

David Noe Sermons

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The Glory of God in the Cross of Christ

John 12:20-33

Sunday of the Passion

John 12:20-33 (ESV): “Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, Sir, we wish to see Jesus. Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

“And Jesus answered them, The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

“If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him. Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour. But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name. Then a voice came from heaven: I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.

“The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, An angel has spoken to him. Jesus answered, This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In this morning’s Gospel, our Lord Christ speaks clearly concerning how He would die — by crucifixion. And ever since His cruel death on the cross, the Church has tried to capture the weight of that moment in Her worship, her art, and her hymnody. Indeed, St. Paul was determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ crucified. Hence, following the lead of those who’ve confessed the faith before us, we also glory in the cross of our Savior. But why? Why should we glory in the instrument of death that took our Savior away? The answer might seem obvious to us, but it’s by no means obvious to the world, which considers the cross a scandal and utter foolishness.

Only those who've been called by the Gospel and have the gift of faith are able to see Christ crucified as the power and wisdom of God. That's why this morning's Gospel teaches that the cross was the hour of Christ's greatest glory, the pinnacle of His life and work. Not one of His miracles, nor any of His words, would mean a thing without the cross. For everything He says, is, and does, either flows from, or points back to His crucifixion and death.

The glory of the Lord in Holy Scripture has always been the revelation of His divine presence displayed in His power to save. Consider the promise of a Savior given to our first parents in the Garden; the Exodus, where God revealed Himself in a pillar of cloud and fire; in the lightning and thunder of Mount Sinai; in the ark of the covenant; and in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle and Temple; all of which pointed to Himself as Savior. And that very same Glory is found in the cross of our Lord Christ, where He is mighty to save. But this time, rather than in power and might, that glory is seen in weakness, humiliation, suffering and death. Thus, when Jesus prayed that the Father glorify His name, the answer which resounded from heaven, was: I have glorified it in the past, and I shall do so again. These words are a clear message to all that the cross would be the hour of God's greatest glory, that place where His only begotten Son would suffer, die, and receive in His own body the fury of the Father's wrath over and against our sin!

So the cross is not what it at first appears to be. Our Lord is not defeated there, but glorified; no helpless victim at the hands of His enemies. To the contrary, the Father purposely handed Him over to those who sought His life, all for the sake of us poor sinners so that we might live. When you understand that, then you'll see how the entire history and fate of the world hinges on the cross, how our Lord's crucifixion is a matter of eternal life or death for all mankind. There the old evil foe, Satan, was forever defeated and tossed out on his ear in a crushing victory over all his works and all his ways, as by it our Lord and Savior brought about the destruction of sin, death, and hell.

By means of the cross, God brought into judgment both this world and our old Adam. On the cross our Savior willingly suffered the consequences of our sin so we might be fully confident that the Father's judgment against us has been fully carried out. On the cross we see not only the entire force of the Law condemning our sin with utter seriousness, but also the enormity of the Gospel, in that Christ bears the judgment of the Law in our place, and suffers all we deserve by reason of our sin. This morning's Gospel begins with a report concerning certain Greeks who had come up to

The entire history and fate of the world hinges on the cross, how our Lord's crucifixion is a matter of eternal life or death for all mankind.

worship in Jerusalem, and were seeking Jesus. Precisely because they were Greeks, these men would not have been allowed to fully participate in the worship of the Jews, and most certainly would not have been allowed to share in the eating of the Passover lamb, which was at the center of the celebration. But what we learn from this incident, is that now, in Christ Jesus, who soon would be sacrificed as the true Passover Lamb of God, these Greeks, and all believing Gentiles, would soon be granted equal access to the true Feast. The cross would open the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers, so that all who enter this Kingdom by way of baptism into Jesus' cross and death might also be invited to feast upon His life-giving body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of sin.

If you read through the book of the Prophet Isaiah, you'll find quite a few references to the lifting up of the Messiah as a banner for the nations. What Isaiah meant has now been clearly defined here in this Gospel, for John records Christ's own words: that He'll be truly lifted up, only when He's lifted up on the cross to die. And as our Lord already indicated earlier in this same Gospel when speaking to Nicodemus: Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent on the pole in the wilderness, so would the Son of Man be lifted up (on the cross), so that whoever looks to Him, crucified there for fallen sinners, will find, in His death, eternal life.

This is the great paradox of Christianity, that only in death is there true life. God loves to bring blessings out of curses, and life out of death. Thus, the very act of childbirth, which God cursed in Eve by inflicting on her the pain of labor and delivery, would become the means by which our Savior came into this world, born of the Virgin Mary. Also consider how, after the fall, God cursed Adam, saying: From dust you were taken, and to dust you shall return! But until then, that very same dust from which you were taken will resist you, so that plants and food will grow only by the sweat of your brow and hard labor. Yet even there, the curse would become a blessing! The curse of death would become the gift of life in the cross of Christ, so that the ground that swallows both the seed and our bodies in death, would, through them, give rise to abundant fruit and eternal life.

Like Jesus our Lord, and like the grain of wheat in this Gospel, the truth is that we too must die in the waters of Holy Baptism before we sprout and bear fruit. As Paul writes in Romans 6: We were buried, therefore, through baptism into His death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. Apart from the cross, dear friends, we must remain in lonely isolation, separated from God by sin, alienated from one another. But in the cross, we're

This is the great paradox of Christianity, that only in death is there true life. God loves to bring blessings out of curses, and life out of death.

united with Christ in the communion of His Church, and in His Church we're united with Christ in the divine life of our Holy Triune God. Thus, we too share the paradox of Christ as we find our true life in the death of His cross. For it's only by the cross that we are cleansed and recreated in holy baptism, only in the cross that God effects in us the salvation He desires for all sinners. And it's only in the cross that we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, united with Christ in His resurrection, and adopted as sons of the Father.

It's only by means of the cross that we are forgiven through the spoken word of absolution proclaimed by those whom God calls into the service of the Church to be His ministers. And finally, of course, it's only by means of the cross that we can be nourished unto life everlasting in the holy communion. In all these ways, our Lord is marking and shaping us by the cross of His Son, both as a Church, and as individual members of His Body. Accordingly, then, we are thus prepared to live with His cross in our lives. We don't think it strange when we suffer as Christians, but count ourselves blessed to bear the cross of Christ as a mark and indelible sign that we are God's children.

However, just suffering with Christ isn't the end of the story, for Jesus also said: If anyone would serve Me, let him follow Me (to the cross) and where I AM, there also My servant will be, in death, but also in life everlasting. As we share then in the cross of Christ, God's promise is that we will also have a share in His Resurrection. It's most appropriate, therefore, that this Gospel is one of the Scriptures normally read at the funeral of a Christian. At that time when our souls are most troubled and upset, surrounded on all sides by the reality of death and our own mortality, God points us to the sign of the Holy cross, and holds it before our eyes like a beacon in the night drawing us to Christ and His glory. The cross is a sign of our heritage as those who've been baptized, a sign of hope in the midst of despair, a remembrance of the forgiveness Christ earned for us there, and a promise of the resurrection of our bodies, and life everlasting. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

You Shall Have No Other Gods

The First Commandment

Mark 16:1-8

Festival of the Resurrection

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Jesus raised the widow's son at Nain, and He also raised the daughter of Jairus. He boldly spoke to Martha, saying: I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. Then He walked up to His best friend's grave and gave an order to the already decomposing remains, saying: Lazarus, come out. And He did—grave clothes and all. But now it was the third day since Jesus' enemies had put Him to death and laid Him in a tomb, and Mary Magdalene, along with Mary, the mother of James and Salome, were headed to that tomb to properly finish preparing His body.

Only a couple of days earlier, on that Friday we call Good Friday, Joseph of Arimathea had wrapped Jesus' dead body with burial clothes and laid it in the tomb. But when the women arrived, the tomb was open. The large, heavy stone had been rolled away. It can't be, they thought, but it sure looked like a tomb invasion or a break-in like some irreverent trespassers had violated and perhaps desecrated or profaned the place where Jesus lay. Wasn't it enough that Jesus had been viciously murdered? Couldn't His enemies at least leave Him alone in death? Dare the two Marys even look? Of course, they would have to look.

And so they stepped into the tomb. But someone was there already. He was no intruder, trespasser or desecrator of the dead, but a holy angel. What were they to make it? You don't see angels every day, and every time an angel appeared to someone in the Bible, that person was scared stiff. So the angel spoke to them, saying: There's no need to be frightened. I won't hurt you. Are you looking for the corpse, the body of Jesus? Then I have great news for you. The grave is empty. See where they laid His body? It's gone! It's no longer here! He has risen from the dead just as He promised!

This was a game changer. The cross had not been emptied of its power

because He has risen! You are no longer in your sin because He has risen! Your faith is not in vain because He has risen! Jesus did it exactly as He said He would. Every detail played out as promised. He was betrayed, condemned, mocked, spit on, flogged, beaten and killed. Then came the clincher: three days later He physically rose from the grave, shed His burial clothes, folded them up and left them there never to return or die again.

No one else had ever done this before, nor will they ever be able to do it, not Muhammad, Buddha, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, or any other so-called prophet. To a person, every single one of their dead, decayed bodies are still in the ground. But not Jesus. You can trust that He will do what He says and promises, because He has risen!

Many saw Him. The other disciples saw Him. And when St. Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians he gave evidence of this fact. The resurrected Jesus, he wrote, appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve. He appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom were still living, though some had fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all He appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. He has risen. We have eyewitnesses. His grave is empty, and there were literally hundreds who saw Him. He did what He promised. He is who He says He is, the very Son of God in human flesh, the One who died for your sins so that you might never die.

And that brings us to the First Commandment, and it means that now, because of Jesus dying and rising, we can properly fear, love and trust in God. That's what happens when people see Jesus as He really is: teaching from God's Word, casting out demons with the authority of God, walking on the sea and forgiving sin. Hence, when Jesus calmed the storm, His disciples asked each other: Who is this that even the wind and waves obey Him? And when He absolved and healed a paralytic, the citizens of Capernaum were amazed and praised God proclaiming: We have never seen anything like this. And the snickers turned to astonishment when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter with only a command. Peter was left speechless at the sight of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah. And as Jesus led the way to Jerusalem without hesitation for the last week of His life, His disciples were astonished, and the others who followed were frightened.

So here also, at the empty tomb, the First Commandment evokes fear and awe with an even greater intensity. Here Jesus leaves everyone shaking in their boots, having done what He promised He would do. From now on

No one had done this before, nor will they ever, not Muhammad, Buddha, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, or any so-called prophet. Their dead, decayed bodies are still in the ground. But not Jesus.

these too would come to know what every disciple of our risen Lord Jesus must also know, that in Jesus, the Son of God, all divine power and mercy is present, for this crucified, risen Jesus has shown Himself to be God almighty come to save sinners, all of them, including Peter, who denied even knowing Jesus, who wouldn't even be seen with Him in His hour of need. Yet Jesus still loved him, and so He singled Peter out and tells the women to give him a message.

Jesus instructed the women to tell Peter and the others that He would meet them in Galilee just as He promised, that there He would show them His hands and His side, there He would absolve them, and there they would all confess, like Thomas, that He is God and Lord. And so it is for you as well. In His death, Jesus has redeemed you, purchased and won you from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil. This, dear Christian, this is the Gospel on which we take our stand, the Gospel by which you are saved: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. This is how God planned it, and this is how it had to happen.

However, unlike He did for the disciples, our crucified, risen Lord Jesus doesn't meet you in Galilee. Rather He promises to meet you in the divine service through His Word and sacrament, to be God for you there, and to absolve you of your sin. You who are no better than Peter, perhaps even worse. You too are forgiven because Jesus shed His blood for you. That's exactly the promise He gives you every Sunday in the sacrament, where He offers to feed you with His true body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. He is the Lord, and here He is Lord for you. Death will not have the last word with you, for the First-Commandment-God, Jesus, has already spoken. He is the crucified One, the risen One, the Resurrection-and-the-Life One, and His promise still holds true: He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Jesus has redeemed you, purchased and won you from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil. This, dear Christian, is the Gospel on which we take our stand.

The Breath of Life

The Gospel of John 20:19-23

Second Sunday of Easter

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In many ways the Church today appears to be like a flat, week-old balloon that's lost much of its air. It's mushy, has no bounce, no vigor, and no resilience. The reason this is so is because much of the Church has cut herself off from her air supply, the living, Spirited, breath and Word of her crucified, risen Lord. His is the breath that breathes the fresh air of the resurrection into the dank, dusty, locked-up rooms of our lives, fills otherwise fearful men with the Holy Spirit, and sends them boldly into the Apostolic ministry, enabling human mouths to speak divine words that deliver God's forgiveness and peace to peace-starved sinners.

In the beginning, God made man by reaching down into the mud and forming his body, breathing into him the breath of life. Without the breath of God, we would all die. Therefore, if the Church is flat, breathless, and lifeless, if Her members are dead, asthmatic lumps of mud, it's because we've forsaken the living breath and voice of Jesus in the lively interchange of confession and absolution, of which there are three kinds. There's confession in prayer, as Jesus teaches in the Our Father. There's mutual confession, one to another. And, there's confession before the pastor as the one appointed according to our Lord's promise that the sins he forgives are forgiven, and the sins he retains are retained. It's to this third kind of confession that today's Gospel speaks most clearly.

Confession, like prayer, is a holy skill, an art taught by the Holy Spirit in the school of life, learned and exercised on one's knees, not casually debated or discussed while flopped in an easy chair around a fireplace over cigars and port. The Lutheran Reformers, therefore, didn't abolish confession, but reformed it. Indeed, it was one of first things to be reformed because of the ungodly practice of buying letters of indulgence that purported to secure God's favor for sinners. Hence, Luther didn't do away with confession, but used it mightily, and said that he could not have survived the Reformation without it!

The Lutheran Confessions call absolution the true and living voice of the Gospel, arguing that it must not be allowed to fall into disuse, and that those who despise absolution understand neither the forgiveness of sins

nor the power of the keys. Protestantism, however, doesn't understand the difference between the Lutheran and Roman confessional, precisely because it doesn't rightly understand either the Gospel or the forgiveness of sins. Protestantism knows how Christ won the forgiveness of sins on the cross, but has no idea how or where that forgiveness is to be handed out. Protestantism doesn't understand that the Gospel isn't simply information about Jesus' work to save sinners, but in fact offers and delivers it.

The Gospel is the living, breathing, Spirit-filled Word of Christ crucified and risen that the Holy Spirit places into our ears to create, renew, and sustain a living trust in Jesus. Faith, St. Paul reminds us, comes by hearing the Word of Christ, hearing, not sighing, praying, meditating, agonizing, or deciding, but hearing, and what's heard is Christ's forgiveness. That's the genius of the Lutheran Reformation: the recognition that living out one's baptism is nothing other than daily confessing one's sins so that sinners might be absolved and forgiven. As Luther bluntly puts it in the Large Catechism: When I urge you to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian.

Luther understood that to be absolved is to be set free by the words of Christ. In the Old Testament, forgiveness was received when the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the people. In the New Testament, however, it's received when your ears are sprinkled with Jesus' blood-stained words. Holy Absolution, then, is the key that unlocks the kingdom of heaven, unchains us from our sin, and sets us free us from fear.

As Jesus said to Peter and to the whole Church: Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. You need not search frantically for these keys, because Christ has already located them in the Church and Her ministry.

But confession isn't something that comes naturally. It's a skill you have to learn, and so the catechism serves as our teacher, teaching us that first we must confess our sin, and then receive absolution. But before you can confess your sin, you need to know who you are. Are you a husband, wife, parent or child, a student, teacher, employer or employee? Whatever your vocation, this is where you serve God, and this is where you have sinned. As you examine your station in life you need to know where you've fallen short. You don't start simply by saying you've sinned, for indeed, that's a given. Nor do you play the blame game and confess the sins of others to justify yourself. No, you confess your sin and take responsibility for it.

And confession properly takes place under the magnifying lens of the Ten Commandments. Have you lied or cursed in God's name? Have you neglected prayer, preaching, and the holy sacrament? Have you slept during the sermon or grown bored with Church? Are you disrespectful to those whom God has placed over you, your parents, teachers, government, or pastor? Are you holding a grudge against someone, or withholding forgiveness? Are you a drunkard? Do you lust? Are you greedy for money or material gain? Have you stolen? Are you lazy? Do you cheat your employer, employees or customers? Have you lied on your taxes? Do you gossip? Do

you covet the house, possessions or standing of your neighbor? This is how the Ten Commandments are to be used as a diagnostic tool for confession.

But none of us like having our sins diagnosed. Indeed, most of us treat sin as if it were a stray cat wandering in the backyard. We feed it, water it, and give it a place to sleep, and then wonder why we can't get rid of it. In our clumsy attempt to hide from our guilt and shame, we stitch together flimsy fig leaves to cover our most shameful parts, and live our lives locked up in fear of God and one other. But God doesn't want us locked up in shame, guilt, or fear. He wants us fully exposed to the warm, bright light of His grace, to inhale deeply of the spring air of the resurrection, to be loosed from our sins, not wallow in them. He calls out to us, saying: Where are you? Who are you? What have you done?

God doesn't want us locked up in shame, guilt, or fear. He wants us fully exposed to the warm, bright light of His grace, to be loosed from our sins, not wallow in them.

But before God can clothe us, He first has to strip away our fig leaves, and the first fig leaf to fall is the devil's lie that says if you don't feel sorry enough for something, then you aren't truly repentant, and can't be forgiven until you stop sinning altogether. The truth, however, is that there's no better way to deal with sin than to confess it and drown it in the death of Jesus.

The second fig leaf that has to be stripped away is the false shame and humility that causes us to think we wouldn't want anyone in the Church, especially our pastor, to know what truly wretched sinners we really are. We're not ashamed to sin openly in full view of our all-holy God, yet we're too ashamed to say aloud what we've done before a fellow sinner for our own good. Deeds that might well bring us to the brink of destruction we do with impunity, yet we flee from saying those words that can bring us freedom, life, and salvation.

The third fig leaf that has to fall is false religious security, the idea that because we're already saved we have no further use for God's forgiveness, or because we were forgiven in baptism or the Lord's Supper we no longer need absolution. That kind of mentality doesn't reflect the certainty of true faith, but rather a false security that tramples the very heart of the Gospel. Faith born of the forgiveness of sins hungers and thirsts for forgiveness. True faith must be fed and nourished by the forgiveness of sins. Refusal to seek it is unbelief.

The fourth fig leaf is tiny, but it's big enough to duck behind. That fig leaf is mistrust. We simply don't trust one another with the terrible secret of our sins, because we know ourselves and how easily gossip falls from our lips. Here we have to remember that the pastor is bound by the solemn oath of ordination never to repeat what has been said to him in confession, even under threat of punishment. He is accountable to the Lord as a stew-

ard of the mysteries of God. And as long as the Lord remains silent about our sin, and He will, so must the pastor remain silent, for he speaks in the stead and by the command of Christ.

Just as you have to trust the doctor with an intimate knowledge of your body for him to make a sound diagnosis and apply the correct medication, so you must also trust the physician of your souls with your sins so that He might apply the Gospel's healing balm to your wounds. Those who complain most loudly about not having their needs met, often use confession the least. And while the Lord sends pastors among us to bind up what is broken in our bodies, in order for that to happen you first have to let him look at your X-rays. This then, is the first work of confession, that we confess our sins.

The second work is that we hear God's absolution. Through the mouth of a man we hear God's forgiveness addressed personally to us, not doubting, but firmly believing our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven. Luther's brief order of confession gets right to the point when it directs the pastor to say: Do you believe my forgiveness is God's forgiveness? and then directs the faithful penitent to reply: Yes. This is not just some parallel forgiveness, as if the words spoken on earth are repeated spiritually in heaven. No, the words you hear are Christ's words addressed to you, first person to second person. I forgive you. They come with the breath, Spirit, Word and authority of the One who hung on the cross to save you.

God's work of absolution doesn't depend on your confession. God doesn't mete out forgiveness based on how well or how much you confess. He forgives solely on the basis of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. He does it with his Spirit and Word. Therefore, when you are absolved and rise from your knees, you must not blaspheme this Word by saying, I don't feel forgiven. You are forgiven, whether you feel it or not, because Christ has declared it so. You are a sinner no longer, for He has become the sinner in your place: the thief, the murderer, the adulterer, the gossip, the cheat, the idolater, and the drunkard. You are now a sinless child of God, cleansed by his Word, as clean as on the day of your baptism. If we truly believed that, we'd be busting down the doors of the Church, dragging pastors from their studies, and demanding in the name of Jesus Christ that they hear our confession and speak God's gracious words of absolution into our ears.

The Church would again be filled with the Spirited breath of Jesus. It would again be a place of lively interchange of the Law and Gospel, confession and absolution, or as Luther called it a mouth-house for the forgiveness of sins. God is not stingy in dishing out forgiveness. It's we who are stingy in receiving it and putting it to use. God wants us filled to overflowing with forgiveness, so that it might flow over to those who are near us, with each of us confessing and absolving our sins to one another, instead of nursing grudges and gripes and divisions. There would be true peace among us, not the paltry peace of man-made programs, but the peace that flows from Christ's wounds to us all, that peace which passes understanding, and keeps us, heart and mind in that one true faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Our Savior in the Flesh

Luke 24:36-49

Third Sunday of Easter

Luke 24:36-49 (ESV): As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, Peace to you! But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And he said to them, Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, Have you anything here to eat? They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.

Then he said to them, These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the rank heresies arising in the early church was known as Gnosticism, which is the root of the English word *knowledge*. Gnosticism teaches that the physical body is evil, while the spiritual alone is good. It promotes the false, damning lie that escaping one's bodily restrictions is the only way a person can ever truly achieve enlightenment. And Gnosticism is behind the thinking of those who believe killing themselves for the cause of their religion will immediately transport them into the presence of the Almighty to receive their reward.

Of course, no true Christian would ever think that. But, all the same,

many who profess the faith still unwittingly share a similar attitude with those who despise the physical when they allow themselves to believe that what's private and of the heart is somehow superior to what's done in public. You find such thinking among those who denounce the Church's ancient liturgy to promote a more enlightening, spiritual kind of worship. They see a carefully prepared and delivered sermon as inferior to one that rolls off the top of a Spirit-led, anointed tongue. Prayers spoken extemporaneously from the heart are seen as more spiritual and sincere than those taken from a book or written down in advance. And what goes on in the privacy of one's heart is viewed as more genuine than what's confessed before the world in public worship.

But Holy Scripture knows of no such internal spiritualizing of God's work among us, as is evidenced by this morning's Gospel. Here such notions are challenged, indeed, confronted head-on by Christ, who is no fleeting specter, shadowy spirit-being, or disembodied Savior. He is the One who stands among us in His flesh and blood, especially as He distributes it to us through the external means of water, bread, wine, and words. And this teaching hasn't come to us out of thin air, as it were, but rather through God's Church, which calls us not to a private, secret Christianity, but to a living flesh-and-blood fellowship with our living flesh-and-blood Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

For the second week in a row now, today's Gospel finds Jesus' disciples cowering behind locked doors, and for the second time, He appears to them speaking a word of divine peace. At first they were startled by His presence, even frightened by the thought that what they were seeing might not have been anything more than a ghost. But hear what our Lord says to put their troubled hearts at ease. Look at My hands and My feet. Touch Me and see. A ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have. What a comfort this flesh and blood Savior intends to be for those who understand the dangers they daily face in life.

From time to time when we gather here for worship, we also have the wonderful privilege of witnessing God the Holy Spirit at work in the blessed sacrament of holy baptism. I suspect most of the time we take this blessing for granted, because usually those who are baptized live to a ripe, old age. But that isn't always the case. There are times when infants who are baptized don't make it to adulthood, and sometimes don't even make it through youth or adolescence. For them, especially, this sacrament is more than a pious ceremony or rite, for the stark reality is there's a real enemy out there called death. That's why, as infants, God seeks to clothe us in the flesh and blood of Jesus in this sacrament whereby means of water and the Word, God breaks the darkness of death and clothes us with the very same promise the disciples received on that first Easter evening.

Only those who are spiritually blind and foolish refuse to seek this concrete, tangible Savior, for they are filled with such pride and arrogance they think they have enough inside themselves to manage on their own.

But when trouble comes, and you find yourself standing before God naked and exposed, what you need is a real Savior's real touch. When you're buffeted by the storms of life, you need a concrete Anchor to hold you steady, something outside of yourself. And that Something, that Someone, is this same Lord Jesus who deigns to come to us in ways you can see, touch, and handle. That's what happened when Jesus appeared to His disciples that night. He showed them His hands and feet, and while they still didn't believe it, He asked, Do you have anything to eat? And when they gave Him a piece of broiled fish, He took it and ate it in their presence, so they might see Him as a real flesh and blood Savior.

