of a culture that has embraced unhealthy forms of sexuality and alcohol and drug use. And so all of us, young and old, come to Jesus. Why? Because he has those wonderful words of life.

Words like, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Mat 10:29-31, NRSV) And remember these words, "In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2)

In a dying and decadent world, Jesus reminds us that there is something more, something of infinitely greater worth that awaits all who trust in him. He has wonderful words of life.

His words remind us that even the smallest person's life can have a great impact on the world. If this world has meaning, if our lives have meaning, if it is true when the smallest sparrow falls from the sky the Father is aware of it, doesn't that say that who we are and what we do is important--no matter what our limitations?

Many years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner and his wife lost their teenage son to a rare disease. We grieve all the more deeply over the death of a young person because he or she never got to reach their full potential. But their son's death was not the end of his influence. Many years after their son's death, Kushner and his wife learned that more than half of his high school classmates had memorialized him in their college essays as "the most unforgettable person" they had ever met. This young man's attitude toward his own life and death had been so impressive that dozens of young people were still influenced by him.

The greatest heresy of which you and I can be guilty of is not a lack of faith in God. The greatest heresy is a lack of faith in ourselves and what God can do through us. Even the smallest person in the kingdom of God is of infinite value. Even the person with the most severe limitations can impact others. This is why the words of Jesus are so refreshing and life-giving. He tells us that our lives matter.

I mention this because how we feel about ourselves will determine the effectiveness of our witness to Christ. There are many people who latch onto Christ because they are disgusted with themselves. And that's good. We need to reach out to him when our self-esteem is dragging the floor. But if we stay disgusted with ourselves, we can never be effective in reaching out to others. Christ has too many followers who feel helpless, defeated, impotent. Let Christ deliver you from your feelings of low self-esteem. Let him speak to you words of life about who you are and what he has done in your behalf.

Matt Weinstein, in his book, *Managing to Have Fun* tells an interesting story that deserves to be broadcast widely.

He said he was running through the streets of Berkeley with his friend Dale Larsen. Dale is a clinical psychologist, and although they had been friends for a long time, they had never gone running together before. After stretching, they began to run and had only gone a few blocks when Matt noticed that Dale reached into the pocket of his shorts, took out a handful of coins, and threw them over his shoulder. The first couple of times this happened, Matt pretended not to notice. But after a while it began to drive him crazy--so he finally asked Dale, "Dale, what is the story with the money? Why are you throwing coins into the street?" Dale laughed and proceeded to tell him about an amazing psychology experiment nicknamed, interestingly enough, "The Good Samaritan Study."

“In the study, researchers positioned themselves across from a pay phone and studied the people who made phone calls. One of the first things they discovered was that almost everyone who makes a call looks in the coin return after hanging up to see if any coins happen to be there. The urge is irresistible: you just have to look in the coin return to see if the machine has mistakenly returned your money! This behavior gave the researchers an idea. The next day, they randomly put coins in the coin return slot, so that some of the people who used the phone actually did discover money. The researchers then hired a young woman to walk by the phone at the exact moment that the subjects were hanging it up. When the young woman walked by with her arms full of books, she pretended to stumble and drop them on the ground. Astonishingly, the researchers observed that the people who found money in the coin return were four times as likely to stop and help the woman pick up her books than were the people who found no money in the coin return. They concluded,” writes Matt Weinstein, “that when we feel good, we tend to do good, which also means that the helping impulse is transferable. In other words, if you do something good for another person, he or she is much more likely to do something nice for someone else, causing one small gesture to result in a giant ripple effect.”

Notice those words: “when we feel good, we tend to do good . . .” Many people identify themselves with Christ’s ministry, but they never reach out to others. Why? It is because Christ’s spirit, Christ’s acceptance, Christ’s empowerment have never penetrated their hearts.

The disciples knew they could never leave Jesus. Oh, they had the freedom to do so, but they would never have the desire to do so. Because, in him, they had found life. They felt good about themselves in his presence, so they could feel good about others. They felt pure in his presence, so they could have pure motives in relating to others. They felt his love and so they could be loving. Simon Peter answered for the rest, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

How do you feel about Jesus this day--and how do you feel about yourself? Some of us feel like sinners--and we are, but he has taken away our sins. Some of us feel inadequate, but we do not take comfort in our completeness, but in his. Some of us feel resentful. We wonder why life has not been more fulfilling.

We wonder why we do not experience his goodness in our lives. Could it be that we have not opened ourselves completely to him? Could it be that we have not completely listened to the words he would say to us? Could it be that our spiritual and emotional lethargy is a result of our fear of total commitment to his purpose for our lives?

Permit me, please, to illustrate with a truly strange analogy. According to the fossil record, the oldest known mammal on earth is the opossum. This is unusual, because the opossum is not a particularly hardy animal. It is not very fast or smart or aggressive, and it has few ways to defend itself. So how has the opossum survived so well in this hostile world?

For starters, the opossum will eat anything. There is almost no substance that it finds inedible. Also, the opossum is not susceptible to any diseases. It even has a built-in resistance to certain types of snake venom. But the single most effective defense mechanism opossums possess is the ability to “play dead.” When threatened by a predator, opossums react by falling into a coma-like state, which can last up to six hours. Most wild animals will not eat a dead animal, so the predator often leaves the opossum alone.

In the southern U.S. people use the expression, “playing possum.” It means that people are immobile, feigning death. That reminds me of many Christians. It’s like the old joke about the man who died in church. Paramedics carried out six people before they got to the right one.

Too often, our lives lack spiritual vitality. They lack joy, they lack life. I believe the reason is fear--fear of total commitment to Christ and a refusal to hear and believe his wonderful words of life.

One Christmas years ago, a letter was addressed to Santa Claus. It was intercepted by a postal clerk in England. The clerk suddenly realized it was written by his own daughter, who was quite young. The girl told Santa that recently her little brother, Charlie, had died. She asked Santa to take Charlie’s presents up to heaven so that he would have something to play with. And then she told Santa of her parents’ deep grief. She asked Santa to bring something that would help her father stop crying so much. She wrote, “I heard him tell Mommy that only eternity could cure him. Could you give him some of that?”

We all need some of that, don't we? Some eternity. That's why today we have come to spend time with Jesus. Only he has the wonderful words of eternal life.