

God of the Long Haul

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Text: John 6:35, 41-51

Surely one of the most curious chapters in American pop culture was the brief national obsession with trucking culture in the 1970s. What an odd and awkward time!

If we weren't getting down to the disco tracks of Bee Gees and Donna Summer, we might have been listening to corny country songs on the radio. Admit it if you watched the television show BJ and the Bear or if you remember C.W. McColl's run at the top of the charts with "Convoy."

"Come on and join our convoy,
ain't nothin' gonna get in our way.
We gonna roll this truckin' convoy,
'cross the USA,"

Or maybe you preferred Jerry Reed's hit "Eastbound and Down" from the movie *Smokey and the Bandit*.

Keep your foot hard on the pedal. Son, never mind them brakes.
Let it all hang out 'cause we got a run to make.
The boys are thirsty in Atlanta and there's beer in Texarcana.
And we'll bring it back no matter what it takes.

As a teenaged boy, I had a personal window into the trucking culture. My uncle was a trucker. He owned his own rig and he and his neighbor shared time behind the wheel and under the hood hauling all kinds of things from to Texas to Georgia.

Part of that time was the CB radio craze. The boys that lived next door to me in Atlanta climbed a pine tree between our houses and rigged up an antenna. I got an old radio from my uncle, adopted the handle the Peachtree Picker and spent my nights calling out, "Breaker breaker, come on good buddy"

What an odd time for America. RIP the 1970s!

Now I am well aware that trucking songs are a long way away from the black gospel music that carries us week to week here at Caldwell. I know also that all of this talk about trucking may seem a long way away from Jesus' words about being the bread of life in today's reading from the gospel of John. But stick with me for a moment.

Our scripture today continues the passage we began last week. The ideas we find in John 6 call for more than just a single Sunday. So we have brought some bread of life back to the communion table to symbolize that God's gift of the bread of life is more than just a single Sunday.

Today's scripture raises some heavy theological questions.

When Jesus says, "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me" is he saying that Christianity is the only real religion in the world and the only way to God?

When Jesus talks about those he will raise up on the last day, how do we know who gets saved and who doesn't? Are we in the club or not?

How do we eat this bread of life so we may have everlasting life?

Yes, there is a lot going on in the words Jesus offered to the crowds then and for us as we listen in 2,000 years later. But let me propose that our way to at least some of the answers to those and other questions is by looking at one little word in the middle of today's reading.

There, in verse 44, Jesus says, "No one comes to me unless they are *drawn* by the Father who sent me." Those are the words of the New Standard Revised Translation. But, as we know, there are many translations of these ancient words, which started out as a verbal tradition long before they were ever written down.

The word that catches my eye is "drawn" as in the translation we heard, "drawn by the Father." The Greek word for drawn in the ancient language of scripture is pronounced "*elko*." It's used in a very precise way in the Gospel of John. The author picks this word for specific reasons. You see, it appears only 8 times in all of the New Testament and most of those uses are in John's Gospel.

So why is that important? What is John trying to say about how God works through Jesus? What does any of this have to say to our busy, distracted and fragmented lives?

The first meaning of the word the old Greek word the gospel uses is "to draw," as in to attract something or someone. In this case, God is drawing us. And that rings true, doesn't it? One of the more mind-blowing truths about God is that God did not consider Himself complete without the creation of humanity alongside all the other creatures of the earth and stars and universes of the cosmos. God certainly didn't need us to be complete. If anything, God created a lot of headaches when God made us.

But God's identity lacked something, God's purpose was missing something without us, broken and busted, stiff-necked and misguided as we are.

Then God came in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God draws us close. In Christ, God attracts us: in Christ's compassion for the marginalized, in Christ's courage to speak truth to power, in Christ's righteous anger about injustice, in Christ's humanity and his divinity, in Christ's final submission to death on a cross for our healing. In all these ways, we are drawn to God.

In these ways and other ways, God makes it plain. If Christ is God's self-revelation, God's own self portrait in human terms, God is saying: "This is who I am. This is how much I love you. This is what I want for the world. This is what I expect of my children, to love as I have loved."