Dear friends, and especially you who are being confirmed this morning, Christ our Lord has also given you a concrete promise to hold on to, a

When you're buffeted by the storms of life, you need an Anchor to hold you steady. And that is this same Lord Jesus who deigns to come to us in ways you can see, touch, and handle.

concrete hope upon which to build. Though He's taken up His flesh and blood in resurrection, yet He still provides you with a visible, tangible reassurance of His presence. In holy baptism, He applies His life to yours through water and Word. In holy absolution, He grants you the forgiveness of sins in words spoken to you by your pastor. In the holy communion, He gives you His very body and blood to eat and drink in a meal of salvation. For Christ desires you to be confident that you have a Savior who speaks to you the very same words of peace He spoke to His first disciples.

Contrast this faith with that which looks to the heart for confidence and peace and writes off the real, saving touch of Jesus through flesh and blood!

Aside from the outward promises of God, what else is there to cling to: private thoughts, personal opinions, or an individualized religion of the heart that has no grounding in the Word of God? These things will always delude and lead you astray. They won't be there for you when you

stand face to face with the reality of sin's grasp on humankind, namely, that all of us, someday, are going to die!

But what God gives in the flesh of His Son, that will not betray you. You can count on it to save you! That's why this morning and every Sunday morning God is here among His people to provide them with the saving body and blood of our Lord Jesus in and under bread and wine. Through that blessed sacrament, you and I have fellowship with God through the very flesh and blood of His Only Begotten Son, and this not only through His humanity, which walked on the earth more than 2,000 years ago, but also through His Body, the Church, which is certainly still very much alive and well among us who are Christ's!

This morning's Epistle reads: We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ. Through our flesh and blood Savior, dear Christian, God has made you and me to be of one flesh, not only with Him as our God, but also with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ! Our Bridegroom is the Husband of only One Wife. And that Wife is each one of us, each one of you, His Church. We are bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh, and, by virtue of God the Holy Spirit calling us by the Gospel, we now each belong one to the other.

When you and I eat the bread and drink the wine of the Holy Supper, God gives every one of us who partake the very same food. There's no difference in what we eat and drink in this meal, for we receive it according to Christ's institution, and we who have faith in these words, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins, receive it in common for our good as members of God's family in Christ, and not as those who, unbelieving, receive it to their judgment. Thus this is a blessed communion, and in it, we get all Jesus has, and all Jesus is. Jesus is here in this meal to build us up in that most holy faith into which He has called us. And as we partake, we do so not trusting in ourselves or anything else we might have as individuals, but only in what we have in common, Jesus Christ as Lord!

Martin Luther once put it this way when he wrote of the sacrament, saying: When I eat it, then it eats me! Outwardly I eat the meal, but inwardly I receive all the treasures of Christ, and even Christ, Himself. So when I receive the sacrament, it is Christ who receives, consumes, and devours both me and my sins, so that I enjoy and receive His righteousness, His godliness and His riches, as at the same time they swallow up my sin and misery.

In the very same way, my dear brothers and sisters, as we are one in Jesus' flesh, so we are also united together, one with another. As individual grains of wheat are crushed, ground, and formed into a single loaf, as many grapes are squeezed and made into a single wine, so also we are gathered into one body in this meal. As Christians, you and I don't live our lives in isolation from one another. In Christ your life becomes my life, and my life becomes yours. Our fellowship is not with God unless it's also with one another! And all this is true because God, in Christ, has made us one family and one body, all belonging to one Christ because whoever feasts upon the Savior has more to live on and for than just himself. We have more, much more, than a private, secret, disembodied Christianity

We don't live our lives in isolation. In Christ your life becomes my life, and my life becomes yours. Our fellowship is not with God unless it's also with one another!

to sustain us. We have fellowship in flesh and blood through Jesus Christ, and in that fellowship we live together forever with Him who has called us out of the darkness of sin to live in the glory of His marvelous light. May it always be so, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Beautiful Shepherd, Beautiful Sheep

John 10:11-18

Fourth Sunday of Easter

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

Dear Christian friends, in their many writings, the holy prophets and apostles make ample use of a number of simple images to describe for us this God whom we rightly and properly worship. Moses, for example, in Deuteronomy 24, declares that God is a consuming fire. The Psalmist in various places describes Him as a Sun, a Shield, a Rock, and a Strong Tower. Even our Lord Jesus describes Himself using images such as the bread of life, the gate for the sheep, and even a mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wings.

Among the many images Scripture uses to describe God, however, perhaps the most simple and cheerful is the image our Lord Christ uses to describe Himself in today's Gospel, where He says: I am the Good Shepherd. These words of Jesus over the years have compelled countless works of Christian art, inspired hymnists and poets, strengthened the weak, sustained the weary, and comforted those who mourn. And during times of great fear or difficulty in our own lives, such as when tornados go spinning out of control over our heads, or torrential rains threaten to drown us, who here has not mouthed silently or out loud the well-known words of the beloved 23rd Psalm: The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want?

I am the Good Shepherd, says Jesus, and the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. When our Lord Christ speaks of the Good Shepherd, He uses a specific word to describe the sort of goodness this Good Shepherd possesses. He doesn't speak merely about some kind of inward goodness, as if He were declaring Himself to be the righteous Shepherd or the perfect Shepherd, although He most certainly is righteous and perfect in every way! But the knowledge that Jesus is righteous and perfect isn't all that comforting to us unrighteous, imperfect sinners and that most certainly is not the point He's making here in this Gospel.

So to get to the heart of what Jesus is saying, perhaps we might translate His words this way: I am the Beautiful Shepherd, or, I am the Shepherd,

the Beautiful One. In other words, Jesus is the Shepherd who is visibly good in every way, the Shepherd whose inner goodness is plainly evident in every word He speaks and in every deed He undertakes. He is that Shepherd who, for us and our sake, will not keep His inward goodness and righteousness hidden, but will, rather, display it openly for all the world to see. And it is this goodness and beauty that provide such great comfort to us poor, lost sheep who are in need of a Shepherd.

So when Jesus says: I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Beautiful Shepherd, I am the Shepherd who makes His goodness known, He isn't speaking about fleshly beauty or physical appearance, as if He were nothing more than a good looking man. To be sure, Isaiah indicates precisely the opposite when he writes of Christ that He had no form or majesty that

I am the Good Shepherd who treats My sheep with gentle care, patiently leading them to green grasses, filling them with everything good, defending them against all danger, and guarding them from all evils.

we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him.

The inner goodness and beauty of Jesus is of the type that cannot help but become outwardly visible. People are not drawn to this Beautiful Shepherd because of His curly hair, His stunning physique, or His sparkling eyes, but because of the goodness He displays in His words and actions.

It is as if Jesus in this Gospel is saying: I am the Good Shepherd who always treats My sheep with gentle care, patiently leading them to green grasses, beside still waters, filling them with everything good, defending them against all danger, and guarding and protecting them from all evil, so that they learn to walk confidently where I lead, knowing I will never leave nor abandon them, and I will lay down My life for the sheep. In the end, this is what makes our Good Shepherd good and beautiful, that ultimately He manifests the fullness of His beauty in the fact that He willingly lays down His life so that His sheep might live.

And you, dear flock of God, you have been given more than your fair share of this Good Shepherd's goodness and beauty. That which makes you good and beautiful is the very goodness and beauty of our Good Shepherd Himself, which He has passed on to you in holy baptism. You are not beautiful because of any adornment you might place on your body, because of your shape, your size, or any aspect of your appearance. Rather, you are beautiful because Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is beautiful. You are beautiful for the very same reason that you are also good, not because of any inner beauty or goodness you might possess on your own, but solely and entirely because of Jesus. This Good Shepherd, this Beautiful Shepherd, gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness, and to purify

for Himself a people of His very own, a people eager to do what is good, a people eager to do what is beautiful. So, God's sheep are good and beautiful because their Shepherd is the Good Shepherd, the Beautiful Shepherd, the One who alone bestows on them what Isaiah calls a crown of beauty.

Hence the New Testament in many places exhorts us as God's people to show forth in our own lives the goodness and beauty of our Good Shepherd. As St. Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians, so also he declares to you: Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Let us do good to all people, especially to those of the household of faith. Then in his letter to the young pastor, Timothy, He instructs him: Command those Christians in your care to do good, to be rich in good and beautiful deeds, to be generous and willing to share. And finally James states the case in the opposite way, declaring: Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, is sinning!

Yet, we Christians must be careful how we do our good deeds. As one well-known author wrote: It is possible, at the same time, to be both morally upright and repulsive. In other words, you can make your good deeds ugly when you use them to point to yourself instead of our Good Shepherd. For those of you who may remember the television show "Little House on the Prairie," perhaps you recall the character, Mrs. Olson, who was, I think, a rather repulsive example of what a Christian ought to be, because she always used her so-called righteous deeds and good works to puff herself up rather than as a means to glorify God.

Yet Jesus says here in this text: I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. With these words our Lord is declaring that His rich forgiveness and salvation isn't for the Jews alone, but for people of every nationality and country. They, too, He says, will listen to My voice, and there shall be one flock and one Shepherd. And this is the reason that we Christians are to make every effort to live good lives among the pagans, as Peter encourages us, so that through our life, works and words those other sheep will hear the Good Shepherd's voice and follow Him.

Our Good Shepherd lays down His life for all the sheep of every time and place only to take it up again. And while there are lots of good things a shepherd might do for his sheep, none will ever exceed what this Good Shepherd has done for you. He has placed Himself in the way of those things that would harm you. He suffered in own His body all the attacks intended for you. And no one takes His life away, for He lays it down of His own accord.

He has devoted the entirety of His existence for you, in order that He

Command those Christians in your care to do good, to be rich in good and beautiful deeds, to be generous and willing to share.

might fulfill for you this promise: that those who are His will listen to His voice, and that there would be one flock, and one Shepherd. With these words, the Good Shepherd has claimed you to be His beautiful sheep, so that all His Sheep, the whole Church in heaven and on earth, might be one in faith, one in Word and one in Spirit, one flock, following only one Shepherd, and subject to no one else. May our Good Shepherd so faithfully lead each one of you so that we all might live toward the work and the beauty He would fulfill in us for Himself and for others. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Bearing Much Fruit

John 15:1-8

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. After reading Jesus' words in this morning's Gospel about all the fruit my life ought to be bearing, I was pretty intimidated. I began to wonder how fruitful my life had really been. And what about you? How fruitful has your life been? How fruitful is it now? What have you achieved: good things, important things, beneficial things, eternal things, or merely temporal, earthly things? And, if those things you achieved are, in fact, good, have you considered why you did them? Were these things done to glorify God, or yourself, and, will they stand up under the intense scrutiny and examination of the Judge of all?

And what about our Church? How fruitful have we been as a Church? What have we done collectively, and what have you done individually to advance the work of our Savior? What fruit have you borne in His name? And again, why have you done the things you've done — for our heavenly Father, or for yourself? These are the thoughts that were running through my head when I initially read these words of Jesus, but the truth is these words were never intended to send anyone out on a course of self-analysis. In fact, this text ultimately says precious little about any of the things I just mentioned. Jesus isn't giving us a new commandment to bear fruit, but simply to remind us that as Christians we are to both abide and remain in Him.

But what about all the statements in this text concerning the fruit we are to bear? Did you happen notice that there's actually only one command calling us to action, and that that command has nothing to do with bearing fruit, but with abiding in Jesus? When Jesus speaks of His Father as the Vinedresser, who is doing the work? Not you! The only One doing anything in this text is God. You're not being encouraged to concentrate on the amount and kind of fruit your life ought to bear, because there's something more important to focus on — your connection with the true Vine, who is Christ. After all, the main concern of a farmer isn't specifically how large his harvest will be, but instead, on the condition of the plants that are going to bring forth the harvest. If the plants are healthy, then healthy fruit and a good crop will be the natural result.

In one of Aesop's fables, he recounts the story of a farmer, who, on his deathbed, tells his sons of a treasure buried in his vineyard. Well, you can imagine what happened when he died. His sons went out and dug up the entire vineyard looking for the buried treasure. But they didn't find a thing. However, that year the vineyard bore its best crop in memory and all because of the extra cultivation the ground received while the sons were digging it up. The inheritance the farmer left to his sons was that they would receive a bountiful harvest from his vineyard.

The point of all this for you is that instead of concentrating on the fruit your life bears, you ought rather be following Jesus' admonition to stay firmly connected to Him, the true Vine, for only the true Vine can give the branches what they need for the bearing of much fruit. Only those who stay connected to Christ, the true, life-giving Vine, are able to bear godly fruit in their lives. But how does one stay connected to that Vine? It simply happens to those who remain in Jesus and His Word. And remaining in Jesus and His Word, by the way, is what Confirmation is all about, because that's precisely what these six young people sitting here in the front pew are going to be promising to do in just a few, short moments.

Instead of concentrating on the fruit your life bears, you ought rather be following Jesus' admonition to stay firmly connected to Him, the true Vine.

Everything, you see, everything is tied together by this Word of God, this Gospel of salvation, this Good News of God's love and how it comes to sinners. It's Christ's Word heard in His Church, read in your home, and placed in your heart as you hear it over and over again in liturgy, hymnody, readings, sermons, and prayers. And when you consider what it means for you to abide in Christ, and Christ in you, how can you not be reminded of the Sacrament of the Altar,

where Christ's true body and blood become one with you as you eat and drink it? To be sure, we must never forget that the words of this morning's text were spoken by our Lord as He was making His way from the room where He instituted this Sacrament.

Another image used in this text is something not many of us like to talk about, pruning and cleaning. Jesus teaches here that every single branch has to be pruned if it's going to stay healthy. Fruitless branches will be cut off and thrown into the fire. These are the hypocrites, those who outwardly appear to be connected, but really aren't, who are shown to be what they truly are by their lack of fruit. The Vinedresser has to cut them off, for they are no longer useful, indeed all they're good for is to drag down the rest of the crop.

That's why Jesus says here that even fruitful branches have to be cut,

cleansed, and pruned. Even Christians abiding in Christ have to be pruned from time to time so that they bring forth the fruit God desires. But the fruit God desires isn't that you secure any of this on your own. God alone is the Worker working in you, and the fruit borne in your life is a gift. It isn't something you produce, but what God produces in you. It's not something you acquire, but what happens by God's action as you remain connected to the Vine. If God desires fruit-bearing plants, then He must prune them so they remain healthy and flourish.

Now as Christians we understand that none of us is perfect. Even though we possess salvation, a new nature, and have a new man living inside us, the old man of sin is still very much alive. Therefore he has to be pruned and cut back. But the old man of sin isn't always visible. He lives deep down inside the very depths of your heart. Hence, to keep you healthy and alive, that old sin-nature has to be cut back. And to do this, God uses His Word, which cuts deep into your heart to bring you to repentance and keep you in the faith. God also uses the Sacrament of His Son's true body and blood to feed you His forgiveness and give you the strength to carry on. And God also reminds you through the affliction, suffering and pain we all experience that you have to rely on Him for all things. God's desire is that you realize He is the One at work in your life accomplishing His will so that you might stay connected to the Vine, who is Christ.

And what about that person who tries to get by without Christ? Jesus says that without Him you can do nothing. He doesn't mean you can't be successful as the world views success or that you can't accomplish a great many things that might benefit to others here in this world, but that with regard to the most important things eternal things, you can do nothing without Him. Even if you turn out to be a very successful person in the eyes of the world, without Christ, your life will amount to nothing. For if you don't remain in Him and Him in you, you're like a branch that withers, is cut off, picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. And that's what Satan would like more than anything, that you be cut off from the true Vine, that you stay away from the Church, that you no longer hear God's Word, that you stop praying, and that you no longer receive the Lord's Supper to sustain you. And if Satan has his way, the end, for you, will be eternal death and hell.

But when you remain in Christ, you have everything. No matter what happens, your life will be fruitful. You'll still need pruning from time to time. But in Christ you'll have everything you need. Though the fruits of your life may not be visible to you, God knows your heart and what your heart needs. He is the One who lifts up those who quietly abide in Christ's

Even Christians abiding in Christ have to be pruned from time to time so that they bring forth the fruit God desires.

Word and says to them: You have produced fruit, more fruit, yes, much fruit. As a branch abiding in the true Vine, Christ is at work in you, accomplishing all things for His good pleasure and to the glory of His Father. So, whatever the fruit of your life might be, whether spectacular, hidden, impressive, or obscure, that fruit is God's doing, and in His eyes it is much fruit. Amen.

Now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep you in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

The Greater Love

John 15:9-12

Sixth Sunday of Easter

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In the little parish of Ravelunda, in northern Sweden, a pastor raced to the bedside of a dying man. I say he raced, when actually he went somewhat reluctantly because he wasn't really altogether sure what he was going to say to this man to afford him some comfort. That pastor, you see, had been educated in a setting which robbed not only him, but the entire Christian Church, of the essentials of the faith, most especially the Law and the Gospel. Rather than properly learning the Word of God and how to apply it, this pastor had instead received a steady diet of rationalism and logic. He had come to believe and teach that since the people of our world had finally come of age, there was no longer much need for the spiritual remedies of the past, which our forefathers had used.

This pastor's destination was the bedside of a man named Johannes, a pious man who knew his Scriptures well, who, in his heart, was deeply concerned about what God thought of him. Unfortunately, as death drew near, Johannes was no longer able to see that Jesus had taken upon Himself his sin, and that He had given him His own righteousness in return. At that moment all he could remember was the Law, and oh, how that Law haunted and tormented his soul. And so the pastor, sitting next to Johannes' bedside, with the assertion of his priestly authority, said to the poor, dying man: Johannes, if anyone in this settlement will die in peace, it is you, dear brother. Johannes looked up with a quivering gleam of hope in his eye and said: How can that be, Pastor? The pastor replied: Because, Johannes, you are a better and more upright soul than anyone I have ever met. And it was then that the little gleam of light in his eyes died away, as with piercing earnestness, he looked up at the pastor and said: But Pastor, the Judge does not judge the soul by comparing it to others.

But, God is good, the preacher said quietly. Yes, said Johannes, God is good, very good. And it is precisely for that reason that I am in such a bad way. Pastor, you do not know how good God has been to me. He has sought my soul and bid me to walk in the way of life. But I have not done so. I have sat in Church and heard the angels sing. I saw my mother in the women's pew, and I thought: Mother has aged. This winter she may die.

Soon I will inherit the farm. Then my heart wept, for I saw that I loved money more than I loved my Mother. Then later, when the pastor came to the pulpit and began to preach, I thought: You Potbelly. You can play cards and fish for trout, but you have no ability to feed God's poor little lambs with the Word. And then I remembered that I had not prayed for him. Was that love? Some days later as I walked along the road and saw the rye in full bloom, I thought to myself, I will never see rye as thick as this on my farm, for the captain has taken all the good ground. He is rich in the things of this world, but he will burn in hell. Was that love, Pastor?

In the agony of his soul, Johannes considered Jesus' words from this morning's Gospel reading: This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. But as those words raced through his dying mind, they pierced his soul to its very depths. For Johannes, you see, understood very well how miserably he had failed to love others as himself. The wickedness of his heart had risen up to show its ugly head even within the hallowed walls of the Ravelunda Church as angels and archangels sang their praises to the One whose love moved Him to lay down His own life for His friends. Johannes couldn't reconcile Jesus' words, His call to love, with what he saw inside himself. And so, Johannes despaired of all hope.

Perhaps you have been in the shoes, so to speak, of Johannes. Hearing and knowing God's call on your life to love others as yourself, you may have found yourself wanting, falling far short of what our Lord commands. You know you're supposed to love others, especially those of the household of the faith, but there's always an exception in your mind isn't there as to just exactly who you ought to love? Why, no one loves that person, you tell yourself. She's the hardest person in the world to get along with! She did me wrong in the past, and I simply will not and cannot forget it! And yet, dear Christian, you are called to love that person as yourself; even as our Lord Christ loved you.

So you find yourself in a quandary. You know what God wants of you, but you lack the purity of heart to be able to love as Jesus has loved you. And this realization has placed you in a very awkward position, indeed, perhaps it may even have placed you on the brink of despair. Like Johannes, you will find no hope or comfort in the ramblings of rationalism or in any other world philosophy for with Johannes you know in your heart of hearts that it is precisely as the Scriptures clearly teach: The Judge does not judge the soul by comparing it to others. He will offer you neither hope nor peace through the stern judgment of His unrelenting, demanding Law.

You may have found yourself falling far short of what our Lord commands. You know you're supposed to love others, especially those of the household of the faith.

Rather, through His Law He will only drive you ever closer to the brink of destruction and hopeless despair. Of necessity, you will look inside your own heart, at your own thoughts and actions and you'll ask: Was that love? And though your answer, of necessity, will be a resounding No! yet you will still find peace and hope in a Greater Love, the love of Jesus.

As the Father loved Me, said Jesus, I have also loved you. In the midst of despair, our Lord's words are a great mystery, for we are unable, in our sin, to understand them. Yet there are also other words from God that can help as we ponder this mystery of God's grace and mercy. For instance, the Scriptures also say that God is love. And it was this love that moved the Father to judge His Son as He bore in our place the sin of the world so that we might live and never die. Hence, as we are gathered here today, baptized into the name of Jesus, you need to hear that, like Johannes, you have been clothed with the very righteousness of Jesus. In your baptism you have put on Christ. And in Christ, God loves you, not because of who you are, but because of who He is. As the Father loves the Son, He also loves those who are clothed in the righteousness of His Son. That's why Jesus said: As the Father loved Me, I have also loved you.

It is, of course, this very love which God demonstrates to you in the giving of His only begotten Son. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. Our cold hearts had to be cleansed. They had to be made new. And so the Son of God was hoisted up onto a cross to suffer at the hands of sinners until the very lifeblood flowed from His veins. His life would be given as a ransom for many. As a valiant Protector, He would give Himself so as to take others out of harm's way and set them free from the penalty of their sin, yes, even from the penalty of their lovelessness. He became what He was not, so that all the world might become what it was not. Truly, this is great love, yes, the Greater Love.

And yet as Johannes lay on his bed at death's door, the pastor, this man who was supposed to be a curer of souls, found himself unable to help Johannes because he was unable to bring him the Gospel. But standing there in the doorway was a woman, who, as it turns out, had been a close friend. She knew how to handle Johannes, but more importantly, she knew how to handle God's Word. Behold, she said to him, behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Johannes lay quiet for moment. Do you mean? he said, Do you really mean that He also takes away the sin that dwells in my unclean heart? Yes, He atoned for all that sin when He died in your place, she replied. But I still have it in me, don't I, asked Johannes. Yes, the woman replied, as surely as Paul also still had it with him. Have you never read, I know that in me, that is in my flesh, dwells no good thing, for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which

In Christ, God loves you, not because of who you are, but because of who He is.

is good I find not. Yes, that's exactly how it is, whispered Johannes. That's exactly how it is.

And then the pastor received one last lesson in the power of God's love and His Word. Next he was asked to distribute to them the blessed Sacrament of Jesus' body and blood. And while it was true that Johannes would die soon enough, now he would die quietly and in peace. But after leaving Johannes' home, the pastor felt so inadequate and useless that he said to the carriage driver as they began to make their way back to the Church: I am so sorry I couldn't do any more for Johannes in his time of need.

More? the driver replied. Pastor, did you not bring to Johannes Christ's body and blood? Have you not exercised the blessed authority of the keys, which comes from God? Can any man do more than that?

And in the words of the woman and the carriage driver this Greater Love, this One who in love gave His life for His friends, was able to overcome the shallow rationalism of this wayward preacher. And dear friends, in those very same words you may be certain that He will overcome even more than that in your life as well, as you live it in Christ and His Word. May it always be so for His sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

The Ascension: What's That?

Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11

The Ascension of Our Lord (Observed)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few years ago the editor of another denomination's magazine, similar to *The Lutheran Witness*, had a big editorial about how ironic it was that Ascension Day just happened to fall on a Thursday that year. He went on and on about how unfortunate it is that with the Ascension being a Christian holy day we don't celebrate it with as much fanfare as Christmas or Easter and then he went on about how, because Ascension fell on a Thursday that year, it would be largely ignored. The next month came the red-faced retraction. Apparently the editor hadn't realized that the Ascension of Our Lord is always celebrated 40 days after Easter, and always falls on a Thursday.

