

August 12, 2018

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

I had the privilege this past week to accompany two of our confirmation youth, Alex and Hannah, to EWALU Camp & Retreat Center located just outside of Strawberry Point in northeast Iowa. This was the first time in my tenure at Bethany confirmation students have attended a week-long time venture known as Confirmation Camp. It is an opportunity to come together with youth from other congregations to continue their faith journey and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. There are many different camps that were being held throughout the week for children and youth of all ages; in fact, another of our youth, Olivia, participated in something called Pack and Paddle – a week-long adventure of canoeing, hiking, and camping through Backbone State Park. No matter the age or individual camp attended, all groups worked under a common theme, *This Changes Everything*. Can you guess what the this might be? There is always one right answer in church and that is Jesus (or God). If you guessed Jesus, then you are right. And more specifically, what God has done through the birth (incarnation), life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. The this is that free grace we are offered because of God's redeeming work in Christ Jesus. The this is

that forgiveness and love we are abundantly fed and nourished through.

Connected to this theme was a Bible verse lifted up time and time again from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, the book of the Bible we read from just a few minutes ago, Ephesians. Specifically, verse 8 of the second chapter, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."* (NIV)

Bible camp was not something I was exposed to growing up in the faith. And it took me 46 years to finally get there. I readily admit, there was a part of me that really wasn't looking forward to going. I had just returned from a two-week vacation a week earlier and there was much I needed to attend to. Also, I'm not so much the camping outdoorsy type of person. But, it was also the fact I had never been to a Bible camp before. This was totally new and truthfully was leading me to step beyond my comfort zone. I didn't know what to expect and was anxious about the experience. It was a busy week for the campers and staff; as well, as for the pastors and youth leaders who attended with their youth and as the end of the week drew near I realized I had not put in as much time preparing for a weekly sermon as I normally would like. However, as I reflected on the drive home Friday and then early this morning I realized my experience this past week indeed tied in many ways to our texts this morning.

Like last week, in our gospel passage from John we again hear Jesus proclaim that he is the bread of life. As he speaks to the Jewish leaders questioning his authority to make such a claim and recalling the bread (i.e. manna) God provided for their ancestors in the wilderness following the exodus from bondage in Egypt Jesus notes the bread he offers is not the same. While that bread filled their bodies for the long journey ahead it was not enough for the journey to eternal life. But, Jesus is. The bread he offers changes everything and he invites those Jewish leaders, the crowd that follows, and all people to come to eat of this bread and live. We hear of God's providence to the prophet Elijah in his own wilderness wandering as the angel of the Lord encouraged him through words of comfort but also through the offering of bread and water for the call set before him. We hear the psalmist sing the words, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." The church continues to proclaim these words today as the faithful people are invited to the meal of our Lord, known by many names – Eucharist, Holy Communion or Lord's Supper. What was it that caused the psalmist to declare these words? It was the Lord's listening ear as he cried out to God in his fear and affliction and it was God's protection, deliverance, presence and strength to continue onward in his journey with God. And then in Paul's letter to the Ephesians we hear Paul explain how the words he spoke moments earlier, "*For it*

*is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God”* does in fact change everything.

You see there was much division among the early church in Ephesus. Jewish Christians were living among Gentile Christians. There were many differences among them that raised contention including the command given by God to circumcise boys at birth as a sign they are indeed children of God. However, grace offered through Jesus Christ has changed that. Christ’s death and resurrection has changed everything. No longer shall there be division for they have been gathered together in the one body of Jesus Christ that is the church. No longer is their Jew or Greek, for each have been sealed with the mark of Christ by the Holy Spirit. The sign of the cross that changes everything and reveals itself through a life of faith reflecting the very nature of God Jesus lived as Paul calls the church to be imitators of God as they live out their faith bathed in the grace and love freely offered through Jesus Christ. One that seeks to build one another up through words which give grace. A life in which we put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us. This is life in Christ. This is how the unmerited, freely offered, and abundant gift of grace, freedom, restoration, eternal life, love, and forgiveness has changed

everything. No longer are we separated from the love of God. No longer are we bound by the sting of death. No longer are we afraid of eternal salvation. No, we are fed by the bread of life and changed to be imitators of God bringing that same bread of life to the world. Bearing for that love of Christ to one another and our neighbor. This is how we live out our faith through word and action. And when we do this not only does God change our own hearts, but God can change the hearts and lives of those whom we encourage, build up, forgive and be tenderhearted toward.

In my hesitancy and even dread of going to camp this past week the Lord changed everything. I was fed with the bread of life. Through the love of Christ which lives in that place. It shines through the staff and counselors of Camp EWALU. It echoes through the songs that are sung. It resides and radiates through the laughter, hugs, and even the tears that flow forth from being changed by God's grace. I witnessed lives changed. Children and youth strengthened through the bread of life to proclaim their faith in the world. I, too, was changed. Not by my own doing, but rather by the by grace in which we have been saved, through faith— the gift of God. And next year, well, I can't wait to go back and once again be transformed, shaped, and nurtured through that grace that changes everything.