

Lectionary 21 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 22, 2021

John 6:56-69

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Different types of Christians worship in different ways. Virtually every kind of Christian worship service includes reading the Bible. But how it is read can vary. How much gets read varies. Who reads it varies. The pattern that you experience at Dove of Peace is the Roman Catholic pattern developed in the 1960s as a result of the Second Vatican Council. It's the Catholic method, imitated very early by Lutherans and Episcopalians in this country. And later imitated, with less consistency, by many other mainline Protestants.

Let me first point out that in many Christian communities, the preacher decides what they are going to preach on, and that scripture is the one that is read. So there is just one reading, although the preacher may mention many others in their sermon. That one reading is selected by the preacher based on their spiritual discernment of the message that the congregation needs to hear that Sunday. In the churches where I was raised, there were two readings, one from the Old Testament and another from the New Testament. That's a very interesting way of doing it. How the Bible is divided up and presented makes a huge statement to the community. It shapes their understanding of God. That Old Testament – New Testament distinction reflects a Calvinist theology.

For a thousand years before Vatican II, the Roman Catholic church presented two readings, an Epistle – basically a New Testament letter by Paul or someone else. And a reading from the four gospels. So there were two readings, assigned each Sunday, both from the New Testament. The Old Testament was simply not read in the principal Sunday worship services. And this approach was embedded in the Episcopal and Lutheran worship as well, which lasted until the Catholics changed it up in the wake of Vatican II.

Specifically, what happens in our churches is a first reading. More than 80% of the time the first reading is from the Old Testament. That's followed by a responsorial psalm. Responsorial. The psalm is assigned as a response to the first reading. It's music. Then there is a second reading. Which is from the New Testament epistles. And then, last but certainly not least, there is a reading from the four gospels.

I want to analyze this in a bit of detail. Because it is actually critically important. You will notice several things about the gospel reading. First of all, we stand up, if possible, to read and hear the gospel. We don't do that for Genesis or Jeremiah. We don't do that for Romans or Ephesians. But

for Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we stand up. And notice something else. We change *who* reads. The lay person stands aside. And the clergy— the priest, the minister, the pastor— is the one who reads the gospel aloud. This sends a signal about what is important. It also prejudices the sermon which follows toward the gospel. In other words, the gospel reading sets up the sermon by its placement in the sequence, and by the fact that the preacher is the one who reads it. The preacher is more likely to preach on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And less likely to preach on Joshua or Ephesians.

Liturgy is theater, liturgy is drama. What all of this signifies is that the gospel reading is the dramatic climax of the Bible readings, and that Jesus himself draws near to us. We stand up for the gospel as though the judge has just entered the courtroom. And the gospel reading is preceded by an acclamation. Which, except during Lent, is Alleluia. Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord! The gospel reading is preceded by people jumping up to their feet and exclaiming “Praise the Lord!”

It does not have to be this way. In next week’s gospel reading, Jesus will distinguish between the commandments of God and human tradition. This is human tradition. This is a very well thought out and very well designed practice. Keep in mind that just as you stood and heard me read from the sixth chapter of the gospel according to John, hundreds of millions of Christians on this day did exactly the same thing. In their various languages, in various lands, hundreds of millions of Christians today stood up and heard their priest or preacher or minister or bishop or whatever that person is called read these exact same words. In Italian, in Swahili, in Norwegian, in Australian accents, in Castilian accents. The same experience globally. Hundreds of millions of people.

Now each week when we sing Alleluia, another tiny piece of scripture is assigned. One verse, maybe two. This is the gospel acclamation verse. And at Dove of Peace, most Sundays, you hear Eric Holtan sing those words. And the words that he sang today were these: *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.* Now Dove of Peace, among Lutherans, does our liturgy in a fairly sophisticated and elegant manner. It is usually done properly and in good order, with some exceptions. Even when we are sloppy or make mistakes. And so we are blessed to have someone like Eric with a good voice, and a pastor and others who know how to properly execute a fairly complex liturgy, at least by Protestant standards. In three years of Sundays, 156 Sundays, today is the one day that Eric sings: *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*

However, not all Lutheran churches are as fantastic as we are. And so there is an easier option. In those churches that do not have an Eric who can chant a different verse each week, they sing the same verse every week. And usually in unison. I’m talking about congregations in the United States, in our denomination. So they sing, every week: *Alleluia. Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia.* So you here at Dove of Peace, out of 156 Sundays, you only get this once. Because you are a sophisticated Lutheran. (Which is an oxymoron.) But more common, more run-of-the-mill Lutherans do this every Sunday. When they stand up for the gospel reading, they sing in their own voices and in their own words: *Lord, to whom shall we go? You*

have the words of eternal life. Many of you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Those are the words of Peter. The one who jumped into the sea and started to sink. Peter, the one who said he would never deny Jesus, and then did so three times. There is something profoundly plaintive— something needy and desperate in those words. Jesus himself also sounds needy and desperate in this moment. Many people have decided to quit following him, and Jesus poses the question, “Are you also going to quit?” And Peter says no. This, I believe, is the so-called Confession of Saint Peter in the fourth gospel. It's a famous event in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, where Peter recognizes and affirms and acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah. We call that the Confession of Saint Peter. It does not occur in this fourth gospel according to John. But instead this: *You have the words of eternal life.* But it is framed in this slightly pathetic way. Where else can we go? We have no choice. It's a lovely contrast to the majesty of Joshua's declaration in our first reading today. *As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.* A grand declaration of choice. Joshua uses his free will to choose the Lord. For Peter, it is not a grand choice. Peter feels powerless and desperate. *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*

I think it is delightful that there are hundreds of millions of Catholics in a church that was supposedly founded with Peter as the first pope. But it's these Lutherans in America who quote Pope Peter week after week. *Lord, to whom shall we go?* It's an appropriate way to greet the gospel. It's a confession of our weakness. It is a confession that we are sheep. But we know who our shepherd is.

So Peter's words resonate with us on this Sunday. One out of 156 Sundays for us sophisticated Dove of Peace Lutherans. But truly a great place to begin a worship service. A great way to begin a time of prayer. “Lord, to whom can we go?” We can say those words with Peter, and begin to hear what the Lord might be speaking to us. On any given Sunday. Or at any given hour. We have little power. We have little choice. We are little more than sheep. But he has the words of eternal life. Amen.