That embarrassed editor, however, was right about one thing. Although the Ascension is one of the major Christian holy days, we don't celebrate it with as much fanfare as Christmas or Easter. That's why, in most congregations today, Ascension is celebrated on the Sunday following. Perhaps we don't really know what the Ascension is all about. Maybe we are like so many others who ask: The Ascension? What's that? We know that Christmas means Jesus was born. We know Easter means that He rose from the dead. But what about the Ascension? What does it mean? Well, first of all, it means that Christ's work of redemption is complete.

The book of Hebrews teaches concerning the Ascension that after Jesus provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Now in our country the Food and Drug Administration regulates the amount of contaminants, such as insect body parts and other impurities, that can be in a particular food and still be classified pure and unadulterated. God, however, has a much higher standard. Before you can gain admission into heaven, God requires absolute purity, 100 percent holiness, with no trace amounts of sin allowed. And of course, we've all failed this test, because we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

There's nothing you can do to purify yourself or make up for your sin. But Jesus Christ has done all that for you! As both Victim and Priest, He purified you in His sacrifice on the cross to atone for the sin of all, a one-time sacrifice for sin standing for all eternity. And now His Ascension to the right hand of the Father shows us that His work of redemption is complete. That's why the author of the book of Hebrews says: Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Next, Christ's Ascension means that the God-Man, Jesus, is your King. While here on earth, He didn't always or fully use His divine power, but humbled Himself even to the point of death; yes, death on a cross. Hence

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Christ's Ascension marks the end of His earthly humiliation and the glorification of His human nature. Not only as God, but also as man, He alone is the mighty Ruler of all things. So, God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

And when the Scriptures speak about Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father, they aren't referring to a physical reality but a spiritual one. In ancient times, kings would often have a right hand man, who, literally sitting on the king's right, had the power and authority to rule over

his kingdom. So when we say in the Creed that Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, we mean that the God-Man, Jesus Christ, has absolute power and authority. He rules over all creation and people, both believers and unbelievers. And He is also absolute Ruler over the spirit world where angels, authorities and powers also submit to Him.

While to us this world may appear to be completely out of control and running amuck, and though it may seem that the devil and his demons are free to attack us at will, the reality is that Christ is still in complete control. His rule is far above all other rule, authority, power and dominion, not only in the present age but also in the age to come. So, why do things in this world happen the way they do? Paul tells us God placed all things under Christ's feet and appointed Him to be Head over everything for sake of the Church. In other words, everything that happens in this world is for the sake of the Church for the protection, blessing and benefit of God's Christian people, yes, for the protection, blessing and benefit of you as an individual member of Christ's bride, the Church.

That's why St. Paul wrote that God works all things together for the

good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. You may not be able to comprehend how all the things in this world are working together for your ultimate good, yet, as a Christian you have to understand and trust that Christ, our king, is doing exactly that as He rules over all things. As St. Peter stated so clearly in His Pentecost sermon, God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of that fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, He has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, and has poured out what you now see and hear. Christ is the Founder, Ruler and Head of His Church. And by the working of the Holy Spirit, He empowers the Church to serve Him and bear witness of all that He has done to save us poor, wretched, fallen sinners. God exalted Him to His own right hand to give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.

Next, Christ's Ascension means that He is interceding for you. Paul says in his letter to the Church at Rome: Christ Jesus, who died, more than that, who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. In ancient kingdoms, it was the job of the right hand man, to receive petitions and requests and pass them on to the king. In the throne room, one would not address the king directly, but speak to the king through his right hand man. Jesus has taught us, saying: The Father will give you whatever you ask in My name. In other words, the Father's Right Hand Man is there to accept and hear your prayers and petitions, and also to intercede with the Father on your behalf. And because of His Son's righteousness, you may be both sure and certain that God the Father hears and acts on your prayers for His Son's sake.

And the one thing Jesus especially pleads with the Father for is your forgiveness, even as St. John wrote: If anybody does sin, we have One who pleads with the Father for us, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the Atoning Sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world. And it's because of this that we want to look at the final thing Christ's Ascension means, and that is, namely, that He will come again. Jesus says: In that Day you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven. And so likewise, the angels said to the disciples as He was being lifted up into heaven: This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go. And finally, John says in his Revelation concerning that Day: Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him.

On the Last Day, dear Christian, Jesus will come again. And this Second Coming could occur at any moment. When He comes again, heaven and earth will pass away, all the dead will be raised and judged, and you and all believers in Christ will enter into eternal life. That's why St. Paul so vehemently encourages and directs us in his letter to the Church at Colossae:

Christ,
our king,
rules
over all things.

Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

So again, what does Christ's Ascension mean? It means His work of redemption is complete, and that it's complete for you! It means that Jesus, the God-man, is King, your King! It means that Jesus is interceding and that He's interceding especially for you. And it means Jesus will come again! And on that Day, when Christ who is your Life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory! And all this will happen for the sake of His name. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

I Will Not Leave You Desolate

John 14:15-21

Sixth Sunday of Easter

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Imagine a child, lost and alone in the middle of Disneyland, with no one to watch over or protect him. Though he's surrounded by countless thousands of others who are well-meaning, the security and comfort of his parents' presence is what he really needs. So, falling into a tearful fit, choked up with raw emotion, he cries out: I want my Mommy and Daddy! Children, of course, are more open about their feelings than adults. You and I, we aren't likely to break out in tears if we get lost in an amusement park. But that doesn't mean we don't have fears. Indeed, we have fears that go down to the depths of our soul, even if we aren't willing to admit it.

One fear common to us all is that we might be all alone in this universe. We wonder what would happen should we find out that there is no God to wipe away our tears or take us home to Himself when this life is over. Indeed, is this not the cry of the unbeliever who is lost in grief over the death of a loved one, indeed, our cry in times of suffering, stress and doubt? We may fill our lives with all kinds of diversions to try to bring an end to such feelings, but the very fact that we surround ourselves with distractions is itself a cry of insecurity, an indicator that we don't want to be all alone or abandoned here in this world.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is reaching out to comfort His disciples who were afraid, and not only the disciples of His own time, but the disciples of our day, as well, for we all have fears and doubts about our faith, about our overall role in God's plan, about our place in God's Kingdom. So listen to Jesus' promise: I will not leave you desolate! These words were spoken just after our Lord had told His disciples what was soon going to happen on Calvary's cross. Yet even with that assurance, fear and doubt still assailed them so much so that Thomas earlier blurted out: Lord we do not know where You are going. How can we know the way?

Jesus knew that what was about to happen would cause His followers

worry and doubt. His arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and burial as well as the persecution they would endure, would leave them feeling unsure and abandoned. Even though His Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost would soon follow, these disciples of Jesus would still be wrought with fear. And that's precisely how people feel today. When you are sick or suffering, when someone close to you dies, when a tornado drops out of the sky and destroys your every earthly possession, there's going to be a big hole in your life. That's when you are at your most vulnerable, because deep down inside you don't really think anyone understands what you are going through.

That's when you might believe falsely that you have no options. And while you might rationally grasp the truth that in this life there will be trouble, when it begins to pile up and overwhelm you, it can all seem so futile and insignificant. You might even feel as if you are losing your grip. Still, even in the midst of all this there is Good News! Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, has already been where you are! He knows exactly how you feel, because He's the One who was the most abandoned of all, the One who suffered the total rejection of God as He hung on the cross and cried out: My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?

Nobody understands abandonment like Jesus! Nobody understands forsakenness like Jesus! Nobody understands the word *alone*, like Jesus! And it's precisely because He understands what this is like, that He can come to you and say: I will not leave you desolate!

And Jesus has not abandoned you! He sent the Holy Spirit to fill the hole created in your heart when He ascended back into Heaven. This is the Spirit of Truth, and He can only be received by faith, the kind of faith our Lord Jesus gives. This Spirit is given to you by Christ so that in His absence you'll have another Counselor, Mediator and Helper to be with you. This is what Paul was talking about in Romans, when he wrote: Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And He who searches the hearts of men knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Even when incapacitated by illness or injury, even when you can't utter so much as a prayer for yourself, the Spirit is still there making intercession for you! This is the gift Jesus gives in Holy Baptism! This is how He keeps His promise never to leave His children desolate. Through the Word, Baptism, Absolution, and the Holy Supper of Christ's very own body and blood, we are constantly being filled with the Spirit of truth so that we will not be alone. And because we aren't alone, our lives aren't subject to the whims of fate. You aren't a spiritual nobody going nowhere. There is a purpose for your life. Knowing that the Holy Spirit dwells within you, you

Nobody understands
abandonment
like Jesus.
Nobody understands
forsakenness
like Jesus.

can confidently say with St. Paul: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Because of this indwelling Holy Spirit, you can joyfully confess: Jesus will come again! For even in this morning's Gospel, as Jesus was speaking to His followers about leaving them, His promise was that He would return. Jesus kept that promise by staying with them for forty days following His resurrection. And even now those who follow Jesus also share in His resurrection, a real flesh and blood, physical resurrection. For just as death was temporary for our Savior, it is likewise temporary for all who follow Him! One day those who have trusted in Christ will see their loved ones again in the flesh, for God has made us physical and spiritual beings, and on the Last Day our glorified, resurrected bodies will be reunited with our souls, for God's promise is that He will not abandon us to death and the grave!

Jesus came to remove desolation from your life, and this He continues to do as He comes to you who belong to Him in the gift of faith, saving you from your sin, comforting you with His Holy Spirit, and shaping you by the power of His Word. You have not been abandoned to live a life of lawlessness, not knowing what is or isn't God-pleasing. Rather Jesus has taught you already what you should and should not do to please both Him and the Father. And while the world doesn't know what pleases God because it refuses to hear Jesus' voice, you who follow Jesus know what pleases Him, and what pleases Him is that you trust what He says.

Even as Jesus spoke the words of this text at Table on that first Maundy Thursday before His crucifixion, the events that would take Him to the cross were already in motion. The time would soon come when His followers would actually believe that He had failed in His Messianic mission, that He had abandoned them. But on Easter He returned to deliver on His promise, and that promise is also intended for you and for me. Therefore my prayer for you today is that you might always have confidence that this is true! The Spirit given to you in Baptism tells you so. And so does our living Lord and Savior, when He says: I will not leave you desolate. Thanks be to God for His great and abundant mercy. Amen!

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

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again
in the flesh.

Jesus as the Truth

The Gospel According to St. John 14:1-12

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. I dare say that one of the greatest threats to the Christian Church in our day is that teaching that says all paths lead to the same place, all worship is received by the same god, and the faithful of every religion receive the same salvation. This damning falsehood has always been with us, but it's far worse now than it's ever been. At its root is the conviction that there's no such thing as absolute truth, and that it doesn't matter what you believe, just so long as you sincerely believe it! This is why, I suspect, nearly every religion, except for one, is openly taught in most schools, and why, in the name of cultural diversity, children learn about Buddhism, Hinduism, Spiritism, and all the other isms, except, of course, for that faith that confesses the crucified, risen Carpenter from Nazareth as the only Savior of sinners.

Christianity is the only faith not tolerated in the public square, because it teaches that no other religion can make a person right before God, that there are no other gods other than the Triune God, and that all other ways of salvation are bogus. To the contrary, as long as a generic god and generic virtues are held up as noble, it isn't likely anyone is going to view that as a threat. No one will be offended, and no feathers will be ruffled. But look what happens when the Gospel is preached. When Paul preached the Gospel in Thessalonica there were riots in the streets, because Jesus' teaching is exclusive. He isn't just one way amidst any one of numerous truths, or one life among all the others. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life: the only Way to the Father, the only Truth that encompasses all other Truth, the only Life that has ever conquered death, and the only One who brings eternal salvation.

But even Jesus followers didn't understand this. Consider today's Gospel, how His disciples didn't have the foggiest idea what He was talking about when He told them they would follow Him where He was going. That's why Philip said to Him: Lord, we don't know where You are going? How can we know the way? You and I, we want to know where we are going before we choose which path to travel. Who gets in a car and starts driving without first having a destination? But it's far different when talking about things heavenly and eternal. Jesus is the only One who has

a clear view of our destination and how we are to get there. We have no way of finding the path to eternal life, nor would we want to find it had the Holy Spirit not drawn us. We aren't the ones in the driver's seat and if we were, we would soon find ourselves upside down in a ditch, or heading in the wrong direction. We were born headed in the wrong direction, hell-bound children of wrath traveling farther and farther away from our Father's house. But Jesus doesn't just show us the Way, He reveals Himself as the Way, the only Way to the Father, the only Bridge across the gap from death to life, the only Path through the wilderness, the only Ladder spanning heaven and earth, and the only Mediator between God and man.

Now to be sure, the Law also tells you the truth about yourself. It exposes the lie of your sin as it mirrors your rebellion, self-centeredness, hatred, lust, anger, and greed. It shows you the impact lying has had on your life. It enables you to see the truth of your death apart from Christ.

But in contrast to the Law, Jesus doesn't just show you the Truth about yourself, He also shows you the Truth about Himself, that He is the Truth. Jesus reveals and shows to us the Father's love, that our God is the One who is for us. Jesus speaks the words the Father gave Him to speak, does the works the Father gave Him to accomplish, and shows thereby the Father's heart and will to save poor sinners like us. To see Jesus is to see the Father. To know Jesus is to know the Father. And to believe in Jesus is to believe in the Father.

When Philip therefore said: Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied, he wanted to see the Father apart from the Son. He was speaking for every religion that tries to deal with God apart from His Son, and there are countless religions that do just that. Even Philip, who had seen Jesus' miracles and heard His teaching, was tempted to go around Him to get to the Father directly. Philip reminds us then how deeply ingrained this tendency is in us, that we want to go around Christ to the hidden God, to seek Him outside of His Word, apart from the Sacraments, and somewhere other than here, in His Church. We imagine God talking with us directly, without means, His Spirit whispering right into our ears as if our dear Lord Christ had never taken on a body and flesh. So we look for God in quiet mountain meadows, in the beauty of a sunset, or in the calm serenity of nature, that is, everywhere but where Jesus promised to be, in His Word, Baptism, Absolution, and the Supper.

That's why Jesus directed Philip and us back to Himself. For you must be found in Him in order to be saved. Jesus is your Way, joining you to His death and resurrection, pointing you to the Father through faith in Him. Jesus is your Truth, guiding and sustaining you as you travel that path to

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eternal life, forgiving your sins and feeding you along the Way with His very own body and blood. Though we are all sinful through and through, God has nonetheless made us His children. That's the Truth to which you must cling when everything else in life testifies against you. When you gaze in the mirror and say, I can't possibly be a child of God! when you see the awful mess you have made of life, and the terrible consequences of sin, when you take note of all you have done to yourself and others, and are tempted to doubt and despair, you still have this Truth, this Truth that points you to Jesus as the One who conquered the lie of your sin with His very own blood shed for sinners on Calvary's cross.

Dear Christian, what it means ultimately for you to know Jesus as the Way and the Truth is that through these things He brings you the most important gift of all, Himself as your Life. By the time you are baptized you have already begun the process of dying, but even then, you are already living in Him. And even though you will continue sinning until that day when they place you in a grave, God wants you to know that you are still living and raised with Him, even as St. Paul testifies: It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Jesus is
the Way,
the Truth, and
the Life,
the only Way
from death
to life,
from hell
to heaven, and
from the devil
to God.

Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the only Way from death to life, from hell to heaven, and from the devil to God. He is the only Truth that can, and has, overcome the lie of sin, sin that ultimately will kill us all. And He is the only Life, eternal Life. So then, I guess the spirit of our age

is almost right. All roads except for One, do lead to the very same place: death, destruction and the fires of hell. But only One Road leads to eternal life with God, and that Road is Jesus. Walk with Him by faith. Learn of Him through His Word. And live in Him through the blessings of His Body, the Church, for He alone is your Way, your Truth, and your Life and, by God's grace and favor, ever will be for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Believe What the Prophets Have Spoken

Luke 24:13-35

Third Sunday of Easter

In the name of the Father, and of the, Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. On the day Jesus rose from the dead, we find two of His disciples, Cleopas and another man whose name we don't know, walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were discussing recent events in Jerusalem, most especially Christ's triumphal entry, His trial, crucifixion, burial, and of course, the rumors concerning His resurrection. As they walked along the road, a Stranger drew near and began walking with them, which wouldn't have been so unusual, except that this was no stranger, but Jesus. Not recognizing Him, one of the men began telling Him how Jesus had been a Prophet mighty in deed and word, how the chief priests and religious rulers had handed Him over to be crucified, and how they had pinned their hopes on Him as Messiah. And now, though there had been rumors of a resurrection, He was nowhere to be found!

The men had their facts straight, but because they weren't wound around Jesus' death and resurrection, they hadn't believed. Knowing the Scriptures isn't the same as believing them. Having all the facts about Jesus isn't the same as trusting Him with your sin. You may memorize the entire Bible, rattle off endless passages at the drop of a hat, amaze your friends by reciting a list of the kings of Israel and the names of David's wives, know a Proverb to address every problem, or be able to cite a Scripture verse for every situation, but if your words aren't connected to the death and resurrection of Jesus, none of it will be of any value.

You see, it isn't how much of God's Word you know that matters, but what. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus squarely in the center, the 66 books of Holy Scripture really do not hang together all that well. The scarlet thread that ties it all together is Jesus in all His suffering and glory. These men walking with Jesus truly were foolish and slow of heart to believe all the prophets had written! They should have known. It was plastered

throughout the pages of Holy Scripture. The evidence was everywhere. But as we often do, I suspect they were busier reading things into the Scriptures than they were reading things out of them. Hence they missed the main point, that the way of God's Messiah and all those who follow after Him is the way of suffering before glory, and dying before rising.

So Jesus, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, showed them all the Scriptures concerning Himself. What a sermon that must have been, as Jesus directed them not to their hearts, feelings, experiences, or even to Himself, but to the Word alone. Luke doesn't say which Scriptures Jesus used, but no doubt He included enough to show them the truth of what He was saying. He would have reminded them of God's covenant with our first parents that the Promised Seed of Eve would one day crush the head

The way of
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of Satan. He would have pointed them to the Suffering Servant, despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, bearing our shame, carrying our sorrows, wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities, by whose stripes we are healed. And certainly He would have directed them to His own cross, suffering and resurrection.

What Jesus gave them was the key to the Scriptures. That's why it's so important for each of you, and especially you, Caleb, on this day of your confirmation, to hang on to every Bible story you have ever learned, every passage you have ever memorized, and all that you have read concerning Christ's death and resurrection. For it's only

when you see Him as the Heart, Core and Center of Scripture, that God's Word will really have meaning for you. For in truth, that's how Jesus turns stubborn hearts slow to believe into hearts that burn with faith, when you hear how Jesus suffered and died to win for you the forgiveness of sins, and that you, as a baptized believer in Christ, have been joined to His suffering and death so that you too will rise to life on the Last Day, even as He was raised from the dead on that first Easter morning so many long years ago.

You are privileged to have these Scriptures as your own, these Scriptures through which God makes you wise to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, God's Word, preached through the Prophets, Apostles, and Evangelists, written down for you so that you might be instructed, rebuked, corrected, and trained, so that you might embrace the salvation God won for us all on the cross through the death of His Son. These Scriptures contain everything you need for eternal life. You need no new revelation, nor any more information, because the Scriptures preach and teach Jesus, the Promise of God rejected by men and raised to God's right hand, at whose coming all the dead will rise, every knee will bow, and every tongue confess Him as Lord.

The Scriptures are preached and taught here in the Church. And you, in these last days, are fortunate to have them on your bookshelves, coffee tables and nightstands, a luxury the people of Luke's day could never have imagined. If your heart is slow to believe and your mind is dull in the knowledge of God, you have only yourself to blame. Just look at the two men on the road to Emmaus. Though their hearts were burning, their eyes weren't yet open. But when Jesus pretended He was about to go on past Emmaus, they insisted He stay for supper. It was nearing the end of the day, evening was fast approaching. Wouldn't He stay, they asked, and eat with them, to be with them in their sad, lonely state?

So Jesus became their Guest, but note how He then assumed the role of Host, how He took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. Sound familiar? It should. Luke doesn't want you to miss the connection between this meal and the one Jesus ate with His disciples on the night He was betrayed. Here again Jesus is at table with His disciples, breaking bread, and it was then that their eyes were opened and they recognized Him. Last week Christ's wounds identified Jesus to unbelieving Thomas. This week it's the breaking of the bread. But all of it, you see, is the same crucified, life-giving flesh of Jesus.

It was then that Jesus vanished from their sight. Though their eyes were now open, they could no longer see Him, but that didn't matter. They still knew He was with them. He had walked, talked and eaten with them. And where two or three are gathered in His name, receiving His gifts, His promise is that He will be with them. That's what the Church is all about. It's that place where Christ reveals Himself in the Scriptures and in the Supper, just as surely as He showed himself to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Scripture and Supper. Teaching and table fellowship. Word and Sacrament. That's what the Divine Service is all about, Jesus serving us with Himself. From the very beginning, the Church has understood this. That's why the early Christians devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles, the Fellowship, the Breaking of the Bread, and the Prayers. Because the Early Church had Jesus, Word and Supper, they were certain that their crucified, risen Lord was present among them to save, even as we are today. They needed no programs, no gimmicks, no publicity stunts, no mass marketing. They had the Scriptures, the Supper and the Prayers. That's all they needed. And the Lord added daily to their number.

History tells us that Simeon, the son of Cleopas, one of the men who walked the road that day with Jesus, later succeeded James as the bishop of Jerusalem. Maybe that's why Luke mentioned his name. For Cleopas, the father, ate with Jesus at Emmaus; Simeon, his son, ate with Jesus in

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Jerusalem; and now you and I eat with Jesus here in the Liturgy of His Church. What we have today is the very same table fellowship, and the very same Communion. Every Sunday is a trip to Emmaus, where Jesus walks with us, talks with us, and makes us His own. We can't see Him, but He's still here, making Himself known to His disciples. His voice is heard in the preaching of the Scriptures and in the Liturgy, and we recognize Him in the Breaking of the Bread. The Sermon leads us to the Supper, and the Supper sends us out into the world to tell others that the Lord has risen from the dead. Having seen Jesus here in His Church, our hearts burn, aflame with the confidence that Jesus is our Savior, Redeemer, and Shepherd, the Lamb whose blood has redeemed us, whose death and resurrection are ours, and who abides with us until the Day of His Coming. May it always be so, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Jesus Came Among Them

John 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. On that first Easter evening, ten of our Lord's disciples hid themselves away in a room because of fear of that Jews would persecute and kill them just as they had Jesus. Only ten of them were there because Judas, in his despondency, had committed suicide, and Thomas, for some reason the Scriptures don't disclose, wasn't with them. So there they were, shaking in their boots, locked away in what they thought was a safe hiding place, when all of a sudden Christ appeared out of nowhere showing them His hands and His side. He didn't unlock a door or climb through a window. He was just there. Naturally they were frightened and expected a well-deserved rebuke for their cowardice. But that isn't what happened. Instead Jesus brought them that peace which the world cannot give, the same peace you and I also receive, by the way, in the Divine Service when God's Word and forgiveness are spoken into our ears.

Now these disciples could truly be at peace, for their Lord was again among them with His forgiveness. But not all the Disciples were able to rejoice, for Thomas was not there. And later, when he returned and was told they had seen the Lord, he refused to believe. Now Thomas is often called Doubting Thomas, but that's entirely true, because Thomas didn't just doubt, but steadfastly refused to believe. He told the others that unless he could see with his own eyes and feel with his own hands the nail marks on Jesus, he would never believe. Call me crazy, but that sounds like rank unbelief to me. So, seven days later when Jesus again appeared among His disciples Thomas was there. Jesus gave them His peace, then walked up to Thomas, looked him squarely in the eye and said: Reach your finger here, and look at My hands, and put your hand into My side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.

As the Scriptures clearly teach, to be a follower of Jesus, you have to believe He rose from the dead, and if you deny the Resurrection you are actually denying the Resurrected One Himself. Those who claim to be Christian, yet refuse to believe in Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead are nothing but hypocrites, imposters and fools, and their so-called Christian faith is nothing more than a sham. That's why Jesus said what He said to

Thomas, because He doesn't want him, nor any of us, to remain in unbelief. And while Scripture doesn't reveal whether Thomas actually did what Jesus asked him to do, it does tell us what happened next. Thomas answered Him, saying: My Lord and my God!

Then Jesus replied: Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. That's not to suggest Thomas wasn't blessed in his believing. He was. But how many after Thomas would be able to see what he had seen? Very few and certainly none of us! That's why St. Paul reminds us in his second letter to the Corinthians, we walk by faith, not by sight . . . we don't look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Are there times when you refuse to believe God loves you, cares about you, or wants to be here for you?