This self-portrait of God is what Jesus is talking about when he refers to himself as the Bread of Life, not for just today ... but for life everlasting. Like bread baking in the oven that sends a welcoming aroma throughout the house, we are drawn to God. And, once we know God in Christ, we are to offer the same fragrance of love and grace to the world, to attract others to God's love through our loving actions in the world.

As it is written in 2 Corinthians, we are to be for others like "the sweet smelling fragrance of Christ."

What a good word for those who have ears to hear ... or should I say noses to smell. But we cannot leave it there with this one word as a way to unlock today's reading. That is because we know some who do not know that sweet fragrance.

We know some, even in our pews today, who have known anything but that. They have instead only a bitter taste about God left by mean and hurtful expressions of organized religion. In too many places, people on the margins have only been burned and wounded by the church, because of their sexual identity, because of their past life choices, even because of their gender, they have been marginalized and made to feel like unwanted riff raff or overlooked step children. Rather than the true fragrance of Christ, many know the stench of racism, of homophobia, of classist ideas about who "deserves" to be in church" and other sins that, let's be honest, people who call themselves Christians still commit.

What does John have to say to *them*, those whose hearts are hurt, those whose view of God is cautious, at best, if not downright skeptical?

That brings us to the second meaning of our key word in verse 44.

The scripture says: "No one can come to me," Jesus says, "unless *drawn* by the Father."

The second meaning of that original Greek word *elko* is "to haul," as in to carry or to convey or to tote, as some might say.

Do you see how that meaning of the word comes alongside the other?

It is a promise for those who have been thrown off the scent of Christ. For those whose doubt and questions muffle their ability to hear God call them by name, for those not otherwise able to receive God's gracious and loving invitation, the gospel of John tells us God will carry them, God will convey them. For those who for whatever reason do not feel attracted to God, God will haul them, God picks them up, wherever they are in their faith journey, and totes them on his shoulders.

Yesterday, I packed a U-Haul truck with my daughter's belongings and hauled them back home from graduate school. A high school job of packing and unloading a truck all summer gave me the most important lesson of all when moving anything: Make sure it's tied down. You don't want to get to where you're going, open the cargo door and find everything in the back of the truck in one big messy, broken pile.

You've got to secure your cargo. Maybe that's the way it is when God haul's us.

Like my uncle and his 18-wheeler, God secures us gently in the cargo area and delivers us through the love of Christ to where we need to be. In those times in our lives when we are not drawn to God, when we are not *attracted to* God, the Gospel of John says leave the hauling to Christ. As the country song goes, "Jesus, take the wheel."

Here's the best part – here's the point: Whether we are *attracted to* God or *carried by* God, we are delivered. That, friends, is the essence of our doctrine of predestination. That, regardless of anything else, we are pre-destined to be loved by God and delivered through Christ.

There! Got ya! You had no idea this was a sermon on predestination. I know ... if I'd said that up front, you'd have taken a nap.

In closing, let's recognize one more thing this morning.

As in last week's readings, this week's scripture describes the people of God as grumblers and complainers. We all at times grumble and murmur. We complain with God and contend with Christ. We may second guess or do everything we can to distance ourselves or stand apart from God's love.

But either way, whether God attracts us or carries us, God gets us to where She wants us. God wins in the end. That is the victory of the cross.

Over and over in the fourth gospel, Jesus says "I am" I am the bread of life. I am the vine. I am the light.

He is making it as plain as he can. It us who make matters difficult. It's us who complicate things.

The way to God is so often simpler than we make it. St. Augustine, one of the church's earliest leaders, wrote about today's verses that it is not for us to judge who is drawn to God or not, who is saved and who isn't. That is up to God's gracious and forgiving nature.

"See how God draws," Augustine wrote of the Lord, "See how God draws ... not by imposing necessity" but by offering grace.

"As far as the manner goes, it is not violent," he continued, "but it is a movement of the Holy Spirit, turning us from being unwilling and reluctant into willing" souls who yearn for God.

So whether we are attracted by the fragrance of God's grace or drawn by the example and submission of Christ or even hoisted onto God's shoulders and hauled for as long as it takes, friends, we are God's and we are predestined to be loved by our Creator.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.