

8.11.2024 Pentecost 12

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1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

“Whoever believes has eternal life”

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

This month we are reading the “bread of life” section in John’s gospel in which people seek Jesus between the mountain and the seashore. In today’s gospel Jesus tells the crowd, “*I am the bread of life...whoever believes has eternal life.*”

I would like to reflect a bit about these words spoken to the crowds and the disciples as they sought Jesus on the mountain and by the seashore. Jesus’ disciples, drawn to him, answered his call, gave up everything, and followed him. The crowds also, drawn to Jesus, left the responsibilities of homes and work to seek him out between the mountain and the sea.

People were hungering for something, for healing and for an indescribable bread that gives eternal life. Each of us here today knows this indescribable bread of life that is Jesus Christ. You know him in the Eucharist, prayer, the word, and in service with him to others. You know the power of Jesus’ promise, “*I am the bread of life...whoever believes has eternal life.*” You know his power to feed others through you as you have embodied him in your life.

Like the crowds, perhaps you have also experienced moments of Jesus’ renewal, healing, and grace in the mountains or by the seashore. As the crowds followed Jesus, we also continue to leave our daily lives, seeking him in moments of retreat in the mountains and by the sea.

A moment ago, we heard the powerful witness of four young people who have experienced Jesus the bread of life while working in the mountains as counselors at two of our church camps, Lutheridge and Lutherock. Thinking about the tension in John’s gospel between the mountain and the sea, I would also like to share from my own camp experiences in these places.

As a boy, every summer I went to Camp Augustana on Lake Geneva in Wisconsin for a week of Choir Camp. Some weeks during the summer we also traveled with my dad who was camp pastor for “Family Camp.” We stayed in dorms or family cabins, having our meals in the Dining Hall. Later, in high school, I went on youth group trips to the Lutheran Outdoor Ministry Center (LOMC) in Oregon, Illinois for “Camp-formation” weekends. In college, I hiked for a week in the White Mountains of New Hampshire with a church youth group that included my dad, brother, and sister, and our home base was Calumet Lutheran Camp located on Ossipee Lake in Freedom, New Hampshire.

I share these experiences because they help me see myself in John's gospel story between the mountain and the sea, encountered by Jesus and fed with the indescribable bread of life, Jesus Christ. Far from my home congregation, camping helped me discover that "*whoever believes has eternal life.*" That word "whoever" means what it says. Paul says it this way, "*For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved*" (Rom. 10:13, Acts 2:21, cf. Joel 2:32). At camp I learned that "whoever" includes all people of every background and identity.

The chapel at Camp Augustana stood atop a small hill, but when I was a boy that hill seemed like a mountain. In climbing that small hill, I was learning to go to the mountain of prayer with Jesus and "whoever" else might be with me. I was learning to discover the "*breadth and length, height and depth*" of God's love for all people (Eph. 3:18) – for "whoever" calls upon his name.

After college, when I first went to Japan as a lay missionary, I shouldn't have been surprised to encounter Jesus on the mountain and by the sea, because over the years in Japan, camps continued to be a part of my life. As a young 20-something, I helped lead retreats at Hi-BA Bible Camp in Chiba Prefecture on the Pacific coast. Years later, I went with seminary students to Okutama Bible Chalet in the mountains west of Tokyo. Over the years, I traveled between the mountains and the sea: to La Salle Retreat Center in Hino, west of Tokyo (run by the De La Salle Christian Brothers); the Kansai Seminar House in the foothills of Kyoto (run by the Japan Christian Academy); Amagi Sanso, a Bible camp and retreat center located on Izu Peninsula (run by the Japan Baptist Convention); and to Doshisha Retreat Center on the shore of Lake Biwa near Kyoto (run by Doshisha University).

In sharing this, I am hoping that you might also reflect on moments in your life when you have been drawn by God into Jesus' presence. Perhaps it was on a mountain or by the seashore, perhaps it was at a retreat center, or during a vacation as a stranger visiting a new city and a new church. Jesus Christ met you, and "whoever" else was there, with grace and peace. Such moments and the places we visit along our journey are places where we meet Jesus Christ, recommitting our lives to him, following him anew through lives discipleship and service in this world God so loves.

You see, the name "retreat" reflects the biblical idea of Jesus withdrawing to the holy mountain with his disciples to pray, even as they were followed by the crowds. Like those crowds, we also need times of spiritual retreat and renewal, times of meditation upon God's word in prayer and worship, away from the extreme busyness and noisiness of modern life. Jesus' words, "*whoever believes has eternal life,*" are words of promise you can trust. Jesus' words of promise extend not

only to you and me, but to “whoever.” *Whoever* means everyone, everywhere. It means all people between the mountain and the sea who call upon him.

Increasingly, I pray that we might take Jesus’ words to heart about “whoever” in this fractured and broken world, where we have become intolerant of whoever is different. “Whoever” includes all nations, ethnicities, languages, genders, and identities. We are, as Paul told the Ephesians, to “*put away from you all bitterness, wrath and anger, wrangling and slander...[and] be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*”

Paul calls this “*walking in love*” as “*imitators of God.*” Jesus gave himself for you, for me, and for this whole world God so loves. Jesus says, “*the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*” Jesus gave himself on the cross and was raised, not only for my friends, family, and nation, but “*for the life of the world.*” To believe in Jesus is to see yourself journeying with “whoever” else in this world believes in him, as you use his life in you for the life of the world.

With small steps, I began to understand this as I climbed that mountain of a small hill at Camp Augustana, worshiping with children of many different backgrounds. Many years later, one cold, rainy autumn day near the shore of Lake Biwa, I stood on the platform of Kita-Komatsu Station waiting for a train to take me back to Tokyo. As I stood talking with new friends and colleagues who taught at universities and seminaries all over Japan, I looked out at the fall colors of the mountains, realizing that Jesus was also journeying with us.

Jesus promises, “*Whoever believes has eternal life.*” To believe in Jesus is to already have eternal life – all your life – from the mountain to the seashore.

Jesus feeds you with his word so that whoever you meet might also meet him in you.

I no longer remember how many times I have met Jesus between the mountain and the sea – and it no longer matters, because I know he lives in me.

May he also continue to live in you.

“*Whoever believes has eternal life.*” Amen.