In other words, Holy Scripture teaches the exact opposite of what the world would have us believe. For we live in an age of skepticism and cynicism. We really think that seeing is believing. If we can't see it for ourselves, we tend not to believe it. And even when we actually do see something, we aren't always ready to believe it.

The author of Ecclesiastes also lived in a time of cynicism. Reflecting the spirit of his day, he wrote: The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will

be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Are there times when you refuse to believe God loves you, cares about you, or wants to be here for you? Be honest. When you see the kinds of things happening that we saw with the weather this past week, don't you wonder why God doesn't do something to prevent these kinds of horrible tragedies? We forget that although suffering is never God's will, He does, for reasons He hasn't revealed, but sometimes allow it.

Now no doubt you have heard plenty of preaching about how much God loves you. And because you think you have that part down pat, does it leave you thinking that perhaps you would like to hear something different every now and then? Indeed, there are many preachers, feeling their sermons no longer have the pizzazz they once had, who think they need to preach something new and different to catch their hearers' attention. You have probably had similar thoughts yourself, some of you have even shared those thoughts with me. When you hear for the umpteenth time that Christ has risen from the dead, haven't you ever thought, Big deal? Or when you have heard me say Jesus is with you right now to give you His gifts, haven't you thought, So what? and wanted to hear something new? Dear friends, it is a big deal that Christ has risen from the dead, and that He is with you right now to give you gifts, for without Christ's resurrection and gifts there would be no point for you to be here at all. Indeed, if Christ

isn't risen, we are all headed for hell, there is no reason to believe any of this, and we certainly have no reason to be here.

But you are here aren't you? You are here to celebrate our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection. For it's in Christ's birth, life, suffering, crucifixion, death and resurrection, that our Savior once and for all time and for all mankind conquered sin, death, and the devil. He overcame Thomas' unbelief, forgave the disciples, won for you the forgiveness of your sins, earned a place for you in heaven, and brought you God's peace. He sent you His Holy Spirit, who calls you by the Gospel, which, as John reminds us, was written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we might have life in His name. As our new confirmands and we with them, will confess in just a few moments, there is salvation in no one else. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Here in His Church is where our Lord comes to us in His Word, in Baptism, in Absolution, and in His Holy Supper to save. And here is where He wants you to be.

In and by these means, the Holy Spirit enables you to exclaim with Thomas, My Lord and my God! This Holy Spirit gives you the eyes of faith so that you might behold here our risen Lord and King as He comes among us again in His Word, His body, and His blood. On that Second Sunday of Easter many long years ago, the Holy Spirit also came upon Thomas, so that he might no longer live in unbelief, but rather trust that our Lord had risen from the dead. And now that very same Holy Spirit has come to you so that as Christ's dear child, you might also live your life in Easter triumph and joy, which will be yours forever. Christ has risen and has come to bring you forgiveness, life, and peace, that peace which the world cannot give. Dear Christian, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Christ forgave the disciples, won for you the forgiveness of your sins, earned a place for you in heaven, and brought you God's peace.

Sir, We Wish to See Jesus

John 12:21

Palm Sunday

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. When I was a student at the seminary, I was assigned to work in a local congregation doing field work so I could practice all the things one has to do as a pastor. I had to assist with the Liturgy every now and then, preach every once in a while, teach a Bible class, and whatever else needed to be done. One thing I especially remember is the well-worn, hand-written note taped to the pulpit which said quite simply: Sir, we wish to see Jesus. The incident from this morning's Gospel, where these words are recorded, took place shortly after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem when a group of God-fearing Greeks approached Philip hoping to gain an audience with Jesus. Philip then went to Andrew, and the two of them set off to see Jesus.

But our Lord gave them a rather strange response to their request that He talk with these Greeks. The hour has come, He said, for the Son of Man to be glorified. Now, you might recall that earlier Jesus made a similar statement when He said that His time had not yet come. But on this occasion He told Philip and Andrew that the hour had finally arrived for His glorification and that this glorification would take place on Calvary's cross, where He would suffer and die for sinners, conquer Satan, and reveal His glory in a way no one expected. I tell you the truth, He said, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Of course, in spite of the fact that very few understood what He was saying, we know now that Jesus was speaking about Himself, that He is the Kernel of wheat that dies so that many new plants will spring forth unto everlasting life!

That was why St. Paul, in his letter to the Church in Rome, wrote: Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of [this] one act of righteousness was justification for all men. Just as through the disobedience of the one man [Adam] the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the One Man [Christ] the many will be made righteous. Paul's words here remind us that Jesus' crucifixion and death were accomplished for the entire world, and it's precisely because of that fact that the request of the Greeks, Sir, we wish to see Jesus! prompted our Lord to speak these words. For it is only when you see Jesus dying on

the cross for your sins that you really see Him as He must be seen, as the Seed that falls to the ground so that new life might spring forth.

This seed was first planted in you on the day you were baptized, when you were planted in the grave and put to death with Christ in order that you might also be raised up with Him, a new, young, vibrant, living plant, growing, maturing, nurtured and fed with God's Word, fertilized with Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. And that which is true for the beginning of your spiritual life, dear Christian, is doubly true for the rest of it as well, which is why Jesus also went on to say that if you love your life you will lose it, but if you hate your life in this world for His sake you will keep it for eternal life. So, do you love your life more than you love Jesus? Is your whole being wrapped up in what you want to achieve for yourself, or how you are going to improve your self? Then Jesus says you will lose your life. But, who wants to hate their life? I don't. But that isn't exactly what Jesus is saying. What He means is that you should hate your life in this world. Being totally committed to Christ, you are willing to lose your life in this world for His sake. You put a higher priority on Him than you do on the things of this world. Hmmm, that sounds a lot like the First Commandment!

Next Jesus says that to serve Him you must also follow Him. And then He promises that if you do that, then where He is, you will be also. And if you serve Christ, that means you will follow Him. But, where is He going? He's going to the cross and to His death. And to the cross is where you are headed, as well. But, this isn't just any cross. It's a heavy wooden, splintery cross with the body of Christ hanging on it. Scripture teaches that this cross must be a part of your life as a follower of Jesus, even as it was also a part of His life. Remember, Jesus didn't have to go to the cross. After all, Jesus wasn't a sinner, or was He? There was no reason He had to die, or was there? Yes, Jesus was a sinner. And yes, He had to die because He was carrying in His own body the sin of the world, your sin and mine. Though He knew no sin, He became sin so that you and I might live.

He is the Son of God. He could have asked the Father to save Him from this hour. But no, this was the hour for which He had come, and He would see it through to the bitter end. This is the context in which Jesus cried out: Father, glorify Your name. Don't save Me, but use My death so that Your salvation might be made known to all. And the Father replied: I have glorified it! Through Your life My name was glorified once, and now, in Your death and dying, I will glorify it again. The crowd didn't know what to think, so Jesus told them that these words had been spoken for their

Do you love
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more than you
love Jesus?
Is your
whole being
wrapped up
in what
you want
to achieve
for yourself?

benefit. The time for the judgment of the world was now at hand. Now Satan would be driven out and His power stripped away. Our Lord Jesus would bear the cross in our place, removing all the power the adversary once held over our heads.

As Christ was lifted up on the cross He would draw all mankind to Himself. As He hung there, His glory would be displayed for all the world to see. His crucifixion would be His glorification. Through it He would save mankind from the terror of sin, death and the devil. So here, finally, is the answer to the query of the Greeks: We wish to see Jesus. Soon everyone would see Him in all His glory, dying for us poor sinners the death we deserved, earning God's favor for we who have no right to it.

Which of you if you could have had a hand in laying out this plan to reveal God's glory, would ever have ever thought of revealing it in this way? Who would want the glory of a cross? And who would have ever thought of looking for glory in such an unlikely, unholy place? Yet there on that cross, by God's express design, is the only place where Christ's glory can be found. So, dear Christian, if your desire is to see Christ in all His glory, then it is the cross where you must look. And if you want the glory God promises to all those who belong to Him, the cross is where you must find it, for God's glory and forgiveness can only be found when you hate your life in this world and when you bear the cross of Christ, looking forward to that blessed world which is yet to come.

The trouble is, you and I don't want to suffer. We don't want the cross. We're afraid of it! But the cross is the reason why Christ came into our world. It's your reason for being. It's not only where the Son of God shed His blood for the life of the world, but it's where you must go if you want to see Jesus, if you desire His forgiveness and everlasting life. And fortunately, you don't have to go to Golgotha to see Jesus on His cross, for He has determined to come among us today with that very same body and blood that was given and shed on Calvary's cross for us sinners to eat and drink for our soul's salvation. So if you want to see Jesus, see Him now as He comes in His Supper, for here He has made Himself available to all who trust His gracious Word and promise. Here is where you may see Him, feel Him, touch Him, and taste Him, all for your soul's salvation, and for the forgiveness of your sins. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

**Our Lord Jesus
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Gathered Together as One in Christ

John 11:47-53

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Throughout history, position, ego, status, power and a desire for recognition have been corrupting influences on those who have authority over others, especially when they have it in abundance. It's been said, and rightly so, that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Indeed, in the history of our world there are countless examples of entire nations led astray by leaders corruptly wielding their power. We would like to believe the Church is immune from such things, but that's not the case. In fact, one of the greatest dangers to the Church is that fallible men run it. The ones to whom God has given the responsibility of preaching, teaching and confessing the Truth for the sake of the lost, are the very ones who oftentimes zealously guard their own position over and against the clear teachings of God's Word.

The events of this morning's Gospel took place after Jesus had raised His friend, Lazarus, from the dead. This miracle caused such a stir that the chief priests and Pharisees called a council to decide how best to put an end to the influence of this itinerant preacher. As they began, one of them said: What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If they did nothing, it wouldn't be long before the people put their trust in Jesus instead of them. Though God had charged the them with being custodians and stewards of God's Word, they had rejected the very Word of God Himself. Their ego and desire for recognition had corrupted them so completely they were willing to kill for it. They would zealously guard their power at all costs, even though the ones who would suffer most were the people under them who depended on their teaching. This is the same group to whom Jesus once said: Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one convert, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. Because of these men, many went to their graves without any hope at all, for their leaders had left them without forgiveness, truth, or faith in Christ.

And nothing much has changed in our day. Now, hundreds of years later,

the Church is often fractured and wounded by discord and strife, not because Truth is unknown or unattainable, but because it's subjected to struggles for power, position and authority rather than being anchored securely in the Word of God. The words of the chief priests and Pharisees are still being spoken in our own day: What shall we do, lest they take our place away from us? Where a simple thus sayeth the Lord, and a strong, fearless confession such as Luther once made when he said: Here I stand, I can do no other! the Church has instead heard words such as these from Her pastors: This is just the way things are in our new cultural setting. This is the way things have to be so no one is offended by our teaching. In the end, Truth is subjected to the struggle for power, position and authority, while poor sinners are left to risk the loss of God's forgiveness, truth and the eternity our Savior purchased on Calvary's cross.

In spite of every opposition, God's truth will be heard, and our Lord will win the battle.

It's only by God's grace that the voice of truth continues to be heard, for the true Church is and must be built only on the truth of God's Word. And it's only because She stands on this Foundation that the gates of hell will not be able to prevail against Her. In spite of every opposition, God's truth will be heard, and our Lord will win the battle. For the darkness of sin and death will never be able to put out the Light of Christ Jesus.

Consider the early church, where the truth was unable to be silenced even in the face of the cruel opposition of the Roman government. Consider how the truth could not be silenced in the dismal period of the Dark Ages, when it must have seemed as if Satan had won the day. Consider how the truth couldn't be silenced in the papal rule of the Middle Ages that led to the Reformation. And finally, how the truth has not been silenced in our present culture of hedonism and the idolization of self in which absolute truth is thought by many to be nothing more than a fable.

God's truth cannot be silenced by mere mortals. It must be heard, and in some cases, it may even have to come from the mouths of those who don't even know what they are speaking. Did Balaam's donkey not speak the truth to his master and even spare his life when he was too proud to listen to God? Look at this morning's Gospel, where the chief priests and Pharisees held a secret meeting to consider how they might silence Jesus, where Caiaphas, the high priest, said it would expedient for them that one Man should die for the people so that the whole nation wouldn't have to perish. Caiaphas spoke, not really knowing what it was he was saying. And although he was an unbeliever, God nonetheless used him as an instrument to speak that truth which could not be silenced, that Jesus would die for the sin of the world!

As by one man, all mankind fell, and, born to sin, were doomed to hell, so by one Man, who took our place, we all received the gift of grace. Though Caiaphas knew not what he spoke, the effect of his words was that

Jesus' death for the nation would serve God's purpose of gathering together into one the children of God who were scattered everywhere. Therefore it's not a bad thing for you and me to long for the kind of oneness, in the Church of which Caiaphas spoke. In a pluralistic society such as ours, where all religions are considered to be the same, all deities are believed to be true, and it doesn't matter what you believe just so long as you believe something, we long for a time when all Christians might be able to truly unite under the banner of Christ and walk together in unity and concord.

But our desire for unity ought to be motivated by the truth of the Gospel, which compels us to stand firm against the devil's assaults and the damning doctrines of pluralism, and the spirit of our age that spout the hellish notion that love, leading to unity, is more important than the foundation on which unity must be built. So long as men defend position and power at the expense of the truth, and falsely believe truth is determined not by the clear Word of God, but by the exercise of our own reason, there will be division in the Church on earth, for the truth cannot be silenced, and must always fight tooth and nail against every error that might lead sinners away from Christ to their doom.

There's a paradox, then, in which the Church must exist here in this world. On the one hand, as Christians, we are called on to exhibit and have unity of faith and spirit. But on the other hand, God also calls us to be staunch defenders of the truth of the Gospel. The chief priests and Pharisees thought too little of the Gospel to even believe in it. In their case they treasured their place and nation, or perhaps, peace and harmony, over and against the message of the cross. But when truth is at stake, there can be no unity of faith without unity of confession, for the foundation of the Church is Christ alone and everything that is true about Him. It has to be just as Peter confessed to Jesus when He asked him who he thought He was. He said: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. To which Jesus responded: You are Peter and on this rock, that is, on your confession of Me as the Christ, the Son of the living God, I will build My Church, and the gates of hell will not be able to prevail against it. Power and authority in the Church exist then, not to be served by the Word, but rather to serve the Word. Our Lord Christ truly unites us and gathers us together as one only when we stand under that clear Word of truth and confess it in all of its parts, defending it with the might He gives us. God grant that it might always be so, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Our Lord Christ unites us only when we stand under that clear Word of truth and confess it in all of its parts, defending it with the might He gives us.

Every Picture Tells a Story

Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Transfiguration? you say, What's that? *Transfiguration* is a word that isn't used very often. And that's OK, because this is an event you don't see very often. In fact, if you had seen it, you would never forget it. That's why Peter, writing many years later, remembered it so vividly. He wrote concerning this event: We were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to Him by the Majestic Glory, This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with Him on the holy mountain.

That's what the Transfiguration is. Peter saw it with his own eyes and heard the voice from heaven with his own ears. Both the picture and the words tell a story, an amazing story. We heard this story in today's Gospel, where Jesus took three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, up with Him to a high mountain where He was transfigured before them. Or, putting it another way, His appearance changed, His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. He who created the sun, moon and stars now shined with their brilliance. On that mountain Christ was clearly revealed to Peter, James and John in all His divine glory as the very Son of God, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.

Now to be sure, this is a glory that Christ, from eternity, always had, but it's a glory that had been hidden since the moment He took on human flesh and made his dwelling among men. Our Lord Jesus seldom nor fully ever manifested His glory during the days of His earthly ministry, but on this day, on this mountain, He most certainly did. For a brief moment, He pulled back the curtain, so to speak, so that His disciples would be able to clearly see that here was the eternal Son of God in all His Divine majesty, the One by whom all things were made, who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven and was made man.

But you might be asking, what is the significance of His clothes becoming white as light? What story might this picture be telling? Could it

mean that here in the flesh of Jesus we see the holiness and purity of God Himself revealed in human flesh? What else could it mean? For as the Scriptures teach, Jesus is without sin and unstained by transgression. He is perfect in righteousness, the One who alone flawlessly kept all the commandments. As true man, born under the Law, this Jesus, Israel reduced to one Man, is the only One ever to love God with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength, and His neighbor as Himself. Righteous, holy, and unblemished, that's who Jesus is, and His white-as-light clothing reflects that fact.

Now look at yourself. When you look at your own garments in the light of Christ, what do you see? You see clothing soiled, stained with sin that can't be removed by you no matter how hard you try. Holy Scripture teaches that all your righteousness is like filthy rags, all of it! But the Good News is that Jesus kept the Law in your place. He did what you could not do, and all of it, in a manner of speaking, was transferred to your account.

What else do you see in this picture? You see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. They had not been around for centuries, but on this unique occasion, God brought them back into the picture. Moses was the great deliverer who led Israel in her wilderness wanderings, who, on Mount Sinai, gave God's people His Ten Commandments. Moses was the one who told Israel: The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your brothers, it is Him to whom you must listen. So the picture of Moses standing with Jesus tells us that Jesus is the One to whom Moses pointed. Elijah was with them was because he was the greatest of the prophets, who pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment of all biblical prophecy, the One to whom all the prophecies direct our attention.

Yet in that moment when the disciples looked up, no one was left but Jesus. And what story does that picture paint? It says that if you want to know where to look for your salvation, if you want to know what the focus and purpose of the Bible is, you need look no further than Jesus. Jesus isn't the new law-giver. Moses already did that. Nor is Jesus to serve as our example, but only as the Savior of sinners who would go to the cross to die for the sins of the world, your sins and mine. He alone is your Savior, the One who came into our world to do what you will never be able to do, to earn for you and give you His life, His righteousness, and forgiveness for your sin, all so that you might have life with Him forever.

But there's one more thing you dare not miss in this picture, the bright cloud that overshadowed them. This was no dark, threatening cloud like the storm clouds that appeared on Mount Sinai when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. This cloud signified the presence of God, but not in a threatening way. This is how one might picture the presence of God

Here in the flesh of Jesus we see the holiness and purity of God Himself revealed in human flesh.

as He surrounds us with His love, protection and presence by which He guards and guides us, much like the pillar of cloud that led Israel through the desert as she left Egypt and the armies of Pharaoh behind. So also in Christ we have the presence of God with us, to lead us all the way through the dreary desert of this world of sin, all the way to our home to heaven.

So there's the whole picture. Jesus shining like the sun, His clothes as white as light. Moses and Elijah there with Him, telling us how Christ is the Goal and Focus of God's plan for us poor sinners. And finally, the bright cloud of God's saving presence surrounding us on every side. That's what you see. Now what do you hear? You hear the voice that came from the bright cloud, saying: This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to Him. This is the voice of our heavenly Father testifying

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dreary desert of
this world
of sin.

to and approving of His Son and His saving mission to redeem sinners. These words remind us how far God went to rescue us, how He loves us so much that He would give His beloved Son, His only begotten Son, to die for us while we were yet sinners, so that we might not die but live.

Because the Father loves His Son, you may also be sure that He loves you, too. For in Holy Baptism, God joined you to His Son and clothed you with the blinding white robe of Christ's righteousness. There your sins were washed away as God placed His Triune name upon you to mark

you as one who has been redeemed by Christ the Crucified. In this great exchange, God made you His child, accepted and dearly loved for Christ's sake. Now, through baptism, God the Father says concerning each of you: This is also My beloved son, with whom I am well pleased. And because you are God's sons, you listen to what our dear Lord and Brother Jesus says, because you know that there is no one else who has the words of eternal life.

Today, in both pictures and words you have learned of God's great love for us all in His Son, whom we have once again beheld, bright and shining. As the Son of God come in human flesh, He is the Goal and Focus of all salvation history. In Him you are surrounded by the bright cloud of God's gracious presence. As you look only to Jesus, you hear the Father's voice telling you how much He loves you in Christ, and joined to Him in Holy Baptism, you rejoice that you have God as your Father and that you are His beloved child. So every picture does tell a story. And in this picture of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, you see and hear yet once more of the never-ending love of God for all of us in Christ, and with the saints of all time you rejoice in the great salvation that is yours in the life, death and resurrection of our Savior. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Worry Replaced by Contentment

Matthew 6:24-34

Eighth Sunday After Epiphany

Matthew 6:24-34 (ESV): No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. You and I, we are chronic worriers. We worry about everything, no matter how little. We worry if there will be enough money to pay the bills, whether the business we are engaged in will generate enough income to turn a profit, whether our children will turn out to be responsible citizens, whether or not we will have a job tomorrow, next week, next year, or any one of a number of the other things we worry about. In short, I suspect most of us spend more time worrying than we do anything else. And at the center of all this worrying is what Jesus calls mammon. That's why our Lord makes a distinction between serving God and mammon, because we are guilty of serving mammon to the exclusion of serving God. We place

our trust in things that will wither and perish rather than in the one thing that will never pass away. Hence our Lord Christ teaches us here not to trust the world and all its treasures, but to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, knowing that all these other things will be added according to God's will.

But still the fact is that everything in our world today revolves around mammon, that is, money, or the lack of it. Unemployment is jumping up and down, but it's still too high. Business owners are tightening their belts not knowing what tomorrow will bring. Many say things are going to get worse before they get less worse. And nowadays optimism is as rare as a warm day in January. Property taxes are almost certain to climb. Someone in the government is always threatening to find a new way to take more.

God gives everything we need, and yet we complain it isn't enough.

And let's not even talk about the cost of gasoline or health care. Life costs money, and you have to be clothed, fed and healthy to earn money. And while most of us may not be in danger of losing our jobs or livelihood, it's awfully difficult not to be affected when daily you are bombarded with nothing but negative news.

How quickly we forget what we ought to have well-learned from Martin Luther's Small Catechism. Do you remember what it teaches about the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer? It teaches us to pray: Give us this day our daily bread and that God gives daily bread indeed even without our prayer, even to all the wicked. But I suspect those last five words are the hardest to swallow, especially when the wicked seem to be doing better than you are. Yet, the wicked aren't satisfied either, for when they have one thing, they always want something better. And when they receive something better that's not good enough either. You see, the wicked are just like us, for we all ultimately place our trust in mammon.

But mammon cannot save. A rich collection of tens, twenties, fifties and hundreds won't earn you everlasting life, and no matter how nice your car is, you can't drive it into the kingdom of heaven. Now that's not to say having earthly possessions is evil, but when you place your trust in those rather than God, that's what Jesus is attacking here in this text. As the Catechism teaches, daily bread is everything that belongs to the support and needs of the body. God gives everything we need, and yet we complain it isn't enough. And when we place such limits on God's gracious giving, that's when we find ourselves running in the way of the Law. God gives us more than we think He does, yet we remain ungrateful and demand more, expecting all His gifts to be of the earthly variety. And when those earthly things don't come to us as quickly or in the quantities we want, we hit the panic button, at times even blaming God for the shortfall.

Here in this text Jesus gives us two humbling examples in the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Neither of them worry about what they

will eat or how they look. No bird sulks in the nest wondering where food for the next two weeks is going to come from. No flower refuses to bloom until it looks better than the flower growing next to it. The birds have food and lilies clothing. It's that simple, or our Creator provides them with everything they need. Yet we worry when God isn't doing enough to feed us or to make us look good. In spite of what the world believes, the best pair of shoes, the biggest house, or the fastest boat on the lake cannot come close to the great value of all the good things our heavenly Father daily provides us.

And, while daily bread is a gift from God, that isn't what saves us. That's why Jesus tells us first to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Worrying about tomorrow is not seeking the kingdom of God, but hearing God's Word and gladly keeping it is. Therefore we rejoice in the gifts of the purely preached Gospel and the rightly administered means of grace, because we know that it's there where we see the righteousness of God, a righteousness that provides for us in every time of need. Consider Job, who lost everything and then some. In an instant his house, family, property, wealth, and health were taken from him. His friends begged him to curse God and die. Yet Job remained faithful, and never strayed from the Lord and His Word.

Mammon, you see, cannot provide everlasting life. It's here today and gone tomorrow, while the Word of the Lord endures forever. The kingdom of God is yours, dear Christian, because God's only-begotten Son took on human flesh, suffered, died and rose from the dead to pay for the sin of the world, your sin and mine, so that we might have eternal life and not be weighed down with and worry about such things. To be sure, what do you really have to worry about? Consider for a moment the great suffering that went on during Luther's day, and yet listen to the words Luther wrote for the last stanza of his well known hymn, A Mighty Fortress. And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife. Let these all be gone, they yet have nothing won. The kingdom ours remains.

