

Funeral Sermon for Rev. Ron Jeffrey – April 12, 2015 – John 6:68
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

My sermon text for this afternoon is from the gospel of John, chapter 6 verse 68: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

One thing I never got to do with Ron, is write a sermon together. But based on other experiences, I suspect the process would have looked something like this:

Ron bursts into the office, we start talking and a topic emerges. This single topic fires off a complex series of neurons and synapses – his, not mine - and all of a sudden, books start flying off the shelves of our shared Library. (When I say “shared Library” I refer to the fact that for my first two years here, the Library in the Minister’s Study consisted of about 10 of my books and 500 of Ron’s). With each book that comes off the shelf, Ron recalls with immediate clarity, which chapter of the book pertains to the topic at hand, the main thrust of the author’s premise, and the way that he or she has structured the argument. On the sideboard, I assemble a pile of books and after 25 minutes Ron realizes he needs to be someplace else... and I am left with a stack of books and a bushel-basket full of scholarly, concise, insightful, brilliant commentary from my friend Ron Jeffrey.

While I didn’t get the opportunity to write a sermon with Ron, John 6:68 is a scripture that the two of us had significant shared experience with – but more on that later.

At a staggering 71 verses, the 6th chapter of John is one of the longest chapters of the New Testament. It starts with two stories familiar to us from the other gospels – the feeding of the multitude, and Jesus’ walking on the water – before launching into a long, exhausting, confusing diatribe about Jesus as the Bread of Life. Much of this sounds a whole lot more like John talking about communion, than Jesus musing on discipleship, but no matter: with these words Jesus is really ramping it up, testing how deeply committed his followers are to his world-altering mission. It culminates in the rather ghoulish verse 56, “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I live in him.” After a bit more to-ing and fro-ing, in verse 66 it is revealed that “because of this, many of Jesus’ followers turned back and would not go with him any more. So Jesus asked the twelve disciples, ‘And you – would you also like to leave?’” And it is at this point that Simon Peter answers on behalf of the group: **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”**

If I’m not mistaken, I think I am hearing hurt feelings in the question from Jesus to the disciples. Jesus pushed them, hard, on a most challenging point of theology, and with that the more casual followers quit on him. So he looks at the twelve he figures he can count on, and asks, “And you – would you also like to leave?” And at that moment, I feel an extra kinship with Jesus, because that is one of the hardest things for anyone in Ministry to deal with – the reality that even during the most successful ministries, there are going to be people who *were* walking the walk with you, who start to fall off the pace and will perhaps fall off the path. For years, I have understood God’s incarnation in Christ Jesus, as God’s way of saying to *all* of humanity, “I am going to experience all of this first hand so I can fully empathize with all of your joys and sorrows.” But until this week, I hadn’t really understood that *Christ even took on the self-questioning experience of a preacher’s life*; I knew that as he said hard things, people rejected a his message and started to oppose him, but I never really thought of our Lord and Saviour experiencing that crummy feeling of watching people just drift away.

Such an honest question by Jesus, asking if the disciples were willing to stick with him, and what an answer by Peter: **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”** With Peter’s words, those of us given the task of standing at pulpits on Sunday mornings are reminded that in the final analysis, if we can get our ego needs out of the way, it’s not our thoughts and opinions being offered from here, but expressions of the life-giving power of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our gifts and abilities are definitely utilized, but what we must rely on, and what we must convey, is the power of the Divine, which has demonstrated the ability to rise up above anything that threatens to crush it. We bring our knowledge of world events, we apply other modes of thought, we even consult other sacred texts, but in the final analysis we commit our hopes to the resurrection power of Christ.

Earlier I mentioned that Ron and I had some important history with this scripture passage. Roughly a year ago, we got talking about the really foundational stuff of our lives and our ministries. We talked about our sense of calling, we talked about the kinds of things that have shaped our practice of ministry, we even talked about what it feels like when people lose faith during your time in ministry, and then Ron told me that there was one scripture that defined his call to ministry and in many ways, his self-understanding as a child of God: (you guessed it) John 6:68, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” It was such a gift to have that shared with me, and I vowed I wouldn’t forget it.

The next part of the story I tell with Silke’s permission and, indeed, her insistence. Five days ago, on Tuesday morning April 7th, I had just finished doing the weekly worship service at the Golden Eagle View Extended Care wing of the Canmore Hospital. I’d planned to hang out with Ron at his home that afternoon, but Silke had let me know that he’d had a rough night and had been taken into emergency. So at 10:30 in the morning, after my worship time was done at extended care, I headed down to “emerg”. Ron’s breathing was erratic – not a lot worse than it had been in recent days, but bad. Silke and I kept talking to Ron... and eventually I reminded him of what he had told me a year earlier, about John 6:68. And almost immediately after I spoke to Ron those words of eternal hope – “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” – Ron visibly started to release from the fight – and about ten minutes later, breathed his last. His source of hope, his inspiration for ministry, had been spoken aloud and that’s all he needed to hear in order to make his move. Silke, that experience with you and your husband was one of the deepest and holiest gifts of my life – both because of its intimacy, and because it completely affirmed the truth of what the apostle Peter said to his dear friend Jesus.

I’ve got a broadly-inclusive spirituality, and I think it’s safe to say that Ron did too. But when I go deep, into that still, small place where only the voice of God speaks, I hear the proclamation of what we declared a week ago on Easter Sunday: Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed. In Christ we have everything we need, in his passionate commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation there is new life for anyone who wants it. In our life, in our Ministry, there is no place else to go. In Christ we have our courage and our purpose and our destination.

And so on this day, we give thanks for this passionate, sparky, lively, determined, spiritual, scattered, scholarly servant of Christ, and we do so with the confidence of the Lord whom we are all called to serve. Christ Jesus is the embodiment of God’s word of eternal life, and may that embodied promise of life eternal and abundant, be heard loud and clear on this day of sadness and celebration. Amen.

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