

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER: ROGATE
Jeremiah 29:11-14; James 1:22-27; John 26:23-30

Plain Words

“His disciples said, “Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God.”

Nothing could be plainer than the Small Catechism. It lays Scripture out there sweetly and succinctly. It’s not long. It’s not flowery. It’s the Bible boiled down to six chief parts. It’s plain as plain can be, and you’ve studied it for two years with me, and you still don’t know it. If only I had a yardstick! No, you know it, but you still don’t know it enough to stop learning it. Don’t feel bad, though; Luther never knew it well enough to stop learning it either. He writes in the Large Catechism, which is like the Small Catechism, but...larger:

I act as a child who is being taught the catechism. Every morning—whenever I have time—I read and say, word for word, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Psalms, and such... I cannot master the catechism as I wish. But I must remain a child and pupil of the catechism, and am glad to remain so.

The word “catechesis” was used by the Greeks in the theater. It meant “to make an echo.” In catechesis, a student echoes a pastor. But why would the Church want to teach specific questions and answers in such away. **What does this mean?** See, you’ve turned the tables on me. It means the Church believes these questions and answers matter. Why? Because the Bible says these questions and answers matter, and the Bible is the word of Christ, the Church’s Head.

You’ve learned the questions and answers of life, and not just of this life, but of the life to come. You’ve learned plain words, yet perhaps the most neglected words of all, precisely because they are so plain. How often don’t we want God to give it to us straight, until He does?

Jesus’ disciples were no different from us. They rejoice that Jesus has finally spoken plain words to them, without figures of speech. They repeat, almost word for word, what He’d just taught them. And then, only a few chapters later, they’re hiding in fear, wondering what God was thinking. Jesus had told them in plain words, but they’d thought they knew them well enough and moved on. Never move on. When you can fit God’s mind in your head, then you’ll know His words well enough, but you’re gonna need a crowbar the world can’t make to pull that off.

To quote Eric here, or, rather, to quote the Large Catechism that Eric quoted in his essay: **Therefore, I again beg all Christians, especially pastors and preachers, not to think of themselves as doctors too soon and imagine that they know everything. Instead, they should daily exercise themselves well in these studies and constantly use them... And they should not stop until they have tested and are sure that they have taught the devil to death, and have become more learned than God himself and all his saints.**

I think I’ve told you this story before, but what’s the fun of being a pastor if you can’t make people sit through the same story over and over again. Mark Twain once overheard a businessman well known for his heartlessness say that before he died he was going to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, climb Mount Sinai, and read the Ten Commandments out loud from the top. Twain wryly suggested, **“You could stay home in Boston and keep them.”**

St. James puts it this way: *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.”*

These words you’ve studied aren’t a task to be completed, but a sacred trust invested in you by God. These words aren’t simply meant to go in one ear, but to conquer the other, together with your heart, mind, and soul. You’ve seen yourself in the mirror the past two years. You’ve seen the good, the bad, and the ugly: your Savior, your sins, and your sinful nature. And believe me, your sinful nature is ugly. But there’s nothing that says ugly people can’t be in shape, and your sinful nature is always eager to get a workout. So, if you’re going to wrestle with the old Adam, you need the muscle of the new Adam. Get to lifting your Bibles, running to the Communion rail, and swimming in your Baptism, because that’s where Jesus packs His punch.

There are two ways to learn in life: from books or from experience. Learn from the Book; it’s less painful. Learning from experience leaves you looking like the rest of us. Pretty scary, isn’t it? It’s not as easy to comb over stupid decisions as it is bald spots. The school of hard knocks leaves bumps. God has given you the Book. Take Him at His Word, and put it into practice.

And when you fail—notice, I said when and not if—know where to turn. Thankfully, the Book tells you that too. In chapter five of this Gospel, Jesus told some religious folk who thought they had more highlighting in their Bibles than He did, *“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.”* And Jesus is your only hope when you fall, even as Jesus is your only hope for staying faithful.

Josh’s catechism verse speaks mountains of wisdom for those times when we think we’ve heard more than we’ve done, and not only when we think it, but when we know it, usually when we haven’t done all that much hearing either: *“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death”* (2 Corinthians 7:10). When you’ve let down your Savior, always stand with St. Peter and not with Judas. Run back to Jesus. Seek His mercy. Console yourself with the thought, “Perhaps He will forgive me,” and Jesus will wipe that perhaps away and sign His name with the Blood that bought you. Judas was too scared to run back. He despaired of Christ’s mercy. He was swallowed by shame. His guilt turned his feet to concrete, put a rope around his neck, and, it would seem, sent him precisely to the place from which Christ had come to rescue him.

Jeremiah says in our first lesson, *“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”* One day, Philip Neri, a sixteenth century priest was talking to a university student. He asked him what he was studying and what he wanted to be. The young man was studying philosophy, but would be done the next year. *“And then?”* Philip asked. The student said he’d study law. *“And then?”* Philip asked. The young man said he’d become a lawyer and build up a reputable practice. *“And then?”* Philip asked. The student said he’d start a family and keep moving up at work. *“And then?”* Philip asked. The young man thought and replied that he’d probably be satisfied with his success, grow old and die. *“And then?”* Philip asked. The student paused, looked troubled, and began crying. All his ambitions suddenly seemed like nothing. He’d been preparing for the wrong life.

Never forget, “**And then?**” If you can’t answer that today, forget about tomorrow, because tomorrow is just one distracted school bus driver away. Thank God there’s none of those in Swan Valley. Not one day of your life is a throwaway day. It may be *the* day. It may be *the* opportunity. And when *the* time comes, let’s pray those questions and answers the Church stubbornly crammed into your cranium come to mind.

You’ve been given plain words. Learn them. You may not have me hovering over your shoulder anymore, but you’ve still got the plain words. When someone tries to tell you those words aren’t as plain as they are, shut your ears. When your sinful nature tries to tell you that He who spoke them didn’t mean them, open your Bibles. These words may be plain, but they taste great to hungry hearts. Never get full. Amen.