Dear children of God, a king's crown, all the gold in Fort Knox, the finest home in the entire Kansas City area, or the most fashionable clothes money can buy, are nothing when compared to the gift of your baptism. St. Louis the Ninth, King of France, and namesake for the city of St. Louis, once said: I think more of the place where I was baptized than the Cathedral where I was crowned. For the dignity of a child of God, which was bestowed on me at baptism, is far greater than that of the ruler of the kingdom. At death I shall cease to rule any longer, but my baptism will be my passport to everlasting glory. Oh, how I pray that every one of you believed those words to be true! Just think of it. The righteousness of God now cov-

No bird sulks in the nest wondering where food for the next two weeks is going to come from.

ers you in Holy Baptism. You have something mammon can neither buy nor sell. The forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are yours through the simple means of words, water, bread and wine.

Here today you will soon receive Christ's Body and Blood for the forgiveness of your sins and the strengthening of your faith. Christ will place upon your tongue His death so that you might live. Where earthly food fails, this heavenly meal will satisfy your soul completely. But it's still hard not to worry, isn't it? With so many bad things going on around us, it's difficult to see that the good things of God outweigh the bad that comes our way. Still yet, in Christ's Church, children young and old are hearing the Word of God and being baptized into the name of our gracious, Triune God. Parents are teaching their children the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, telling them stories from God's Word, and showing them how God delivers His children in every time of need. And the more this is done, the stench of the pessimism of this filthy here and now will be sweetened with the truth that here we have no continuing city. Though jobs and money may come and go, here in His Church Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, still feeds us with His body and blood, and clothes us with His righteousness. Here worry is replaced with contentment, and His kingdom is ours forevermore. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

You Shall Be Perfect

Matthew 5:38-48

Seventh Sunday After Epiphany

Matthew 5:38-48 (ESV): You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Preaching on a Scripture lesson such as this morning's Gospel presents quite a challenge. I say that because it would be far too easy, I fear, to preach this text in such a way that some of you might fall into despair over your sin and failures, while others of you might fall into pride, wrongly assuming that you have kept the Law. It would so much easier to talk about something else altogether to avoid the risk of stepping on anyone's toes. But that would certainly not be the right or the faithful thing to do either. No, this Word of our Lord Jesus stands before us, and is addressing itself to us, and it's my divinely given vocation to preach it to you this morning.

It's sobering for us to rightly consider how seriously our Lord describes sin and its consequences here. He does this because of a problem we all share, that is, we fail to consider and take to heart the fact that each and every one of us are truly sinners through and through. And this is true not just in some general, abstract sense, but really and specifically, in thoughts, and words, and deeds. And so today this Word of God condemns our sin for what it is, so that recognizing our lost and fallen condition we might confess that sin and receive Christ's forgiveness, so that in Christ our righ-

teousness might exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. And this is not a righteousness of our own, nor is it the result of our own good works and clean living, but rather the righteousness of Christ, which belongs to those who are His by grace alone, through faith alone.

The only real life any of us have, dear friends, which is also our only real hope, is the life Jesus Christ lived and sacrificed for us, the life He gives to us in Holy Baptism, the life we live in Him and He in us. Every other sort of life, which is really nothing more than death in disguise, has to be renounced and relinquished. Therefore the Church dare not tolerate our sins as though they are innocent and harmless, but must condemn them for what they are, that is, sins leading to death, as we sinners are called to repentance so that God's forgiveness and life might be given out freely and joyfully to all who believe in the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Our Lord and Creator responded to those who sinned against Him with mercy and forgiveness.

Although many like to think of the Sermon on the Mount as some sort of description of how God blesses people who are poor and lowly, if you look closely you will find it contains a whole lot of Law. Here Jesus doesn't let anyone off the hook, including you and me. He exposes the roots of the deep evil that is already growing and thriving in our hearts long before it ever gets into our words and actions. Our Lord does this to contrast the death of our sin with the life and salvation of His mercy and forgiveness. For in Him we have been given a new life, a life that

isn't characterized by murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and covetousness, as our so-called life apart from Christ actually is. Rather, our life in Christ is characterized by His perfect righteousness, revealed above all and most clearly in His Cross, and given in Holy Baptism.

Our Lord's words throughout this Sermon are so serious and harsh, because the sins He addresses are the polar opposite of the mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation that come to us through His Cross. Thus He condemns all these sins so that He might forgive us, reconcile us to Himself, and make us members of His Bride, the Church. Jesus didn't come, as some falsely believe, to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it, to bring it to perfect completion in His own body. All that He calls for throughout this Sermon, all that He calls us to be, He Himself lives and fulfills in His own flesh, even to the point of death upon the Cross. For as St. Paul writes in his Epistle to the Romans, love is the fulfillment of the Law, because love does nothing to harm the neighbor, but rather seeks to help and serve. And it is just such a love that we see in the cross and crucifixion of our Lord Jesus.

Instead of taking revenge, an eye for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth, our Lord and Creator responded to those who sinned against Him with mercy and forgiveness by sending and giving up unto death His only begotten

Son for the life of the world. Everything this world of sinners deserved, including you and me, the Son of God suffered. All the debt we owed, the Son of God paid with His own lifeblood. Therefore since God has already reconciled the world to Himself in Christ, any and all claims that you and I may think we have against one another have already been satisfied and declared null and void. So, when we pray: Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, we pray knowing all these things have already been taken care of by Jesus. For Jesus turned His cheek when we couldn't, surrendered His garments when we wouldn't, and carried His Cross for us and our salvation, which means that we have no right whatsoever to exact retribution from others. Instead we forgive others as we have been freely forgiven by Christ.

The required perfection spoken of at the end of this text is like that of our Father in heaven, the righteousness of Christ that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. It is a righteousness defined and perfected by mercy and forgiveness. And it's in the mercy and forgiveness of God in Christ that His perfection is most clearly revealed and expressed. It is therefore most appropriate that the word for perfection, in this Gospel is the root word for *it is finished*, of our Lord upon the Cross. For it is upon the Cross that His mercy and forgiveness are perfected, and that His perfect righteousness is accomplished for us. As sons of God in Christ Jesus, you and I, we are called to be perfect, in this same sense and in this same way, by loving our enemies, showing mercy, forgiving those who sin against us, and finding and living our life in the Cross of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

We have no right whatsoever to exact retribution from others.

That, dear Christian, that is the point of all these words of Jesus, that we love our neighbor as our own self, and even that we love those who hate us, all for the sake of God, our heavenly Father. To love and serve one another, to refrain from revenge and to forgive instead, to give freely even to those who are taking advantage of us, and to love and pray for those who hate and persecute us, all of this, our dear Lord Jesus Christ has already done for us in our place. Indeed, He continues to do this, and will continue to do this, until that Day when He returns again in glory. Until that Day He now lives life in and through us for our neighbor, so in us our neighbor might also know and experience the same love of God we each enjoy as sons of God.

That is the righteousness to which you and I are called, which we cannot earn or obtain for ourselves, but which has been obtained for us, and given to us, by Christ. Only in Christ do any of us live as a perfect son of our Father in heaven. In fact, only in Christ is God our Father at all. And, because this is so, you and I love and forgive where we would otherwise hate and hurt. We give and sacrifice where otherwise we would covet and

lust. We put the best construction on our neighbor's actions even when our neighbor's actions would otherwise wound or hurt us. We serve without thanks where we would otherwise retaliate with anger and revenge. In all of this, the Gospel is thus confessed, and the world sees in us the grace of God in Christ.

Instead of retaliating, seeking revenge, or refusing to forgive, the righteousness of faith in Christ suffers all things, bears all things, endures all things, for the sake of Him Who suffered death in our stead, bearing all our sins and griefs, and enduring the righteous wrath of God on our behalf. Consider how He turned the other cheek to those who mocked and abused Him. When He was reviled, He didn't revile in return, but entrusted Himself to His Father, so that by His stripes, we might be healed, that, having died to sin, we might live for righteousness, knowing that however far short we may have fallen from God's perfect righteousness, the Son of God, has not failed to reconcile anyone to Himself through His Cross and Resurrection. He, dear child of God, He is your life and your salvation, and in Him, you are perfect, just like your Father in heaven. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Tempted, But Not Overcome

Matthew 4:1-11

First Sunday in Lent

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Following our Lord's Baptism, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After 40 days of fasting; that's 5 weeks and 5 days without so much as a morsel of food; Jesus was hungry. So the devil appeared to Him, offering bread to fill his stomach. Next, knowing He was weak, tired and longing for human contact, Satan offered Him the honor of being saved from a fall by the angels who had been given charge over Him. Then finally, hoping Jesus would falsely believe His Father had abandoned Him, the devil extended a neighborly hand, by offering to step in and be His god. Satan wouldn't ask Him, as the Father had done from eternity; to suffer and die. Indeed, he would be more than happy to relieve Him of that obligation. The devil seems so nice, doesn't he? All he wants is for Jesus to have bread enough to sustain Him, the honor He rightly deserves as God's Son, and finally, to be spared any suffering.

Obviously the devil had not yet seen the whole picture. He didn't understand things very well; or, as C.S. Lewis put it so aptly in his book, *The Lion, The Witch, And The Wardrobe*, he didn't understand the deep magic. And so Satan came to Jesus in a vain attempt to get Him to exchange His rightful role as Savior for the momentary, fleeting pleasures of this world and life; and perhaps the safety of knowing that the cross and grave would no longer be part of His future. To put it quite simply, what we see here is that the devil is a liar and the father of lies. He knows it's impossible to have more than one god, and that if you don't worship the God of Holy Scripture, you are end up worshiping the devil. Those are the only options.

In the end, our old evil foe gets for himself not only those who are out-and-out witches, Satanists or devil worshipers. He also gets those who are undecided, who, throughout their lives preferred to be fence-sitters, who managed to keep their names on the Church rolls somewhere even though they were only lukewarm pretenders who wanted nothing to do with God.

Satan also gets those who chose to worship no god at all, and those who worship the false gods of false religion. The devil's kindly ecumenical offer to share the stage with the Father is like the SS troops of World War II beckoning the Jews into the showers of the death camps! Satan's desire that Jesus have bread and honor and be spared worldly suffering had only one goal and purpose; that the fallen men, women and children of this world would go to their graves without the benefit of hearing Jesus' Word.

So the devil comes to our Lord following His 40 days of fasting and says Him: Jesus, You shouldn't have to do all this. It's not Your fault man is so weak. See how the people of Israel behaved during the 40 years of the Exodus. All they did was grumble and complain! They picked the bread

Our Lord
and Creator
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those
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against Him
with mercy and
forgiveness.

and quail up off the ground which the Father had given them; and all the while they hungered for the cucumbers and onions of Egypt. These people aren't worthy of You or Your gifts. Take these stones. They could be bread for you; pleasing to the eye, good for food, even tasty! You are God's Son. You have the right to take care of Yourself. Go ahead, be God. Let me have the men. I can assure You, those miserable ingrates will never bother You again, because I will be their god and I will take care of them.

But in spite of how tempting Satan's offer may have appeared, Jesus does what Adam, Moses, and Israel did not do. He resisted the devil's might. To be sure, He was tempted in every way, even as we are; but He wasn't overcome by the temptation. He doesn't fall or sin. Instead, Jesus suffers in His obedience for our disobedience. He lives His life perfectly according to God's Word. He's fully confident the Father will provide everything He needs. Therefore the Son will wait. Led to the place of temptation by the Spirit, the Son submits to the Father, and in that process knows hunger and shame. The Father provides for the Son; not by removing the burden from His shoulders, but by offering Him up as a sacrifice. The Son goes silently as a Lamb to the slaughter without so much as a complaint; without bread, without honor, and without friend. The Father sacrifices the Son to give the Spirit to the those miserable excuses for human beings who had come into the world before Him, and who would come into the world after Him; to Adam, Moses, Abraham, Israel, and finally, of course, us.

Christ goes on alone to pay for sins He didn't commit. He turns the other cheek, allows His enemies to force a crown of thorns down upon His brow and drive cruel nails into His hands and feet. He permits Satan to do his worst, have his day, and take his price. Ah, but then, then the price is

paid. The ransom has been made. The sacrifice is now complete. There's nothing more Jesus needs to accomplish on our behalf. Now, having fully satisfied the unyielding demands of the Law, He removes its crushing guilt and shame. He takes up His power again and rises triumphant from the grave. His power to save is greater than the power of the devil to destroy, seek vengeance, deceive, or to tempt. Christ makes no threats nor gives any empty promises. His is the greatest power of all; the power to forgive sin! He rules not by might, but by grace with love. He makes citizens to populate His Kingdom of grace by declaring those who had formerly been rebels to be His own dear children, as He washes them in the rosy waters of Baptism stained with the blood of His Cross. Satan's fantasy of killing God comes true; but proves to be his utter defeat. Failures, losers, cowards and weaklings the world over; and throughout time; are set free from their dark shame and welcomed back into the light of the Father's embrace!

Thus you, dear Christian, you are no longer a failure or a coward. You are a beloved child of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit forever. You may still have to live out all your days here in the wilderness of this world in weakness; knowing hunger and shame and being attacked by the devil; but that isn't the end of your story, for the student is not above his Master and Teacher. God's way, you see, is to hide heroes in weakness and saints in sinners. You now follow Jesus in the Way of the Cross, the grave, and the empty tomb. It's not by bread alone that you live, but by every Word which proceeds from the mouth of God. He's the One who provides that Word-infused bread for you to eat unto eternal life. He's the One who sees to it that you don't go to the slaughter. No longer are you alone, for your sins have been forgiven and forgotten. Now you are holy, righteous and innocent; entirely without fault or blame.

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But still and alas, though you are on the road that leads to your heavenly home, you aren't yet there. You are still suffering in this barren place full of sin and temptation at every turn; full of sorrow, death and sadness everywhere you look. And so it is that with the earthly bread by which you are sustained here in this world, God has also given You His Word to keep you for eternal life; out of His mouth into yours. And note how He doesn't just give you bread alone. Rather He gives all of Himself, the Word made Flesh, His body in the bread and His blood in the wine, so that you might persevere and live! In this Meal; this Medicine of Immortality; He joins you to Himself; encouraging, strengthening, and nourishing you. Out of your mouth then comes the Word He places inside you, your praise of His mercy and a pious Amen. Through all this; through what appears to be or-

dinary words, and everyday water, bread and wine; God cleanses you from your sin and makes you worthy of receiving His gift of eternal life.

That's how your pastor is now able to stand before you holding up what appears as bread before your eyes. Take and eat, he says, this is the true body of Christ. Take and drink, this is the very blood of Christ, given unto death for the forgiveness of your sin. And hearing those words, you respond, saying: Amen That is, it is true. It is good. It is for me. Thanks be to God that He loves me and has endured all things for me. He feeds me not with bread alone but with Himself. He makes me a holy Temple of His grace. He hasn't forgotten me. He's here attending and serving me. He is for me! Amen! Amen!

And this is what the devil doesn't get; nor will he ever get it; no matter how many times he observes it. This is who the Messiah is and how He desires to be known. He's anointed to be a Sacrifice, the Lamb God provides to make men His own. He's caught up in His compassion and desire to have you. So He does it all; hungers in the desert, carries His cross to Golgotha, and is mocked by the soldiers; all of it, for you. This is what it took to make you His own His holy Incarnation, His fasting and temptation, and His suffering, dying, and rising. You are now a royal priesthood, a Bride so beautiful and precious, that the Bridegroom of grace is willing to pay the dowry Himself in order to have you.

His is the not the way of power and might. His way isn't at all like the way of the imaginary gods designed by men. His is the way of weakness, substitution, and mercy. He is the Answer to what tempts and tortures you. Jesus, having suffered in your place, has now forgiven you all your sin; and it isn't coming back! On that Day which is still coming, it will be revealed for all of creation to see that you are a child of God, well-pleasing in His sight. What you may suffer now for a time isn't even worthy of comparing with the glory that will be revealed in you on that Day. Behold, even now, you are surrounded, and ministered to by angels. With them and the whole company of heaven we laud and magnify His glorious Name, the Name of peace into which you were Baptized; that Name in which you live, and move, and having your being, the name of Jesus! Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.

How's Your Righteousness?

Matthew 5:21-26

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

Matthew 5:21-26 (ESV): You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, You fool! You will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The juicy pulp of the forbidden fruit had hardly even passed over Adam and Eve's lips before they knew something wasn't right, indeed, that something was very, very wrong. The man and woman were naked. They now knew both good and evil. And there was God, the Almighty Creator of all things, walking in the midst of the garden in the cool of the day. Hearing Him, our first parents tried to hide from His presence. But God, being God, after all, still managed to find them, punish them, and cast them out of the Garden for their own good, for after having fallen into sin, their righteousness no longer measured up. They would have to be sent away from God's presence until the time arrived when the Messiah would come.

Now fast forward a couple thousand years to what should have been a short jaunt for the Israelites through the wilderness of Sinai to the Promised Land of Canaan, a short jaunt that instead turned into a 40 year long debacle. Not even the leader of the Israelites, Moses, would be able to enter into the Promised Land now. Although the Almighty had hand-picked Moses to carry the two tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments, which had been carved with God's finger, down from the crest of Mount Sinai, now even Moses himself would be forced to find his burial ground there on the wrong side of the Jordan, on the other side of the river next to land God had promised to give them.

Some years later the Israelites desired a king for themselves, a king other than God who was their true King. So God gave them King Saul. Saul meant well, but truth be known, he had far too many problems that would get in the way of him being a good king. Then along came King David, the adulterer, the murderer, the liar, yet a man after God's own heart. And then there was King Solomon with all his vaunted wisdom, not to mention all his many wives and concubines. From that point on, it was all downhill as Israel and Judah were ultimately carried off to Assyria to a seemingly endless exile in the land of Babylon. They had been warned, but no, they were too righteous to listen to the Voice of Righteousness, which had come to them through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, Amos, and all the other prophets. They were too smart, too smart, it seems, for their own good.

How is your righteousness? How does it stack up when compared with all the saints of the Old and New Testaments?

Then finally, leap ahead a few more centuries to our own world and time and ask yourself this question: How is your righteousness? How does it stack up when compared with all the saints of the Old and New Testaments? Does it exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day? How well do you know your Bible, God's Word? Do you know where your Catechism is? Do you read from it daily? Do you have a library at home filled with good, solid biblical teaching that you and your family read on a regular basis? Do you, have you loved God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind, no strings attached?

Do you love your neighbor as yourself? Do you even know what it means to love unconditionally? Do you love our nation's political leaders? Do you love your enemies, like the yet-to-captured-and-tried conspirators who were heavily involved and responsible for carrying out the 9-11 terrorist attacks? Are you ready to give your life for the person you dislike the most? Are you willing to sell all you have, give it to the poor, take up your cross, and follow Jesus? Are you prepared to make more of a difference in our world than all the great humanitarians of times past rolled into one?

Well, that's what it takes to stand toe to toe with Jesus. You have to be absolutely perfect in every way. You must be truly pure in heart. You must be steadfast and diligent as you live out your Christian faith. Every prayer you pray has to be prayed in perfect harmony with our Heavenly Father's good and perfect will. You have to love others without boundaries or conditions, and yes, that includes loving even the vilest of people more than you love yourself. And there can be no loopholes or excuses as you carry this out. Consider the text we just read, which recorded these words of Jesus: If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

When you refuse to forgive someone and desire to receive Holy Communion, especially when that someone is sitting in another pew here with you in worship, do you not know that it's repulsive to our Lord Christ for you to kneel next to that person to receive His true body and blood before you first reconcile yourself to them? And Jesus doesn't mean that you ought to just make sure you come forward at separate tables so that you don't have to be anywhere near that person. He doesn't mean you should forgive them without forgetting. He means you should drop everything and be reconciled so that the two of you together might come joyfully as one to receive God's gifts. Was it not St. John himself who wrote: If someone says, I love God, yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For he who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? Those are pretty tough words to swallow, aren't they? Have any of us lived up to them? I dare say, No!

The true measure of a man or woman, you see, is not how long they think they are right, but rather how quickly they are willing to be reconciled. So repent. Throw down your gaudy garb of self-made righteousness and put on the righteousness of Jesus Christ. His righteousness alone is what sets you free from the prison of eternal death. His righteousness alone is what bestows forgiveness, salvation, and everlasting life. Truth be known, our heavenly Father as God has every right to have a long memory. He has every right to remember every single one of your transgressions. But know this, He gladly gave up that right when He sent His Son to die on the cross for the sin of the world, for your sin and mine. Hence, when God sees His only begotten Son dying in our place, He gets a case of eternal amnesia. He says: I will remember their sin no more. That's the righteousness of God, dear Christian! Though your sins are like scarlet, God declares that they shall be white as snow. That's true, godly righteousness! And that's why Jesus said: Blessed are the poor in spirit, that is, blessed are those who have no righteousness of their own, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

God's righteousness is yours, dear Christian, only through faith in Jesus Christ. That's why God puts His righteousness in your ears through preaching. That's why God puts His righteousness into your life through water and the Word in holy baptism. That's why St. Paul reminds us: Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall

When you refuse to forgive someone and desire to receive Holy Communion that is repulsive to our Lord Christ.

be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.

And we are no longer slaves of sin. But still, the Law has a place in our lives. We know that God's Law does not, nor cannot, save us. In fact, God's Law can only kill us. It shows us our sin. It shows us how utterly miserably our brand of righteousness has failed. The Law also shows us how we are to live as Christian people, and that when we fall short of God's glory, we ought not turn back to the Ten Commandments and try to do better, but rather to Jesus Christ, the God-Man, the One who has fulfilled the Law of God in our place with His innocent birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection. What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me? asks the Psalmist. I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving and will call on the name of the Lord. I will take the cup of salvation and will call on the name of the Lord. You and I, we carry that sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise to this altar, and in return we receive God's gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, Christ's true body and blood, and that under the ordinary, simple elements of bread and wine. This altar is where Jesus gives us the cup of salvation and the living bread that comes down from heaven. When we eat Christ's true body and drink His true blood, our heavenly Father remembers our sins no more. He lives up to what He has said, and treats us so graciously we finally have to admit that, unlike us, God does indeed forgive and forget.

According to God's will from eternity, the Son of God went uncomplaining forth with our adversary, the devil, so that he might do with Christ as he pleased, and as he wishes he could do to us. After living the perfect life we are unable to live, and after taking our sin and death into His own body, He was then delivered over to the judge, who judged Him worthy to die for the sins of the people. He was handed over to be tortured, beaten, and crucified until every penny you and I owe to God was paid in full, and we were set free to be what God wants us to be, His own dear children and heirs of His kingdom. We know this is so because our Lord and God says that it's so. Because of Jesus' work for us poor sinners, His righteousness and reconciliation is now ours, and you are free. Live now in that freedom for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

The Feast of Pentecost

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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

As the prophet Ezekiel stood gazing at a nameless valley filled with dry bones, he saw his nation lying in ruins, her people exiled. God asked him: Can these dry bones live? And the answer is, Yes! Yes, they can live! They can live when God's Word is preached into them and God's Spirit is breathed into them. They can live and will live because Jesus died and lives. Consider for a moment what bones actually are and represent. Bones are all that's left when there is nothing else left of you. They are the scaffolding for your body, the framework for your flesh. They hold you up, and hold you together. David wrote that when he kept silent about his sins, his bones wasted away. And from skeletal remains, people who are well-trained in such matters can tell whether a person was male or female, how they lived, and how they died.

The prophet Ezekiel was led by the Spirit to this valley filled with dead men's bones, dry, dusty bones beyond revival or resuscitation. God said to the prophet: Prophesy to these bones. Say to them: This is what my Lord God says: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you, and put muscle on you, and cover you with skin. I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am Yahweh, the Lord. As Ezekiel preached, the bones began to rattle. Tendons and flesh appeared, and skin covered them, for God's Word is living, active, life-giving and creating. It always does what it says. These bones were dead and lifeless until the living, active Word of God preached by the prophet had its way with them and then they began to move under its power and come to life.

What this teaches us is that the Word is never alone, but comes with the Holy Spirit, the breath of the living God. That's why God said to Ezekiel: Prophesy to the breath and say to it, "This is what my Lord God says," because the Word and Spirit, which is the breath of God, are always together. And where this Spirited Word is preached and working, even a congregation of dead bones will be able to spring to life, for the Spirit is the Lord and Giver of life who raised Jesus from the dead, the One whom Jesus promised to send to us on this day we now celebrate as Pentecost, the One

whom Jesus promised would build Christ's Church.

