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August 12, 2018

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
12th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B John 6:35-51

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

Have you ever known someone who later became famous? Or maybe one of your childhood friends grew up to hold a prominent position in business or the community or even a government office. Sometimes it's hard to believe that someone we know can be so important.

This weekend, Eric went back to our hometown where our high school class was getting together during the county fair. He got to visit with several of our classmates, one of whom now serves as a public school superintendent who also serves on state boards. Never in our wildest dreams would we have imagined that teenage boy growing up to be an advocate for education! I don't know what I imagined but it wasn't that!

This is the kind of thinking the Jews had when they heard Jesus. "Who does he think he is? We've known him since he was a kid. We know his parents! How does he get off tell everyone he is the 'bread that came down from heaven'?"

Throughout the gospel according to John Jesus makes seven statements that begin with the words "I am". We are meant to be brought back to the first time we hear those words in the book of Exodus. When Moses asks the voice in the burning bush who is sending him to Egypt to free the Israelites, the voice of God answers, "I Am who I Am."

When Jesus says, "I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the Good Shepherd," he connecting himself to the God of Moses and the ancestors. Though Jesus came to us in human form, he holds both his divinity and humanity together. We hear that especially in verse 51 today when he says, "I am the *living* bread who came down from heaven."

This is our third week in the sixth chapter of John. The whole question of who Jesus is begins with him feeding more than 5,000 people from just five loaves of bread and two fish, filling them all until they were satisfied, and with twelve baskets of food left over.

Jesus instructed the disciples to gather up the leftovers, "so that nothing may be lost," he said. Later, in the verses we included today, Jesus says that the will of the one who sent him was that he should lose nothing of all that was given to him, but raise it up on the last day.

The baby who was born in a stable, who grew up following the footsteps of Joseph the carpenter, who learned the stories of God's people on the knee of Mary, now declares that in the package of his humanity is also the person and presence of God.

The one who fed the people with enough to satisfy them, was sent, Jesus says, to gather up those who live as the leftovers, the scraps in this world, and raise them up to new life, eternal life.

How is that done? How does this gathering up of the leftovers take place? Jesus says, “It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.”

We often think about Holy Communion when we think of Jesus as the bread of life. But here Jesus tells us that it is in God’s teaching that we receive the bread that fills and sustains us for this life and the life to come.

In the prologue to John’s gospel, Jesus is named “the Word” (with a capital W). “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:1, 10-13)

It is in the teaching of Jesus that we are being drawn into God’s embrace where we come to believe and trust in a life that is so abundant that it is eternal. This gives us hope both in the assurance of life beyond death, but also hope and trust that this life here and now is a part of that eternal promise.

And if that’s true for those of us who believe, it is just as true for those who have yet to hear this good news. It is true for those who feel like they are the leftovers, the overlooked, the broken pieces.

Jesus says, “This is the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life.” And, “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.”

Faith is about being drawn to God, and Jesus tells us that this is God’s action. We like to talk about our free will, our choices, and even how we are working to strengthen our own faith. Here Jesus tells us that we are drawn to God in and through the Word—the teaching and the person of Jesus himself.

The fact that God is the one who works to bring us to faith might be a struggle for some who, as in last week’s passage ask, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” And it is a comfort to others who seek to be known and loved. So Jesus teaches us in a way that brings it down to earth through this image saying, “I am the bread of life.”

It is hard to imagine the enormity of God being present in the life of one human being. And yet this is the only way we can come to God, to hear God’s voice and to know God’s heart. It is in the humanity of Jesus that we see God’s face. It is in the humanity of Jesus that we also see the faces of all those God loves—ordinary Jesus looks like ordinary you and me, all who are longing to be gathered up in the eternal and abundant life that comes as a gift of faith from God.

Who are those in our world in need of being gathered, included, or loved? The Word of God who became flesh and lived among us is the bread we are given to feed a world hungry for life and love—the life and love of God that we know through the life and love of Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen