Today we celebrate the ministry this congregation has been doing ministry for 136 years. If you multiply 136 by 52, the number of Sundays in a year, you come up with 7072. You can then subtract for snow days and times the church maybe didn't meet every Sunday and come up with a rough figure of 6000 Sundays that the doors to this church have been open. That's 6000 Sundays of people arriving in horse-drawn buggies and then cars in every kind of weather. 6000 Sundays of people bringing their hopes, their sorrows, their joys, their weariness, their disappointments to this place. 6000 years of abundant crops and scarcity, of wars and depressions, of transition and uncertainty and stability. Think of the hundreds of babies that have been brought here to be baptized, of the hundreds of people who have had their funeral services here. Think of the thousands of dishes that have been brought to potlucks, the thousands of Sunday School classes, the thousands of late-night council meetings, the hundreds of chicken dinners to support the community. If these walls could talk, they would convey the rich and varied stories of many generations who have gathered here every week to hear the word of the Lord and to receive the body and blood of Christ. Today, we thank God for the faithfulness of these people who built and sustained this place so that we could worship here every week. Those generations of people certainly had other options for their time on a Sunday morning or a weekday night. They could have used the extra time to work in the fields or tend to chores around the house or spend extra time with their families. Instead, they were drawn here by a bond they had with one another and with God. Though they might not have said it this way, the people lived in a covenant with God, an agreement to be faithful to one another. They were held together by the God who had claimed them as God's people, who had established a relationship with them that was permanent and unbreakable.

Joshua helped the people he served understand the relationship God had built and was continuing with them. Joshua reminded the people of the time when God rescued their ancestors from Egypt and led them to the promised land, pushing back the enemies who threatened them along the way. Joshua spoke to the elders, the judges and the officers of Israel, the leaders of the people, and told them they had a choice: to serve the God who had brought them out of slavery into freedom or the other gods that vied for their loyalty. In a beautiful declaration of faith, Joshua told them, “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” Joshua made a passionate plea to the leaders; he called them to faithfulness to the God who had always been faithful to them. Joshua pleaded with them to confess their loyalty to the one true God and to renounce all the gods that fell away before him.

In a very real sense, Joshua is still talking and today is aiming his words at you and me.

You have a choice, he tells us. Serve the Lord who loves you so much he built a relationship with you that will never end or serve some other god that is calling for your allegiance. Of course, our Lutheran theology tells us that in reality we don't make the choice in our relationship with God – that God makes a choice for us. And that's true. God has created us, has given all God has, even God's son, to love us and that love is the driving force in our lives. But, in reality, you and I face a daily string of decisions to follow God or go another way. There are certainly lots of other gods vying for our attention. We could easily decide to serve ourselves and our families, to huddle together with those we love and make decisions that will only benefit our little band. We could wander off to follow the voices that tell us that beauty, success, wealth and possessions are all that matter in this life. We could view power as a god and seek it in all our relationships. We could do all those things and, truth be told, we all have at some time gone willingly down those tempting paths. But when we discover that those paths all lead to dead-ends, we can return to God and ask for the wisdom and discernment to seek what is good, true and life-giving versus what is false, evil and leads to death.

Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum and continued talking about himself as the bread of life. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them,” he told the people gathered there. He reminded the people of the bread God had given their ancestors after they left Egypt in search of the land promised them. God kept them alive by providing manna, a kind of bread that appeared on the ground all along their journey. This manna was life-giving, Jesus said, but it did not give the kind of life he came to give. Jesus told the crowd that he came to be bread for the world and to give life that lasts an eternity. The people were baffled. They saw in front of them an itinerant preacher who claimed to be sent from God and who talked about ridiculous things like eating his body and drinking his blood.

“This teaching is hard,” they said. “How can we be expected to follow this man?” The people began peeling away, leaving the synagogue to return to their regular lives, to follow gods that were less demanding. Jesus was left with just the twelve disciples he had started with. He asked them a difficult question, one that would determine the course of the rest of their lives. “Do you also wish to go away?” Peter, always the one to speak up first, answered with words that are familiar to us. “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” These are stunning words of faith, of willingness to continue the relationship Jesus had started with him and the others. Where else would they go? Peter was saying. Jesus was the one who had found them, who had called them and who loved them. Somehow he knew that whatever lay ahead, Jesus would always love them, would never forsake them.

“Do you also wish to go away?” Jesus asks us that question, too. He knows that we could choose other ways of life that would be simpler and would let us have more control. He knows that we sometimes wander away from him, sometimes deliberately, sometimes not. But the relationship he has created with us is so strong, so full of love and forgiveness, that we can always return to it and always find him there waiting for us. He gives his body and blood so that we might have the fullest, most meaningful life imaginable. This way is hard, no doubt about it. This way turns us from the mirror and shows us all those who need to know Jesus' love, all those Jesus expects us to use our hands to help. This way demands that we think as much of the other as we do of ourselves. This way requires that we allow all the choices we have to boil down to one fundamental choice: to serve our Lord with all our hearts and souls and minds.

In the words of the sometimes theologian Bob Dylan:

*You're gonna have to serve somebody, yes you are*

*You're gonna have to serve somebody*

*Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord*

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

Thank God for all those over the past 136 who have served God faithfully – not perfectly but to the best of their ability. Thank God for the opportunities we have to serve God today. And thank God for God's faithfulness to us – the real reason we are able to have this celebration today.

Amen.

*Pentecost 13B*

*August 23, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 6: 56-69*