Who else but the Lord who made man out of dust and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils could command His prophet to preach to dead, dusty bones, expecting them to live? Who but Yahweh could know that His word would be heard under such circumstances? Who else could say "Listen!" to a deaf man, "Look!" to a blind man, and "Live!" to a pile of dead bones? And yet was that not what Jesus did when His words breathed life into Lazarus, who was four days dead in the tomb, and what happened when Jesus' words breathed new life into the apostles as He said to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. The sins you forgive are forgiven, the sins you retain are retained?" And today when you hear your sins are forgiven in the name of Jesus, is that not what's happening to you? Are you not hearing

That was why He promised to send the Holy Spirit, so that you might be raised from the death of your own unbelief, and have new life breathed into you once again.

the very words, and breathing the very breath and Spirit of God? Is God not calling you to life in the name of His Son, a life that never ends?

That same bone-rattling, sinew-creating, life-breathing, corpse-raising Word that those bones heard Ezekiel preach, is the very same Word preached into your ears week in and week out here in the Liturgy. There are probably some Sundays when you are nothing more than dry, dead bones piled onto padded pews. But if it was good enough for the bones Ezekiel preached to, who are you to ask for anything more?

You might be feeling dead and dried up this morning. You might have been out too late last night. Something may have kept you up or robbed you of sleep. You may have work or some other need on your mind. Maybe you can't wait to get out of here so you can go relax with your family. But the fact is you need something more.

You need God's Word and Spirit. And the Good

News is that Jesus always delights in proclaiming that Word so that sinners can be forgiven, so that those who are dead can be raised to life. That's what our Lord died on a cross and rose from the dead to accomplish. That was why He promised to send the Holy Spirit, so that you might be raised from the death of your own unbelief, and have new life breathed into you once again.

Can These Dry Bones Live?

As Holy Scripture abundantly attests, we were once all dead in sin, objects of God's wrath, separated from Him by Adam's and our own rebellion. But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. Without Christ we would be breathless, lifeless, and hopeless, nothing more

than dead men's bones waiting to be buried. But now we have been made alive in Christ Jesus through His Word and Spirit. In holy baptism, in the washing of renewal and regeneration of the Holy Spirit, God breathed and worded new life into us so that our Old Adam might be buried with Christ and raised up again unto eternal life. In Holy Absolution, the spoken forgiveness of sins, God breathes new life into us by speaking our sin to death, and our death to life, telling us of His forgiveness and how He no longer holds our sins against us. In the Holy Supper, God's Son places new life into us, saying: This is My body, given for you. This is My blood, shed for you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood, says Jesus, has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the Last Day. And friends, Jesus will raise you up on the Last Day, you who have His baptism, forgiveness, body, blood, Word and Spirit. Can these dead, dry bones live? Oh, they most certainly can in Jesus!

Jesus, you see, isn't just the Resurrection and the Life, in some obscure, unsearchable way. He's your Resurrection and Life. This is the same Christ who once said: He who believes in Me will live even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. There isn't a corpse anywhere that won't sit up and take notice when Jesus speaks His Spirited Word, not in the valley of dry bones Ezekiel preached to, not at Lazarus' soon-to-be-empty grave, not here in His Church and certainly not at your graveside on the Last Day.

In this life, your bones may be filled with cancer, fear, pain, sorrow, suffering, doubt and death. And there may be times when you seriously wonder whether or not these dead, dry bones of yours can still live. Well, they most certainly can! In fact, in Jesus they are living now and in Jesus they will live forever! When God opens your grave on the Last Day to bring you up out of it, when He puts His Spirit-breath in you, and causes you to rise and be reunited with your spirit that will be in heaven, then you, and all the people of this world will know for certain that He alone is Yahweh, for He will have done exactly as He has spoken and promised, exactly as the Spirit has caused you to believe in accord with Christ's words.

Ezekiel rightly pointed Israel's exiles to the resurrection. He prophesied that the people of Israel would again once rise as a nation. And some 50 years after the prophet's death that's exactly what happened. Israel had to rise, because God had spoken. And when God says it, it's as good as if it's already happened. Israel had to rise so that the Christ might be conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin, so that He might go to Calvary's cross, the perfect unblemished Sin Offering for the world, so that

God breathes new life into us by speaking our sin to death, and our death to life, telling us of His forgiveness and how He no longer holds our sins against us.

His unbroken bones might be taken down from that cross, laid in a tomb, and raised to life once again, and so that He might send us His Holy Spirit.

St. Paul writes in his Epistle to the Romans: If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who lives in you. That's the promise God made to you on the day He Baptized you. These bones of yours will live because Christ lives because you have your life in Him. That's how St. Paul could write that your present sufferings and difficulties aren't worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. You and I, we are on our way to the resurrection. The bodies God created on the day of our birth, redeemed in the body of His Son on the cross, and claimed as His own in the waters of Holy Baptism, He will also raise on the Last Day without spot, blemish, sin, disease, or more importantly, death.

It is a real body God will raise from your grave, because eternal life with God isn't a disembodied existence of free-floating souls, but a genuine flesh and bone, sinew and skin, bodily life lived eternally in God's presence. This vision of Ezekiel tells us so. And what that means is that what goes on with your body in the here and now matters to God. Your body isn't some kind of disposable container for the immortal soul, like a soda can discarded when empty. Your body is important to God. He created it, cares for it, protects it, educates it so that it will be useful to Him in caring for the rest of His creation, and permits nothing to happen to it outside of His will.

God washed and anointed your body with His Word and Spirit in the water of baptism. He feeds Himself into your mouth through the body and blood of His Son in the Sacrament. He speaks forgiveness into that body through your ears. Your body, beloved, has been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Your body is now God's temple, an instrument for righteousness, a tool in God's hand to work His will. You and I glorify God in our bodies because God has already glorified our bodies in the body of His Son. And He will glorify your body once more in the resurrection of all flesh on the Last Day when Jesus speaks His Word, blows His living breath, and you rise to live forever with Him in His heaven. So, can these dead, dry bones live? Oh, yes, dear people of God, they most certainly can, and they will. Where the Word and Spirit of God is preached, heard, and believed, dead, dry bones will always rise up and live. God has spoken. You can trust Him to do it because He has given you His Word and Spirit, and it will always be so, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Who Is This Triune God?

The Gospel According to St. John 3:1-17

Holy Trinity

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Because today is Feast of the Holy Trinity, it's most appropriate and proper that on this Sunday we raptly direct our attention toward this God in whose name we begin. Today our celebration and worship is focused on one fact in particular, that our God is a God who has revealed Himself as a Trinity, three Persons in one God, one God in three Persons. This subject, of course, is high and lofty, a way of thinking far beyond our ability to fully comprehend. Yet, even though a proper understanding of God's nature is beyond our capability, we still rejoice that this is the same God into whom we were baptized, the same God who we worship and confess each week in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, and this morning in the Athanasian Creed, the One who comes to us in worship, preaching, baptism, and the breaking of bread and all so that through these means He might freely give us life and salvation.

Perhaps because we've been seeing and experiencing the things God has given us in His Church year after year, we've begun to take them for granted. But make no mistake, these simple things: worship, preaching, baptism and the Lord's Supper are very high and lofty indeed. They have to be, because they communicate God to His people, and God is high and lofty. God is so high and lofty that a person can never hope know or believe in Him apart from what He reveals to us in His Word and the gifts of His Church. And what that means for us today in this celebration of the Holy Trinity is the realization that the only way anyone can ever hope to understand anything about God is if God Himself tells them about it in His Word.

Another way of expressing this might be to say that if a person really desires to know who this Triune God is, what He's like, and even more importantly, what He thinks of and desires for us, we cannot allow ourselves to rely on our own private opinions or judgments. God Himself will have to reveal these things to us in His inscripturated word. It's that Word, recorded for posterity by holy men moved by the Holy Spirit, recorded nowhere else on earth or in heaven, which teaches not only that our God is Triune, but that He alone is holy. And, since God alone is holy, what

that means is we must regard Him with honor, reverence, respect, and dignity. It means that this Holy, Triune God is not a God to be trifled with or thought of lightly, and that the word He speaks isn't to be regarded as mere trivia, or re-interpreted to match up with whatever our current sensibilities might happen to be. In other words, we can't content ourselves with understanding God only in ways that please our own ears. We must allow the Scriptures to stand on their own, interpret and explain themselves, and never be subject to any private, human interpretation.

But there's another thing Holy Scripture teaches us about God. It teaches us not only that God and His Word are holy, but more importantly, that each and every one of us have sinned against this high, Holy God and His Word. It shows us that we have all tried to refashion God into our own image,

This Holy, Triune God is not a God to be trifled with or thought of lightly.

that in matters of daily living, we almost always do things the way we want to do them, and not the way God's Word directs us, and that in matters of faith and doctrine we tend to choose those things we want to believe rather than allowing the Word of God to be the only Rule, Source and Norm for what we believe, teach and publicly confess.

So the things we're talking about here aren't simply some minor flaw, or a defect in our personality. What we have here is thorough-going corruption and fallenness. And what that means, very simply, is that in our natural state we are broken beyond repair. No matter how unpleasant this picture might appear, the fact is that even our most pious thoughts and works are unclean and wicked in the eyes of God. To be sure, it was this sobering truth that brought the prophet Isaiah to mouth the words of this very familiar passage: All our righteousness is like a filthy rag before the Lord.

Now Isaiah, I think it's safe to say, had a pretty good grasp of our sinful condition. Just look at what happened to him on that day when he found himself face to face with the Holiness and Majesty of the Divine Trinity in the sixth chapter of the Scripture that bears his name.

Reading from the first verse the scene is laid out before us: **1** In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. **2** Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. **3** And one cried to another and said: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory! **4** And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. **5** So I said: Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. **6** Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. **7** And he touched my mouth with it,

and said: Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.

Notice how Isaiah responds: Woe is me! he says, I am undone. Isaiah, the sinner, standing before the presence of God like hay before a fiery furnace, says the only thing he can say: Woe is me! I am ruined. I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell within the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.

Dear friends, I'd like to suggest to you that if standing in the presence of God doesn't affect you in a similar way, then you either don't believe in the absolute holiness of God, or you don't fully recognize the depth of the sin that lurks within your nature. For the truth is, we must all learn to say of ourselves, Woe is me, for I am a person of unclean lips or else we have no hope of salvation!

So corrupt and sinful is our human flesh and so broken beyond repair that the only answer and hope has to lie in Jesus' words to Nicodemus from this morning's Gospel, You must be born again. You must be recreated and redesigned through Water and Word, that is, through the working of the Holy Spirit and Holy Baptism.

And while this might seem impossible to our fallen senses, we must remember that with our high and Holy Triune God, nothing is impossible! And here's also where we learn something else about God, something we would have never figured out on our own, and that's that there is something far more mysterious about God than His holiness, far more mysterious than even the Trinity itself, and that something is His mercy.

How this high, Holy God can forgive sin is far above all human comprehension. How this God could love sinners, and how He was willing to give His only begotten Son over to death so that we might have redemption and salvation, St. Paul calls, the mystery of God's will. The Blood of God flowing from the hands, side and feet of the Son of God, was shed for only one reason, that you and I might be forgiven and in that forgiveness be the recipients of God's great mercy. That's what Isaiah received in the text I just read. He was telling about how one of the seraphim flew to him (remember, God comes to us, not us to him), how he had in his hand a burning coal that had been taken from the altar with tongs, and how he touched that coal to Isaiah's lips, saying: This has touched your lips. Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.

Dear friends, today as we're gathered here in Christ's Church to celebrate the mystery of our Holy Triune God and His mercy toward sinners, we are not alone! God is here with us in a very special way. God the Father is watching over us, God the Holy Spirit is moving to and fro by means of His Word, and Christ Himself is also here to offer us forgiveness and life through the very same body and blood with which He earned salvation for

How this high, Holy God can forgive sin is far above all human comprehension.

all. Like Isaiah, you and I are also now standing in God's presence. The seraphim are here to touch our lips with another kind of burning coal, a burning coal that is nothing less than Jesus Christ Himself, Human Substance emblazoned with the fire of Divinity. He alone is true God and True Man, and through the tongs of the office of the Holy Ministry, which He established, God will again bring that gift to our lips this morning as we eat it and drink it for the full and free remission of all our sin.

Here at His table, at this Altar and at every Altar where this Meal is given and distributed according to Christ's institution, our Holy Triune God is once again present to feed His people. He speaks to you from His throne in heaven and He says to you through the one He's placed over you as your shepherd: eat and drink. Behold this has touched your lips, your iniquity has been taken away, your sin has been purged and forgotten. May it always be so in the name and for the sake of Jesus, our Lord, our God, and the only Savior of sinners. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

The Stronger Man

St. Mark's Gospel 3:20-35

Second Sunday After Pentecost

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Consider how the strong man, Satan, first crept through the lush terrain of paradise seeking his innocent prey in a search and destroy mission he hoped would greatly grieve his powerful Foe, the Lord. When he saw the man and woman standing there in the garden, he knew he'd have to fight them with great tact and subtlety for a full frontal assault would probably fail, with man turning his attention first to the woman. He spoke to her lovingly and reassuringly, using the words of God Himself, twisting them until they sounded enticing and attractive, almost as if both he and his Foe were actually saying the very same thing in two different ways.

In this battle, the woman fell first, while the man followed closely behind and all at the exercise of the strong man's persuasive forked-tongue as he spoke lie after lie and passed each one off as if it were the Word of God. Perhaps the strong man stayed just a little too long enjoying his victory or perhaps he misjudged his Foe, but suddenly, there in the garden, the strong man found himself face to face with God, His greatest Enemy, looking no less powerful than He had ever looked in spite of the loss He's just incurred. The Lord's face was filled with wrath and mercy. His speech had the strong odor of sin and grace of Law and Gospel.

There in the Garden, on the very same day as the strong man's victory over the foremost of God's creatures, his most hated Enemy outlined His battle plan. Our Lord didn't conceal His strategy, nor did He speak it only to Adam and Eve. Rather He boldly declared His plan to the strong man himself. I will put enmity between you and the woman, he said, and between your seed and her Seed. He shall crush your head, and you shall bruise His heel. God spoke these words directly to the strong man as a promise, in fact, The Promise, as He told the devil exactly how one day he would be the one who was defeated.

The strong man, of course, would like you to think otherwise. He'd have you believe it's he who has the power, not just over you, but over all things, as he tempts you away from the Lord God with His good and gracious will. When you're sick or in despair, it's the satanic strong man who tries to persuade you that God has no real love for you. He tries to convince you that

you no longer have any need for God when life is good, and that he is the one who has given you all you have. In all this he makes sin and temptation so enticing as he goads you to leave the Word behind and decide for yourself what's good and right for you. This has been his strategy from the very beginning, and it's been highly effective. For although he knows he'll never win the war, Satan's desire is to lure and keep from Christ as many of us as he can. The strong man's greatest pleasure is when he's able to entice one of God's own to leave the kingdom and be lost with him forever.

On the surface it seems like insanity that anyone would follow this strong man. But just look around you. See how many have already forsaken the one true God in favor of the strong man. Consider how many are yet to be lost in the future to his damning lies. Then, finally, look at yourself

You must keep your eyes focused on the promise God made to us all in the Garden that day.

and heed God's warning: You are no match for the strong man. That's why you must keep your eyes focused on the promise God made to us all in the Garden that day, that the Seed of the woman would one day come to do battle with the strong man. The strong man would bruise His heel like a cowardly serpent hiding in a boot waiting for his prey, but the Seed of the woman would crush the strong man's head in deadly fulfillment of God's promise. In other words, the Seed of the woman would show Himself to be the Stronger Man.

Dear friends, you and I, we no longer have to look forward in time to the fulfillment of that promise made in Genesis 3:15. No, our rejoicing is in the fact that the Stronger Man has already come. He's the Seed of the woman, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary. He is Jesus, and He is clearly the Stronger Man, even as we witnessed a few moments ago in our Gospel lesson as He openly taught, performed miracles and healed a man with a withered hand. By such words and deeds He's proven Himself to be the Stronger Man. That's why the Scribes and Pharisees, unwilling to repent and place their trust in Him, instead conspired together in hopes of destroying Him.

And so the strong man, the devil, went about his guerilla warfare of attacking the Stronger Man. He incited Jesus' own people to doubt Him, and thus they came to take Him away, believing Him to be out of His mind. And while the Pharisees and enemies of Jesus were meeting quietly to plot the Stronger Man's death, the scribes spread rumors to discredit Him. He has Beelzebub, they said, and by the power of demons He casts out demons. That was when the Stronger Man set the record straight. He was no minion of the ancient serpent. He hadn't come to persuade more to join the ranks of the damned, but to defeat the strong man once and for all. So He asked: How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself,

that house cannot stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but has an end. No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, Jesus reminded them, unless he first binds the strong man. Then he can plunder his house.

The Stronger Man, you see, came to bind the strong man, tie him up, and rob him of his power over death and the grave. In fulfillment of His Word, He came to tie up the satanic strong man and plunder his house and goods. How did He tie him up, and how does He plunder his house? Now it's apparent that lots of people expected an epic battle of good versus evil, a skirmish of glorious heroics and magnificent charges. But that's not the way the Stronger Man operates. Because His power is made perfect in weakness, the Stronger Man fulfilled the ancient promise and defeated the devil by submitting to death on the cross, by suffering for the sins of the world, and by taking upon Himself the wrath of God for the iniquity of us all.

His strength is in His perfect trust that even though God forsakes and judges Him for our sin, He will also raise Him back to life again. So, the strength and power of the Stronger Man is displayed most clearly in His death. He ties up the strong man by suffering and dying, but death cannot hold Him in the grave. By His resurrection He shows that it's the strong man who has really been bound, and that Satan is the one who ultimately has no power at all!

Death, then, is how the Stronger Man ties up the strong man, but how does He plunder his house? Assuredly, I say to you, Jesus says, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter, but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Stronger Man, plunders the strong man's house and sets you free by the forgiveness of your sin. He died to earn that forgiveness on the cross, and now freely offers it to you through His means of grace.

Thus it is that on this day and at every Divine Service, Jesus plunders the strong man's house. This happens whenever you hear Christ's words saying, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It's in the power of His strength that those words, together with a splash of water, sweep away the devil and his hold on you, for the strong man is no match for the Stronger Man.

But our Lord doesn't stop there. Through His called pastors, He regularly proclaims to you His forgiveness in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, as with those words, your sins are loosed from

By His resurrection He shows that it's the strong man who has really been bound, and that Satan is the one who ultimately has no power at all.

you, and the strong man's house is once again plundered. And the Stronger Man has yet one more battle cry: Take and eat, this is My Body. Take and drink, this is My Blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sin. Where Christ is, you see, the devil must flee, for a divided house cannot stand.

That's how the Stronger Man plunders the devil's house and delivers you from your bondage to sin. But He doesn't force His forgiveness on anyone. He simply offers it as a free gift and a statement of His love. Yet the devil twists even this. He convinces people that, while the Lord offers grace, they ought to refuse His means of grace. They ought to refuse to hear His Word and obstinately refrain from listening to His absolution. They ought shun their baptism and take the Lord's Supper for granted. This, the devil whispers, this is true freedom, when in reality, it's slavery of the worst kind. Those who forsake the means of grace, you see, are forsaking the only vehicle through which the Holy Spirit gives them forgiveness. The person who says he has no need of worship, the Word, or the Supper is actually saying that he has no need for the work of the Holy Spirit! This blasphemes the Holy Spirit, and such a one will not be not forgiven, not because God isn't merciful, but because the sinner says no to the mercy God offers.

So take heed, dear Christian. Though the devil has already lost the war, he still longs for you to join his defeated camp and suffer along with him his defeat and condemnation. He whispers in your ear that he's the one who is right, and that you're no match for him, because, after all, he's the strong man. And he's right! You are no match for him! Compared to you, he's much too strong for you to defeat. But that's not anywhere near the entire truth. For the fact is, that while the devil may be the strong man, our Lord Jesus Christ is the Stronger Man. By Christ's death, Satan has been bound and rendered powerless. By His Word and Sacraments, Christ has plundered, and will continue to plunder the devil's house, declaring to you in the process: You're no longer dead in sin. I died for you. I've forgiven you. My kingdom is yours, and you are Mine. God grant it to you for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Growing God's Kingdom

Mark 4:26

Third Sunday After Pentecost

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Common sense and human reason tell us that working hard is the key to achieving glorious things, a way of thinking that causes many to believe that if something as glorious as the Kingdom of God is going to grow and flourish, then someone is going to have to put in a lot of hard work to make it happen, and how well this Kingdom does will depend on how strenuous our efforts are, how great our compassion for lost souls is, and how ardently we offer up our prayers to God that this would happen. But such is not the case at all, for God alone is the One who must grow His Kingdom. He alone bears responsibility for establishing it and making it flourish, so much so, that the success and growth of this Kingdom isn't dependent upon our efforts at all, nor even upon our prayers!

Consider Luther's explanation of the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer taken from his Small Catechism: To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself, even without our prayers, but we pray in this petition that it may come among us also.

So, our prayers are involved, but not in the way we imagine. It's not that God's Kingdom comes into existence by our prayers and petitions, or that anyone is brought into that Kingdom, but that in our prayers for others, we ask God graciously to bring those we pray for to a knowledge of our Savior that they might receive life in His name. We bring our prayers before God in recognition of what He alone is able to do. It is as if we're saying: Lord, I have no power to keep myself in the faith. You alone must bring it to pass. Therefore, I pray that by Your mercy Your Kingdom might come to me. And likewise I pray that Your Word might be sown into the hearts of those who don't know You, that You would make the Seed of Your Word come to life in their hearts to grow and flourish. Also, if it be Your will that that Word comes from my lips, grant me to speak that Word faithfully. For only through Your pure Gospel can the Holy Spirit lead anyone to a knowledge of salvation.

What a great privilege God has given us, indeed, the greatest privilege of all to be able to come into His presence and pray to Him the most mag-

nificent petition that could ever be spoken: Thy Kingdom come. For in making that request, we're asking nothing less than that all God possesses might be our own. We're asking God to bestow upon us His Kingdom and everything it contains, not just His Kingdom of grace in this world, but also His complete Kingdom of glory in that life that is yet to come!

But what is it that makes us so bold to think that we can ask of God something so incredible, especially when you consider that this petition is coming from the mouths of a people who are so undeserving as we? It's only for the sake of Jesus Christ that a person can speak as we do. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews put it this way. He wrote: During the days of Jesus' life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the One who could save Him from death, and He was

We are able to come to the same Father, in the name of Jesus, in the confidence that we too will receive the mercy and grace we need.

heard because of His reverent submission Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need.

In this prayer, Jesus paved the way for us to follow Him in our prayers. His prayer was that His Father's will might be done, that the Son might suffer death and hell on the cross for sinners. Now, because He was perfect in His submission to the Father's will, we are able to come to the same Father, in the name of Jesus, in the confidence that we too will receive the mercy and grace we need, both for ourselves and for one another.

What a terrible sin it would be, then, were we to ignore this wonderful privilege we have of going to the Father in prayer to ask Him for the greatest of our needs. It would be like a beggar who had been summoned before the king and invited to ask for his heart's desire, only to have the beggar request just enough bread to sustain him through the day. Such a request would be a mockery not only because of the king's majesty, but also because of his mercy. That's how it is in your life when you stubbornly refuse to avail yourself of that personal audience with God through prayer. By such behavior you mock God, belittle His generosity, and demean the price this privilege cost Him, namely the lifeblood of His only begotten Son. Therefore, realizing that God's gracious desire for us all is that we come before Him in prayer with all our needs, large and small, we must make every effort not only to bring Him our needs and the desires of our hearts, but also to recognize the manner and the way in which He does, in fact, answer our prayers. For indeed, it's an easy thing to overlook the miracles that daily take place right under our very noses, as was well-illustrated in today's Gospel.

Consider the farmer who goes out to sow seed in his fields. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he

doesn't know how. He doesn't know how, and yet he's the farmer! He's supposed to know what's going on, but he doesn't, because God is the One who is in charge of the growing. The farmer only throws out the seed and places the outcome in God's hands. In the same way, how can you explain the miracle wherein God takes the lifeless heart of one who is spiritually dead, and an enemy to boot, and turns it into a heart that beats for and serves only Him?

Consider your own faith. Do you believe because you are more naturally inclined to God than those around you? That's not what God's Word teaches. Listen again to what Ezekiel wrote about this: I Myself, God says, I Myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it. I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it. It will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it. They will find shelter in the shade of its branches. All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.

