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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
7th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

This sermon begins before the reading of the first lesson.

This morning the sermon will be a kind of progressive sermon. In seminary I was warned against trying to incorporate more than two readings into a sermon, but today I'm going to break that rule. Individually, each of the lessons for this 7th week after Pentecost is rich with meaning and insights.

But together, these particular readings paint a beautiful picture of the relationship God intends and desires to have with believers, and with the whole world. Together, these lessons speak to the hope we can claim through the love and faithfulness of God through Jesus Christ.

We have already read together a portion of Psalm 86 as our hymn of praise, so I'll start with a few words about that one. Normally, this would echo the Old Testament reading, but it serves as a good word to begin with today.

The other three readings will call us out on our tendency to be divided—in our communities, in the church, and even within our own hearts. We want to know who is in or out, right or wrong, good or evil.

Psalm 86 guided us to pray that we would know the truth of God's ways and that God would give us "an undivided heart." The psalmist acknowledges that there are those who live and work against God's ways of love—and maybe the psalmist recognizes that in himself.

And then we declared the most repeated creed of the Hebrew scriptures—"But you, O Lord, are gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and full of kindness and truth." That last line sometimes reads, "full of steadfast love and faithfulness."

This is how we begin our readings today—acknowledging the divisions within and among us and turning to our compassionate, faithful God.

Isaiah 44:6-8

Stephen Covey is quoted as saying, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." For the Judeo-Christian believer, The Lord, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, the Lord of hosts is the main thing we are reminded to keep as the main thing in our lives.

Most of us wouldn't admit to thinking we are any sort of god, but it seems we often look to others to be gods for us. We expect perfection from our leaders. We expect celebrities to be wise and generous. And we expect experts to know the future.

In this portion of Isaiah, the people of Israel have been taken into captivity in Babylon. They wanted to know how long it would last. They wanted someone to set them free. They needed a source of hope. And they are reminded—as are we—that the Lord God is the source of all hope. There is no other god, no other source of salvation. And with compassion God reassures us, "Do not fear." God will not let us down. The main thing is to keep God the main thing.

Romans 8:12-25

In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he is building an argument for the inclusion of Gentiles in the family of God through faith in Jesus Christ. This was a challenge for the early church. The first believers were Jews who followed Jesus and believed him to be the Son of God and the promised Savior—the One they had been expecting for generations.

But others heard Jesus' message of salvation and came to believe that Jesus had died on the cross and rose again so that they too would be granted the blessings of a full relationship with God and everlasting life. But the Jewish believers wanted the Gentiles to be like them, to be circumcised and to follow the food laws they continued to observe.

Paul writes to this divided church, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." He uses the image of adoption, which legally binds the adopted child to her new family. But adoption as God's children is not just a legal arrangement. Through faith, all believers become "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."

The blessing of this close and eternal relationship with God comes with suffering, as Paul experienced time and again. And it can be easy for us to get stuck in our suffering, to focus in on what is difficult and divided in us and in the world around us. It is precisely in the midst of suffering that we are given the opportunity to give witness to the hope we have through Christ Jesus.

In fact, Paul says the whole of creation "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God." The ways we respond in the presence of suffering can give witness to God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

When we place our hope in God's leading by the Spirit, we hope for what we cannot yet see—the possibility of forgiveness, reconciliation, understanding, and new life.

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Last Sunday, on the CBS Sunday Morning show¹, one segment told about a pastor serving in Shreveport, Louisiana who has been working for over 30 years to build up the community through neighborhood networks of caring for one another.

Mack McCarter grew up in Shreveport, he went off to seminary and eventually returned, moving into the section of town known as "The Bottoms." The photos they showed of that neighborhood back in the '80s looked like the houses were all about ready to fall down.

Pastor Mack, who happens to be white, began knocking on the doors of his black neighbors and said, "There's a group of us that believe if we'll get to be friends then we can change this city." It took time to convince a few to get to know him and to get to know their neighbors better, but over the years the seeds of transformation grew into a non-profit organization called Community Renewal International.

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rebuilding-caring-communities-block-by-block/>

Community centers have been built where teens and adults find support and encouragement to rise above the evils of bigotry, segregation, and poverty. One teen told about how he had been bullied at school, and he was challenged by his neighbors to “not become what you despise.”

Pastor Mack has taken Community Renewal to other neighborhoods, including a gated subdivision with grand homes on large lots. People living in that wealthy neighborhood realized that they didn’t know each other very well and they have deepened their care and connection to one another.

In Jesus’ parable, we want to identify one another as either being the wheat or the weeds. Maybe the weeds sown by the enemy are the weeds of suspicion, mistrust, bigotry, and fear of those we don’t know. The parable acknowledges that the children of God are surrounded by the forces in the world that work against God’s good purposes.

Jesus calls us to be patient, to continue to grow in faith and love, so that we can be witnesses of God’s goodness—like the grains of wheat that become bread to feed and nourish those around us. Deciding who are wheat and who are weeds is not our place. We return again to the Isaiah passage when God says, “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.”

When God serves as the main thing, the source of our life and our hope, we grow to trust that God is at work to bring about God’s justice, in God’s time. Our role is to serve as witnesses to the hope we have in God through Jesus Christ, as we are led by the Spirit. The whole creation is waiting with eager longing for us to share this good news.

Let us do so with glad and generous hearts! Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Confident of your care and helped by the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

God of the harvest, you sow the good seed of the gospel of Jesus Christ into your field. Help your church throughout the world to be both diligent and patient, full of resolve and gentleness, that our witness may be faithful to your intentions. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of all space and time, your whole creation groans in labor pains, awaiting the gift of new birth. Renew the earth, sky, and sea, so that all your creation experiences freedom from the bondage of decay. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of the nations, teach us your ways, that we may walk in your truth. Mend the fabric of the human family, now torn apart by our fearful and warring ways. Guide us by your mercy, grace, and steadfast love to bring care and healing to the world. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of hope, you accompany those who suffer and are near to the brokenhearted. Open our hearts to your children who are lonely and abandoned, who feel trapped by despair, and all who suffer in any way. We pray especially for the places where the coronavirus is spreading. Strengthen doctors, nurses, and specialists as they tend to the sick and dying. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of life, those who have died in you shine like the sun in your endless kingdom. We remember with thanksgiving the saints of all times and places and saints close to us. Gather us with them on the day of salvation. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

In the certain hope that nothing can separate us from your love, we offer these prayers to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.