Even when we're at our so-called best, we're all still weak and inconsistent.

Over and over again, God attributes this gracious work only to Himself: I will do it, He says, His words indicating that we contribute nothing at all, and for good reason! For, if your salvation was, in any amount, dependent upon your cooperation, effort or work, then you could never be certain about it, for even when we're at our so-called best, we're all still weak and inconsistent.

God must do it all, otherwise, it would never get done! And how does He do it? Once again, the simple wording of the Catechism offers the answer: the heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we may believe His holy Word and live a godly life both here in time and there in eternity. That's how God's Kingdom comes. The Holy Spirit's gift of faith, combined with the saving Gospel of God's Word, unites to create a godly life both now and forever in the children of God. And, once again, the only reason it can properly be called a godly life isn't because we're such godly people, or because by our good works we've shown ourselves worthy of God's grace, but rather, because, through the vehicle of faith, God has given us Jesus' life in place of our own.

This is vital for us to understand because, once again, appearances can be so deceiving, like the mustard seed, the smallest known seed in the Palestinian area, which, nevertheless, produces a plant of enormous proportions. Who would have ever have expected something so small to produce a yield so great as the full grown mustard plant, and yet the very same thing is true of our prayers concerning the salvation of others. Just because it appears, at least from a worldly perspective, that nothing has changed as far

as a person's disposition or conduct, that's no reason to believe the Gospel isn't working. Again, consider your own life. Are you a significantly better person today than yesterday? Are you any less susceptible to sin now than you were last night? Are you any less reliant upon the mercy of God at this point in your life than when you were first brought to faith?

You see, the indication that God may have brought another sinner into His Kingdom can't be seen in their good conduct, but only in faith, the kind of faith that caused the publican in the temple to stand far off by himself in the shadows, fearful of raising his eyes or his voice to heaven, but almost imperceptibly uttering his confession: God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Dearly beloved, in the lives of those who are nearest and dearest to you, you may see only the very faintest hint of faith, a mere mustard seed of belief. But God's Word is more powerful than human discernment. The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword as it divides soul, spirit, joints and marrow and judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. As Jesus once spoke these words to the Apostle Peter, so also He now speaks them to you, saying: I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.

It's true that Christ spoke these words knowing Peter would deny Him. But, listen carefully to the rest of His words: when you've turned back, He told him, then strengthen your brothers. Peter was able to turn back and repent of his sin because he knew God had done it all. God had called him into His Kingdom, and Peter knew God would keep him in His Kingdom; so that by God's grace, he might one day inherit and be part of God's eternal Kingdom of Glory. So it is also with you, my dear brothers and sisters. This is the very same means God uses today to call you into His Kingdom and keep you there unto life everlasting. It's God who has made us for this very purpose, and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what's yet to come. If God does it all, the outcome is certain. That's why we can be bold and pray, Thy Kingdom come! Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

That Healing Touch

Mark 5:21-43

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. It was two women, one younger, one older, who were healed by the touch of Jesus in today's Gospel, but the circumstances surrounding those two healings and the way they happened is really quite strange. First of all, the younger woman, the daughter of Jairus, was said to have already been dead when Jesus touched her. And Jesus hadn't even seen the older woman when she touched Him. These two women were both severely afflicted. The twelve year old daughter of Jairus was very near to death when her father approached Jesus, and the older woman had been losing blood for those very same twelve years. Both women had reached a crisis point: the girl was at death's door, and the woman had spent all she had on medical care with nothing to show for it.

But their situations were actually much worse than they at first might appear, for you see, in the society where these two women lived, they were suffering from a kind of social death as well. According to the religious law of the day, both women had become untouchable to the rest of society through no fault of their own. Though it may seem strange to us, bleeding and dying people were considered unclean, and anyone who touched them would also become unclean. So you can imagine the loneliness they must have been feeling as well as the fear. In fact, *fear* is the word used to describe the state Jairus was in as he approached Jesus imploring Him to have mercy on his dying daughter. He fell at our Lord's feet, begging. She was his only daughter. She was only twelve. Now she was dying, and as you can imagine, they were both full of fear. Mark also reports fear as the motivation for the older woman as she tried to touch Jesus without anyone seeing her, even Jesus.

Still the situation was even more dire, for Jairus, the father of the dying girl, was an officer of the synagogue, trained in the religion of Old Testament. He had been taught that when God takes a child away at such a young age, that was hardly a sign of His good pleasure. In fact, it was precisely the opposite. He knew well the words from Sinai about God, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children. So he wondered: Is my daughter sick and dying because of my sin? Is there something wrong

with my relationship with God? And I have no doubt people close to both these situations would have probably wondered the same. Was God visiting them and touching their lives with a deadly touch? Was there anything, anyone, that could bring a healing touch before all was lost?

Now most of the time you and I don't think like this, but maybe we should. You know God's commandments and the punishment He's promised for those who disobey. The punishment is death. Sin has brought death to every single one of us, for as the Scriptures clearly teach, the soul that sins shall surely die. So, while asking your questions regarding the two girls in this text, perhaps you might want to ask concerning yourself and the sin that lives within you, the sin that is killing you day by day. Is there anything, anyone that can bring a healing touch to your life before all is

Faith is when you reach out your hand to receive the touch that comes from Jesus.

lost? Your heart might say No, but the answer is really Yes, in Jesus, for He alone is the One to whom those who are fearful must go for help and aid. But how does Jesus stop God's deadly touch, replacing it with healing?

The full story of His doing this takes us to the end of Luke, where our Lord goes to the cross. There He switches places with us. He receives God's deadly touch, a touch that was meant for us who are sinners and rebels who disdain God's will, who want only what pleases us, and in exchange Christ offers us His healing touch. On

Easter Sunday God comes to Jesus' tomb and touches Him back to life. And by that action God signals His approval of Jesus as our Healer, verifying that when touched by Jesus we will be healed by God as well. And when you are healed by God, His healing spreads through every part of you.

Faith is how this healing comes to you. Faith is when you reach out your hand to receive the touch that comes from Jesus. And Jesus' touch does the healing. Faith does nothing more than trust that Jesus will do precisely what He has promised, that He will touch and heal. And that's what Jesus did with Jairus. He turned his fear into faith. Faith that trusts in Jesus' touch puts you in touch with the Healer. It's like plugging an electric cord into a power outlet. The power is all there inside the socket. Faith simply plugs into it and touches the power line inside, so that life begins to flow where once there was only darkness and lifelessness.

That's why you're here this morning. You know your faith needs the touch of the Savior who alone can bring healing into your life, that life which has sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, that life which is always trying to push faith aside, and will accomplish it, if not brought into contact with the healing touch of Jesus. So you come, you come to the Divine Service with all your rebellion, your worship of other gods, your hatred of your neighbor, and the death that's always trying to overcome you. You come to the only Person who can help — Jesus. And help is what

He gives. Here in His house He touches you with His Word. He touches you with His Spirit in the water of Holy Baptism. He touches you with His very own body and blood taken into your mouth and body through the bread and wine of the Supper, the Medicine of Immortality. Your faith is what has brought you here. And to be sure, that's why God has given you your faith, that you might trust Christ alone to bring the healing you need.

Here in this text Jesus commended the woman who touched Him for her faith, and to that commendation he added: Go in peace. That was all the Good News she, Jairus, his daughter and his household needed to go back into their daily lives as new persons. These two women were not just simply released from their frightful afflictions and the attendant social discrimination, but they were also healed in their hearts, where there was now faith instead of fear, confidence in Jesus, rather than myriad worries about their afflictions.

And so today you are blessed to hear the words of Jesus that you too may go in peace after receiving the true body and blood of our Savior. And that is all the Good News you need. For at the root of it all is Jesus, who has healed our sickness and afflictions. No more do you have to worry about bad visits from anywhere or anyone, even from God. For Christ is God's final Visitor. And in Christ God has visited His people with peace. It's God's Final Touch, the only one you need. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

That's why God has given you your faith, that you might trust Christ alone to bring the healing you need.

The Powerless Savior

St. Mark's Gospel 6:1-6

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. In Mark's Gospel account of Christ's life, it doesn't take too very long before he clearly identifies the Man, Christ Jesus, as that One who alone is able to work divine miracles. Already, for instance, in chapter one, only a few short verses following our Lord's baptism, Mark reports how Jesus cast a demon out of a man in the synagogue at Capernaum, how He healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law of a raging fever, how he cured a man who had been stricken by leprosy, and how, from sunrise to sunset, people were bringing to Him everyone who was sick, demon-possessed, or had any kind of illness or infirmity, be it physical or spiritual, and how Jesus then healed and restored them time after time without fail.

And all this happens long before you get out of chapter one! Chapters two through five include the healing of the paralytic whose friends lowered him through a roof, the calming of the storm, the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac, the resurrection of Jairus' daughter, and the healing of the woman who had had a bleeding disorder for twelve years. All of this is why the words of today's Gospel are so shocking, namely, that when Jesus returned to His own home town He could not even perform one miracle! The Giver of Life Himself could no longer raise the dead. The Executioner of the Devil could no longer cast out demons. The very Lord of Creation could no longer exert power over that which He created.

What are we to conclude? I mean, judging by the miracles Mark previously reported, he obviously wants us to know that Jesus is more than just a mere man, that He is, in fact, truly divine, both God and man miraculously joined together in one flesh and one being in the person of Him who was born of a Virgin. After all, God alone is the only One who can raise the dead, destroy demons, command the wind and waves, and forgive sin. Hence only Jesus is the God-who-walks-among-us!

So, how is it that this disturbing news about our Jesus is being reported here by the very one who previously had spoken so glowingly about the miracles Jesus was performing everywhere He went? I'd like to suggest Mark recorded this incident so that you and I might understand that there

are some things God cannot do. Listen again to verses 5 and 6 of this reading: Jesus could not do any miracles there, except lay His hands on a few sick people and heal them. And He was amazed at their lack of faith. Did you catch that? He was amazed at their lack of faith! Now Psalm 135 states clearly that the Lord does whatever pleases Him. And Jeremiah once marveled, saying: O Lord God! You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. And the angel Gabriel once said to Mary that nothing is impossible for God, as Jesus Himself also attests.

But listen to what Isaiah, the prophet writes: Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God. Your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear. What these words tell us about this morning's Gospel isn't that Jesus for a time lost His divinity, or that His power became powerless when He entered into His hometown, not at all! The fact is His hometown people simply refused to believe. It's not that Jesus was unable to perform any miracles there because of some shortcoming in His divinity or power, but rather that He was prevented from doing any miracles there by these hard-hearted people who would not take Him seriously.

Here in this Gospel, Jesus seems to be very much like the surgeon who is ready and able to perform life-saving heart by-pass surgery, but finds he can't do it because the patient refuses to believe the arteries going to his heart have hardened and are growing more and more clogged with every passing day. In this Gospel, Jesus is like the soldier who breaks into a prisoner-of-war camp seeking to free the prisoners, only to find that they'd grown to like the camp. The soldier was unable to free them because they refused to be freed. Hence Jesus could not perform any miracles in His hometown because the people were steadfastly opposed to the idea that He was anything more than Joseph and Mary's son. The people looked on Jesus as a simple hometown boy, the ordinary son of Joseph, the carpenter, and Mary, his wife. Because they'd known Jesus and His family since His youth, Mark records that they took offense at Him.

So it seems that the all-powerful God gets thwarted once again. Yet one more time the good and gracious will of our Creator and Redeemer gets set aside for human thoughts and fallen desires. Jesus' hometown people render Him useless, so to speak. They empty the cross of its power, to borrow a phrase from St. Paul. The people of Jesus' hometown refused the *for you* of the Christian faith. They refused to believe Jesus had anything they needed or wanted. And in so refusing, they rendered our Lord and His work useless. Hence St. Mark records in this morning's Gospel that Jesus could not do any miracles there, except lay His hands on a few sick people and heal them.

All of this then raises some rather startling questions. First of all, if Jesus, as the Scriptures clearly teach, is God Almighty, the One who was, is, and is to come, what good is this Almighty God if He isn't God for you? If

Jesus is the Lamb of God whose blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins, what good is His shed blood for you if that blood doesn't wash away your sin? If Jesus died on a cross, as even unbelieving historians are hesitatingly forced to admit, if that death and cross aren't for you, is not the cross and its power to save rendered powerless, useless, and wasted in your case?

St. Mark writes: Jesus could not do any miracles there, except lay His hands on a few sick people and heal them. Isaiah declares: Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God. Your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear. And the author of the book of Hebrews writes: If we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.

If after having received the knowledge of the truth, you willfully and deliberately go on sinning with no desire to stop, then for you there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin.

Listen carefully to these words, dear saints of God! If after having received the knowledge of the truth and even though you know better, you willfully and deliberately go on sinning with no desire to stop, then for you there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin. Living in deliberate, willful sin robs Jesus of His saving power for you!

This verse describes our Lord Jesus as if He were a guardrail at the top of a high cliff. So long as you stay behind the guardrail, it's sufficiently strong and more than able to save you from the certain death that will follow if you wander off the cliff to fall onto the rocks below. But, if you bypass the guardrail, there's nothing that can save you.

In the same way, our Lord Jesus Christ, by His death and resurrection, has already done all things necessary to save you from sin, death and the devil. However, if you pass Him by, if you willfully live your life in sin after having already

received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for you. When you willfully and premeditatively live the life you know you ought not live, immersing yourself in a lifestyle that is clearly and undeniably contrary to God's will, then you make Jesus' death upon the cross useless and powerless for you. What is said of Jesus' hometown and the people who lived there in today's Gospel will then be said of you, namely, that Jesus could not do any miracles there.

In a manner of speaking, then, you and I, as the people of God, would do well never to move into Jesus' hometown. For the people of Jesus' hometown are those who entirely miss the *for you* of the Christian faith, and to be sure, the whole of the Christian faith boils down to these two little words, for without these two little words, *for you*, you no longer have Christ! Without the words for you, you have no baptism, no Holy Commu-

nion, no forgiveness of sins, no healing, no hope, no peace, and no resurrection to eternal life. To paraphrase today's Gospel: without the words *for you*, Jesus can do nothing.

But on the other hand, you need to know that with the words *for you*, you have a full share in every gift Jesus gives! Every second of His existence, from the point of His conception in Mary's womb, to this very moment, Jesus' life is a life lived for you! Every step He takes, every word He utters, every time He lays His hands upon the sick or the demon-possessed, He does so for you, even as every insult, rejection, and lash of the whip is born for you.

When you have *for you*, then you have baptism, for the baptismal liturgy says, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. When you have the *for you* of the Christian faith, then you have Holy Communion, for this is Jesus' body which is given for you, and Jesus' blood, shed for you for the remission of sins. And as the Catechism reminds us, the words *for you* require all hearts to believe. When you have *for you*, the cross is by no means emptied of its power, but it is *for you* the power of God unto salvation, the very source of life and resurrection. With the words *for you* come all the blessings of Jesus' life and death: His forgiveness, His healing, His hope, His peace, and His resurrection to eternal life. With the words *for you*, you have the sacrifice for your sins, the sacrifice that Jesus carried out in His own bloodshed and death.

Jesus says that a prophet is without honor in his hometown. But He's given His Holy Spirit to you, His Church, so that here He'll always be held in honor. Here His words and deeds for you will be trusted, believed, and kept in heart and mind. Among you who possess the words *for you*, Jesus is not limited, as He was at home. Among all those who have the words *for you*, Jesus is able, willing and desiring to do mighty things, and He has done them all out of His great love for you. For indeed the promise is for you, and for your children, and for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Even when we're at our so-called best, we're all still weak and inconsistent.

Martyrs for Christ

Mark 6:14-29

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Jesus called John the Baptist the greatest of all, the one who towered above all men who are born of women. Next to the One who Himself was greatest of all, Jesus, John was held up as the epitome and standard of what God intends men to be. And this acclamation of Jesus takes on even more meaning when you read in this morning's Gospel, how John met his demise at the hands of King Herod and his blood-thirsty family. Surely this was a most ignoble end for one who, throughout his life, had so faithfully pointed to Jesus as the coming One who, by His own merit and bloody sweat, would save this fallen world from sin, death and the devil.

Hence, the Church rightly calls John a martyr, but why? Why classify John as a martyr? After all, he wasn't arrested because of his faith, but because a vain woman didn't appreciate what John had to say about marriage, most specifically, her own marriage. So John was beheaded not because of his faith, but because of trickery, and also because of the foolishness and arrogance of King Herod. He was beheaded because a young girl danced enticingly and tricked this foolish ruler into making a vain promise. Yet, it isn't the punishment that makes the martyr, but the cause. John was originally arrested because he condemned an unholy living arrangement between Herod and his brother's wife, Herodias. John was arrested for upholding the Biblical teaching of manhood and womanhood, as well as what God intends marriage to be. Therefore, nobody should ever think that they couldn't be a martyr. To be sure, you don't even have to shed your blood to be a martyr, and there has never been a time or place when the world hasn't declared open season for martyrs, including you.

In his letter to the young pastor, Timothy, St. Paul wrote the following: All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. In other words Paul was telling Timothy, and us, that Satan will never leave the faithful Christian alone. And St. Peter in His first letter to the churches wrote: Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. What this means for you is that you cannot afford to sleep or become weary in the exercise of your faith. You are to be steadfast, immovable, and ever vigilant,

because persecution for one's faith can come in many forms, as Satan sets lures and traps for you at every turn, as he comes to you and tempts you to gossip, lust, be envious of what others have, to hate, cause dissension, and to hunger for money and possessions, and all of this supposedly, at least in your own mind, in the name of some noble cause.

The danger is that the more often you commit a sin, the worse it goes for you. If you commit a sin once, it might sting your conscience. The second time you commit the very same sin, the less it will sting you conscience. And it will continue like that until you are numb and no longer recognize the sin as sin. That's when the devil has you right where he wants you. All those who desire to live loyally in Christ, the devil will batter by this sort of persecution. It's this kind of day to day persecution from Satan that weighs you down as a Christian and threatens to overtake those who are faithful. If you lie, ruin someone's reputation, give false evidence, or go forth seeking selfish gain, then you are a killer just like Herod, and Satan will be quick to remind you of that fact, even as he tries to advance the lie that for you Jesus is of no value.

Listen then to the Lord, who desires to reassure you as you seek to loyally follow Christ: Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear Him who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him! John the Baptist lived life humbly. He didn't seek much. Clothed in camel's hair with a steady diet of locusts and wild honey, John distanced himself from the things of this world as best he could. He pointed always to His Lord and Savior, for John knew that when it was all said and done, he was only going to get into the kingdom of heaven by the grace of God through the cross of Jesus Christ. John therefore held steadfastly to the Word of God, for He knew that in that Holy Word alone is life, true life.

John knew that he had to conform his life to Christ. He knew also that his life was to be patterned by Christ's life. Since Jesus came into this world to die on the cross, why would any Christian think it would be any different for them, as a faithful follower of Jesus? John knew that his confession of the Christian faith in this life would cause a battle. Indeed, whenever the Word made flesh is rightly confessed, Satan is going to respond with a roar, and a battle will ensue. This is precisely what John the Baptist witnessed in his own life.

Wherever the Word is preached in its truth and purity, trouble cannot be far away. Danger is all around as we see from this Gospel, for St. Mark even recounts for us that while John was in prison, Herod tried to protect

Satan tempts you to gossip, lust, be envious of what others have, to hate, cause dissension, and to hunger for money and possessions.

him from Herodias. Even more remarkable is that Herod, we are told, gladly listened to the teaching of John. The hint of danger, however, lies in the fact that John's teaching greatly perplexed Herod, which is to say Herod didn't understand what he was taught. The seed that was sown into the ear of Herod was stolen away by Satan. This is why, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is why you are to be faithful in what the Lord has given you. But being faithful, ironically, doesn't mean that you are to do something. Rather, it means you are to faithfully receive what the Lord gives to His Church. To put on the whole armor of God means you faithfully listen to God's Holy Word, pray it, and meditate upon it. The Church wins her victory not by her own merit, but by relying on the cross of Jesus Christ.

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It is there in that cross that your sins were paid for, and you are declared holy. Christ's blood was poured from the cross, and into the cup of blessing, which you drink in faith seeking forgiveness for your sin and Christ's help and aid. It is the faithfulness of Christ that sets you free. It is this same faithfulness on the part of Jesus that enabled John the Baptist to stand firm in the faith all the way to his martyrdom. A long line of martyrs is scattered throughout the history of the Church, strewn throughout many lands and nations. The martyrs of the Christian Church have confessed the faith, and upheld Christ and the Scriptures, along with

all the doctrines drawn from them. John the Baptist died as he lived, paving the way for others, dying in order to show us the pattern set by Christ.

Dear Christian, in this same way your sins are also forgiven. The faithfulness of Jesus will carry you, even as Holy Scripture promises. Therefore you must cast all your cares and burdens upon our Lord Jesus. Take those weaknesses that lead you into temptation, and exchange them for Christ's help and strength, for it is the Spirit who helps us in our weakness. It is Jesus who loves. It is Jesus who saves. It is Jesus who makes holy. Hence you are now able to stand as Christ's baptized children, washed in the blood of the greatest martyr of all, Jesus Christ. It is His blood that washes away your sin. It is His blood that is poured into the waters of holy baptism and into the cup of the Lord's Supper. It is the blood of Christ Jesus that was shed for the sin of the world that opens up for you the gates of heaven, destroys the fiery darts of our old evil foe, Satan, and will carry you into the land of promise. And all this will happen in the name and for the sake of Jesus! Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Shepherds, Sheep and the Word

Mark 6:30-34

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Sheep without a shepherd. The very notion of this deeply troubled the heart of our Lord Jesus. In fact His heart went out to such sheep as He looked out over a great multitude of them in this morning's Gospel and considered their dilemma. He knows, better than anyone, the dangers that beset sheep who don't have a faithful shepherd. Some will be devoured by wolves. Others will be consumed by neglect and starvation. And still others will be lost to their own wandering ways. If a man has a hundred sheep, says Jesus, and loses one, will he not leave the ninety-nine to go after the one, so that it will no longer be lost? Of course he will. But, what happens to that one lost sheep when the flock has no shepherd? Or what happens to the flock when wolves dressed in sheep's clothing seek to devour them by means of heresy and false doctrine?

The warnings and promises of God's Word are different for shepherds than for sheep because of their appointed place in the kingdom. Shepherds and sheep share many of the same sins, even as they share in the same corrupt nature of Adam. But there are certain temptations and sins that beset one more than the other because of the place they fill in the Churchly order of things. Shepherds, for instance, sin when they fail to teach their flock what is necessary to guard and protect them from wolves who would ravage and scatter them. They sin also when they fail to teach how important it is that sheep not wander away from the flock, away from the truth. Sheep, on the other hand, sin when they refuse to listen to the sound teaching of their faithful shepherd. And they sin, as well, when they fail to judge rightly whether what their shepherd teaches is actually in accord with what the Word of God teaches.

Jesus, of course, came into the world as the Good Shepherd, the One who would lay down His life for the sheep. Unlike the hireling, Jesus came with a vested interest in this flock which, from eternity, has been His very own possession. As their Shepherd, Jesus leads His sheep to lie down in green pastures and guides them beside still waters. Though they walk through the valley of the shadow of death, they fear no evil, for they know

that He will guard, protect and comfort them. He calls His sheep by name, and they listen to Him. They listen to Him because they know the sound of His voice. The Gospel of salvation, the free gift of God's grace in Christ Jesus, is a sweet sound unlike any other in all the world. No other god, no other leader, no other shepherd can or will give them what the Good Shepherd gives to those who labor and are heavy laden, who come to Him for rest and to learn from Him.

And because this is so, Jesus teaches His sheep many things concerning God's Word, because teaching God's Word is part of the office that faithful shepherds do for their sheep. When St. Paul wrote to Timothy about the qualifications for a man who desires to be an overseer, that is, a pastor and a shepherd, he said he must be able to teach. In like fashion, when Paul sent Timothy out as a pastor, he charged him, saying: Preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. A shepherd of God's people must not strive to lead with cleverly devised tactics or programs, but with sound teaching based solely on the Word of God, teaching that rightly divides Law and Gospel. This is essential, not because knowledge saves you from the consequence of your sin, but because knowledge forms the foundation upon which faith is built. That's why these things are written, that you may know that Jesus is the Christ, and believing in Him, have life in His name, because God would have all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

So Jesus, the one and only truly Good Shepherd, when He saw this leaderless, wandering flock, took on the task of teaching them. And as He taught, they found in Him a Shepherd who would lead them from this vale of tears to the life of that world to come. They found in Him a Shepherd who would give His life to protect them, who would die that they might live, a Shepherd whose voice they could trust. Consider the end of John's Gospel, where Jesus restores Peter to the faith. I've always appreciated this text because I can relate, as I'm sure many of you also can, with Peter's wandering ways. Remember, on the night of Jesus' trial, Peter had denied three times that he even knew Him! So, after our Lord Christ rose from the dead, He met with Peter and asked him, saying: Do you love Me more than these? Three times Jesus asked, and three times Peter responded: Lord, you know I love You. And each time Peter responded, Jesus said to him: Tend My sheep, Feed My sheep, Follow Me. And it was then that Peter took up the mantle of a shepherd, following Jesus even to a cross where he met his own end and was crucified upside down. Peter learned that to be a shepherd one must also learn how to tend, feed, and teach God's sheep, feeding them only the good food of God's unchanging Word.

The Gospel of salvation, the free gift of God's grace in Christ Jesus, is a sweet sound unlike any other in all the world.

But I fear I've said too much about shepherds and not enough about sheep. However, in a sense, any examination of that office which shepherds and pastors hold should also be important to the sheep entrusted to their care. It is vitally necessary that the sheep, being intimately familiar themselves with the teaching of God's Word, must therefore judge the teaching of their shepherds according to that Word. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, working by the power of the Holy Spirit in Word, water, bread and wine, has transferred each of you from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. In baptism He has made you His own. He has given you His Word to sustain you, and sent under-shepherds to proclaim the Gospel, which is the Good News of the forgiveness of sins. And He has called you to judge the voice of your shepherd, not by some arbitrary standard of your own choosing, or even what you think about him, but solely according to the pure Word of God.

Many of us have grieved for the Church, because in many ways we have wandered from God's Word, or at the very least failed to stand up when we should have in order to say: Thus sayeth the Lord. To some degree the fault for this lies with lazy preachers who would rather read about the newest techniques in growing the Church than about theology and how to properly apply it to the lives of God's people. But make no mistake, the reason they've been able to do this is because the sheep under their care have failed in their task of judging their shepherds. Far too many sheep have contented themselves with milk when they should have moved on to meat and potatoes, when they should have been wrestling with God's Word and its teachings.

In this morning's Gospel the multitudes over whom Jesus had compassion, found themselves shepherd-less because they had followed those who led them astray. They had followed those who had abandoned sound teaching, followed those who had forsaken the Gospel, who themselves no longer listened the voice of the Good Shepherd. And when Jesus saw them, He knew there was only one way to bring them back. So, He began to teach them many things. As we move forward from this point, your prayer needs to be that when our Lord speaks, He would grant you the willingness to listen, and a burning desire to discern truth from error, that He would give you ears attuned to the voice of the Good Shepherd, ears ready and willing to hear His voice. His voice is really unmistakable, and we would all do well to hear it: Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me. And God will grant it to you for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Sheep, being intimately familiar with the teaching of God's Word, must therefore judge the teaching of their shepherds according to that Word.

Sowing the Word

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ears are where God sows the seed of His Word on the soil of men's hearts, where there are four possible outcomes: It finds a hardened heart where it cannot be planted, a shallow heart where its roots cannot grow, a conflicted heart where the competition is fierce, or a fruitful heart where its roots run deep and it yields much fruit. In this way the Word of Christ is preached and heard in many places, yet the Sower does not seem to care much where this Seed lands. Indeed, He scatters it so that it falls where it may on a crowd gathered at a seashore, on the religious, the seeker, the sinner, and the skeptic alike. There is enough of Jesus for everyone, enough of His forgiveness, and the Bread of Life comes down from heaven to feed the world. There is no need for God to be careful about who hears this Word. He simply desires that this Word be preached, confessed, heard, and believed.

But sadly, the Church of our day often seems more concerned with soil science than with the sowing of seeds. We are big on demographic, sociological and psychological studies to tell us the needs and wants of people and where the seed of God's Word will most likely take hold. But while this might be good practice when gardening, it is bad for the Gospel. Contrast the way we do things today with the picture of the Sower in this morning's Parable. Apparently without much of a plan, the Sower sows the seed of His Word with reckless abandon so that wherever it falls the Good News of the Gospel might be heard, that in Christ the wrath of God over sin has been silenced, the fear of God has been taken away, and the punishment we sinners rightly deserve because of our efforts to overthrow God's rule and reign in our life and world has been laid on God's Son and nailed to the tree of the cross.

God established His reign through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so that now there is peace with God and forgiveness in the Son whom He loves, the One sent to be our Savior, the promised Seed born of

Mary, who died, was buried and sprouted back to life again on the Third Day. That, dear friends is God's powerful, fertile, faith-producing Seed, that when planted in broken, contrite hearts, sprouts into fruitful faith. St. Paul calls this the power of God to salvation, which does not return to Him empty, but like the rain and snow, achieves the purpose for which God sent it, even as Christ did not return to His Father empty-handed, but accomplished the salvation of the world for which He was sent.

Yet as the Sower sows this Seed, some falls on hard, foot-worn pavement, places where the soil is so compressed it is almost impenetrable. The Word of Christ makes it through the ear, but it isn't comprehended, received, or inwardly digested. It hits hardened, calloused, impenitent hearts that think they have no need for either this Word or the Jesus of whom it speaks. It is the kind of hearing that says, been there, done that, yawns, rolls over, and goes back to sleep on Sunday morning. The words are heard, but have no impact. They are understood, but ping off stubborn hearts like seeds bouncing off of concrete.

You and I, we need to recognize this hardening of our own hearts to the Word of Christ — this rejection of the Gospel that is at work in all of us. The effect of our stubbornness, our attempts to justify ourselves, and to deny our sinfulness. It is the logical result of a stubborn will straining against God's desire to save us. We hear the Word, but it has little impact.

Soon we are making one excuse after another for not hearing it until finally we despise and reject it. That's why we sometimes get bored in Church, tired of studying the Scriptures, and have a hard time focusing on the readings and the sermon. That is why precious few of us avail ourselves of Confession and Absolution, and why far too few have any deep hunger to regularly partake of the Lord's Supper. These are all signs that hearts are growing harder. Do you think the angels mind singing the same Liturgy night and day before the throne of God? So why do so many in our day feel the need to have options and alternatives, while at the same time letting the Word go in one ear and out the other, while ricocheting off of hardened hearts?

Seed that falls on the hardened path, Jesus tells us, is straight away gobbled up by the birds, for God forces no one to hear the Good News. If you prefer the lies of Satan to the Truth of Christ, then God will send you a lie. If you prefer the false prophets of peace and prosperity to a true preacher of God's Word, then He will send you false prophets as a judgment. Luther once remarked that the Gospel is like a rain shower that is here today and tomorrow appears somewhere else. Consider how in the Middle East today, the cradle of Christianity, the Word of the Gospel is barely heard anywhere, except for a few persecuted little pockets. Consider Germany, the birthplace of the Lutheran Reformation, where precious little of Christ is preached in those great cathedrals any longer and how few there are who come to hear it when it is.

Think of our own land, this so-called Judeo-Christian nation. For all

our Christianity, our media and mega-churches, and in spite of all the revivals and rallies, there is actually less of the pure Good News of Jesus Christ heard among us today than at any other time in our history. There is no shortage of God-talk, Bible talk, morality talk, values talk. But there is precious little real Gospel talk being offered, delivered, and applied, talk of the free, unconditional forgiveness of sins through the death of Jesus Christ. We have plenty of Bibles to read, and countless places of worship to attend, with services scheduled to meet everyone's timetable. And yet countless thousands die every day without a knowledge of Christ as Lord and Savior.

As the Sower continues sowing His seed, some falls on a thin layer of dirt covering rock. This is the shallow soil of emotionalism, superficial

How many of you would be here this morning, if being here were illegal, subject to fine, imprisonment, or persecution?

religion based on needs and feelings rather than facts and faith. It is Christianity Lite, with all the bubbles but only half the substance. The Word is heard with lots of joy, joy, joy down in the heart, but very little in the way of repentance and faith. It is the religion of the easy chair instead of the cross, the wide road rather than the narrow. Everything happens immediately, in shallow soil as the seed sprouts and grows. But without depth of root or soil, tender shoots are vulnerable and cannot survive the heat. Hence the Word is heard and received with great enthusiasm, but the joy, joy, joy turns out to be a temporary zeal that quickly dries up at the arrival of the cross.

How many of you would be here this morning, if being here were illegal, subject to fine, imprisonment, or persecution? Would you continue to hear the Word of Christ and receive His Sacrament if it ensured your martyrdom or death? I trust and pray all of you would be here, because here is where God is sowing His words of eternal life and distributing the gifts of Jesus earned for us all on the cross.

That is why the Scriptures summarize the Christian life as one of patient endurance, for the life of faith is a race run through hardship, difficulty and loss. It is not like a hundred yard dash, but a marathon requiring stamina and endurance.

You, dear Christian, you are that field in which the heavenly Sower sows His Seed. You are the ground He deigns to turn into good soil. And if you know anything about gardening you know that no soil is self-tilling, otherwise gardening would be a breeze and the roto-tiller people would be out of business. No heart is self-softening, or there would be no need for the Law. God is the One who does the tilling and turning. He does it through difficulties, disappointments, disasters and diseases, the trials and tribulations of life. He does it with His Law, that Word which clears away all boasting and bragging, plows under our pride, and breaks up our

hardened hearts. With the tilling blade of the Law, God cuts through to the depths of your deadness as He weeds out every distraction, every idol, and every denial of Christ. He teaches us to trust Him and receive everything as a gift from His hand.

So when it feels as if God is plowing any of us under, this parable ought to remind us of what He is in our life. He is making good soil out of us. In our baptism, in the hearing of His forgiveness for our sin, and in the Holy Supper, He is sowing Christ into our hearts and wants us to expect a harvest from the seed He has sown. Like Paul, we should consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us, for the Word God sows will not return to Him empty. He will raise us up from the death of our sin like seed sprouting in good soil. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Cleaning Out the Garden

Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

In the name of Jesus. Amen. Have you ever wondered why God allows evil to exist in this world redeemed by the death of His Son, why He permits bombings, terrorism and killings, why He lets His Church be persecuted and suffer, why we sinners are left here after having been made newborn saints in Christ, and why our old Adam, sin and death are still firmly in place? Of course you wondered these things. Who hasn't? Well, I like to suggest that the parable from this morning's Gospel provides us with some answers, for Christ here teaches that no matter how much you would like to rid this world and your own life of sin and every evil, removing these things might possibly destroy your faith along with it. And God's grace and mercy are so great that nothing can be allowed to stand in the way of ensuring that every last grain of wheat will be gathered into God's barn on the Last Day so that that which has been sown will not be destroyed.

The story goes like this: A farmer sowed good seed in his field, and while he was sleeping, the enemy slipped in sowing poisonous weeds that looked almost exactly like wheat, so much like wheat that when it came time for the harvest his servants asked Him: Didn't you plant good seed? Where did all these weeds come from? Now their solution was that they be allowed to go out into the field and pull up the weeds before it was too late. But the Master had an entirely different approach. Let everything grow together. He said, until the harvest, then you can throw the weeds into the fire and the wheat into the barn. Jesus then went on to explain this parable. The farmer is the Son of Man, and the enemy is the devil. The wheat are those who hear God's Word and cling to it, while the weeds are the sons of the evil one. The harvest is the end of the age. The reapers are the angels. And Judgment will come only at the end when what was sown by the devil will be thrown into the fiery furnaces of hell, while what was sown by Christ will enter with Him into His kingdom.

This parable has two sides. The first concerns God's future and final judgment and how the seed He sows will bear fruit unto eternal life, while the seed sown by the devil will be destroyed in the fire of God's wrath. When all is said and done, the weeds will have no lasting effect on the

harvest of the wheat, nor do any permanent damage to the Lord's work, because Christ will prevail as Lord of the harvest, Savior of the world, and Redeemer of all, and nothing can deny the Lord His due. The second side of this parable concerns the here and now, where good, evil, Christ, the devil, faith and unbelief are all mixed up together. Jesus sows the Good Seed of His faith-creating Word, while the devil sows doubt, despair, and unbelief. Where Christ is, so also is the devil. Where Christ is closest to us is in His Word and Sacrament. There the devil mounts his greatest assault. Is that Word true? Is that bread and wine really Christ's body and blood? Are you worthy to eat and drink of it? Are you forgiven, or was that forgiveness for someone else? Wherever the Word of God is preached, you can be certain the Evil One will be there also, whispering his sweetly seductive lies. Whenever Christ seeks to do good through you, evil is always present.

And the devil doesn't just sow his seeds here and there. No, the weeds of the devil are thick, scattered, as it were, across the entire field. That's why the workers questioned the Owner, asking if He had planted any good seed at all, wondering if perhaps he had been taken in by some fast-talking bad-seed peddler, or didn't know what he was doing. When you focus only on the weeds, you lose sight of the wheat, and doubt the Sower of the seed. If your attention is fixed on sin and evil, you may even begin to doubt God, or think there something wrong with Him. So, this parable provides a corrective, for here Jesus shows us that it wasn't God, but the enemy who did this. How else could it be that sin, disease, and death came into this cosmic order God calls very good? God and His Word is not to blame, but the enemy.

So what are you to do with the weeds? If you are like the servants in this parable, you'll think you have to do something right away. You know there is a disaster brewing, so you will want to yank the weeds out now to cut God's losses. You will want to fire up your weed-whacker, or at least have it at the ready. But listen to the Farmer. Do nothing! He says. Let the weeds and the wheat to grow together until the harvest. Give them the same treatment, the same water, sunshine, compost and cultivation. There must be no playing of favorites, for God causes His rain to fall on the good and the wicked alike. And whether that seems fair or not. God's plan is that not a single weed be pulled prematurely. Indeed, you are to put all thoughts of weed whacking out of your mind. That will be the angels' responsibility at the harvest under the Lord's direction. For the present, weeds and wheat must continue together in the same field, for the Gospel is not about the eradication of evil, but the cultivation of faith and eternal life. Weeds are no more than a temporary nuisance and a distraction. God's focus is on the wheat, and He doesn't want to lose a single stalk to some over zealous weed-whacking on the part of His disciples.

The zeal of the Farmer for His wheat is God's zeal in Christ to save you. That's why He doesn't weed out all the evil in this world right now, to ensure that you come to fruitful faith in Jesus and be raised from the dead,

clinging to Him alone for your salvation. Evil is so much a part of this world, and sin so deeply entangled in your life, that were God to eliminate sin and evil completely, it might also mean your destruction. You would be cut down by your own weed-whacking, for the line separating the kingdom of God and the devil doesn't simply run through the world, it also runs through each of you, who, at one and the same time, are both sinners and saints. You simply cannot pull up the sinners without uprooting some of the saints, meaning you and me.

What if this morning I were to try and weed out our congregation? I would do it like this: First I would ask everyone who had ever blasphemed God's name to stand up and leave, also all of you who had ever cursed another person in God's name or who had failed to pray, praise, and give thanks. Then I want all of you who ever despised preaching and God's Word to join them. Those who murdered others by thought, word, and deed could follow. Then the sexually immoral, the thieves, the gossips, and anyone who ever coveted their neighbor's house, property, position, or possessions. Who is going to be left? There might be one or two of you, but may I suggest that you might be in denial, saying you have no sin and deceiving no one but yourself?

Evil is so much a part of this world, and sin so deeply entangled in your life, that were God to eliminate sin and evil completely, it might also mean your destruction.

That is Jesus' point! There is to be no sorting out of sinners and saints before the end of the age, for to do so would only damage the harvest. That is why the Lord of the harvest is content to wait until the time is right. He knows the good seed will grow and flourish even among weeds. The Church hasn't been given the task of eliminating sin from the world, but of applying Jesus' death and resurrection to the lives of sinners.

The time before the end is a time for cultivating wheat, not yanking out weeds, a time for forgiving sin in the name of Jesus, not condemning sinners. We are to leave the judgment to Jesus, for the goal of the Church isn't to make bad people good, or even clean up society, but to save sinners through the preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Now that doesn't mean you ought not seek social justice, not work for just laws and good government, or attempt to control your own sinful behavior. Certainly, these are the very things God has called you to do as part of your priestly service to self and neighbor. But you must also not harbor any illusions that in the process you are going end up with a weed-free Christian society. The weeds and wheat are far too entangled in this life, and only Christ can separate them with the kind of razor sharp judgment that He alone will execute on the Last Day. Unfortunately however, like

the servants in this parable, you and I tend to be impatient about such matters. We would much prefer a quick solution. We want our world to be free from the terror of evil, our hearts to be free from lust, wicked desires and deceit, our tongues free from gossip, blasphemy and prejudice, and our hands free from wickedness. We would much rather be free from the disease and death that dog us. We want our promised new creation now and we don't want to wait for it.

Dear friends, when you were baptized into Christ, God made you a new creation, planting the good seed of faith in your heart and life. But where Christ's seed has been planted, you can count on the enemy also being close by to sow his weeds. That's why Jesus calmly says: Let it be for now. There is no way for you to uproot every speck of sin in the world, for He already put all of it to death in His death. He has already exchanged the sin of the world for His righteousness on the cross. He has already forgiven every sin that has ever been committed, and cleansed you from your own wretchedness with His very own blood, and all so that not a single grain of wheat might be lost. God isn't slow about His promises, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance and faith.

In the end, you see, it is the Lord's harvest. No matter what the devil might sow, on the Day of the resurrection of all flesh, the entire field will be uprooted: wheat and weeds, faith and unbelief, good and evil alike. And at this harvest the wheat will be gathered into the barns and the weeds burned in the eternal fires of hell. The One who directs this harvest is the same One who died on a cross for you, who baptized you, absolves you, and gives you to eat and to drink of His very own body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. You, dear children of God, you are the precious, holy harvest of our Savior, so precious, in fact, that He is willing to put up with all those damnable weeds on your account. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

We want our world to be free from the terror of evil, our hearts to be free from lust, wicked desires and deceit, our tongues free from gossip, blasphemy and prejudice, and our hands free from wickedness.

The Precious Pearl

The Gospel of St. Matthew 13:44-52

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 13:44-52 (ESV): The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all these things. They said to him, Yes. And he said to them, Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. By inspiration of the Holy Spirit we have before us three parables this morning concerning the kingdom of heaven: the parable of the hidden treasure, the precious pearl, and the net full of fish. In the first, Jesus teaches how the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found, covered up, and then, in his joy, went and sold everything to buy. The treasure is the death and resurrection of Jesus. The man who buys it is like he who goes looking for land to buy and stumbles upon a huge treasure, and through no work or worthiness on his part, becomes a millionaire several times over.

This was more than just some shrewd business transaction. It was a gift of grace. The man bought the field for the sake of the treasure knowing that its value far exceeded the price he would pay for the land. Perhaps you remember seeing an auction from the estate of some famous person, how outrageous sums are often bid for the privilege of owning what would otherwise be some rather ordinary objects. The value, you see, isn't in the objects themselves. Rather, the real treasure is hidden and for the joy of owning it, there will be lots of folks willing to part with large sums of cash. Likewise, living under the reign of Jesus' death and resurrection is a treasure worth renouncing earthly security, wealth, works, and righteousness, yes, even one's life, because everything else pales in comparison.

Think of Peter, Andrew, James, and John who left all they had just to follow Jesus. Look at Matthew, the tax collector who heard Jesus' call, closed his books, and left it all to be a disciple. Then there was the rich young ruler who came to Jesus thinking he had already done everything necessary to earn eternal life. So Jesus told him: Go, sell what you have, give it to the poor, and then come follow Me. Believing the price too steep, he left in unbelief without ever grasping the value of the treasure hidden under the ordinary appearance of the Carpenter from Galilee. And after hearing all this, like Lot's wife, you may be tempted to look back over your shoulder at all you will have to leave behind, thinking: Is it worth all this just to own the death of Jesus? Those who persist in clinging to this life's treasures, the fake jewels and phony diamonds of unbelief and idolatry, will likely find themselves robbed of their joy.

But this parable of Jesus isn't a call to renounce property and possessions, for God has never even implied that earthly treasure can't be enjoyed as a gift of His creation. Rather this is a call to renounce your entire life. For indeed, sooner or later, everything in this life, including life itself, will be lost to death. That's why you have to understand that death and resurrection is the only way to possess the kingdom, because all of us one day are going to buy the farm, and in a very real sense, have already bought it, in baptism, having died in the death of Jesus so that your true life is now a hidden treasure, buried with God in Christ. The hidden treasure then is Jesus, the One who gave His all so that you might be His own. Before you were even conceived, Christ was buying the entire field of this world with the sacrifice of His own life on the cross so that you might be His treasured possession. His death is the treasure hidden under the water of Holy Baptism, the words of forgiveness in Absolution, and His very own body and blood put into your mouth in His Supper, treasure hidden from human eyes but revealed in the hearing of God's Word. Everything Jesus has is yours. What could possibly compare with that?

That brings us to Jesus' second parable, the priceless pearl. Once again, our Lord tells us what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's like a merchant looking for fine pearls, who, when he found one of great value, went and sold everything to buy it. The kingdom of heaven is the priceless pearl, which, in order to possess it, a man will sacrifice all he has. Now the marketplace of this world offers many pearls to the unwary buyer, some fake, others flawed. There are the fake pearls of false religion and pious works, which may shine like the real thing, but later prove to be nothing but worthless paste. Such are the flawed pearls of prosperity and power, which seem worth owning. Still, there is always more to want, something missing, and other things to seek after. Yet there is still one flawless Pearl, perfect in every way, Jesus, the sinless Son of God, whose death and resurrection are worth sacrificing everything to own.

St. Paul wrote: If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe

of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, concerning the Law, a Pharisee, concerning zeal, persecuting the Church, concerning the righteousness which is in the Law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Indeed I count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as dung, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Having counted all the pearls in his pocket, tallied all his achievements and credentials, and totaled all his commandment-keeping and righteousness, St. Paul concluded they were worth nothing more than in comparison to the one Pearl of infinite value, the knowledge of Christ Jesus and the power of His resurrection. God's priceless Pearl is the value of your life to God, who gave His only begotten Son, so that whosoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life. Jesus gave it all for you on the cross. He literally cashed in all He had to redeem this world and buy you. You were bought with the priceless Pearl of God's Son. Now your life is a precious, priceless pearl to God. The appraiser of this pearl is God Himself, and the recorded value of your life is the blood of His Son. Knowing your value to God, you also then know His commitment to you that He will work all things together for your ultimate, eternal good, that is, for your salvation.

This kingdom of heaven, God's reign in Christ over your sin, is a hidden treasure and a priceless pearl, but now Jesus gives us one more parable to help us understand this great mystery more completely. The kingdom of heaven, says Jesus, is like a net let down into the sea that caught all kinds of fish. When full, the fishermen pulled it to shore, then sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. When Jesus said to His disciples that they would be fishers of men, I would like to suggest to you that it was net fishing. He had in mind not bait fishing, fly fishing, or sport fishing. Our Lord's disciples were not to snag fish one at a time by dangling a tasty morsel in front of their noses and hoping they would bite. And neither is it the role of the Church to try to lure people through the door by pretending to give them what they want instead of what they need. There must be no bait-and-switch tactics when it comes to the work of our Lord's Church.

The reason net fishing is the way the Church is to do its work is because it's totally indiscriminate. You can't pick and choose the kind of fish you hope to catch. You simply drag the net through the water and it snags whatever it snags: good fish, bad fish, dead fish, beer bottles, old shoes, sea weed, and

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garbage. The sorting takes place only at the end of the catch after the net has been hauled back onto shore and the fishermen sit down with their buckets to judge which fish are keepers and which aren't. And that, according to Holy Scripture, is how the kingdom of heaven works. The kingdom's net is cast out into the world and everyone in it. It reaches as far as East is from West with the Good News that there's no one for whom Jesus didn't die. There's no one who isn't able to possess the treasure of the kingdom, for the perfect pearl of great price, Jesus' death and resurrection, is to be proclaimed to all without exception, the good, the bad, the believing, and yes, the unbelieving.

In the end everyone dies, and on the Last Day everyone rises at the coming of our Lord Jesus. Then the net that gathered good and bad alike will be swept toward the shore, and the eternal sorting will take place. On that day the angels will do the sorting according to our Lord's command. Therefore as the Church we dare not undertake this task ourselves, because it's only at the end when the wicked will be eternally separated from the righteous. As the dragnet of death and resurrection pulls all to the beach to be sorted, that's when the Hidden Treasure of Christ will be revealed in all its fullness, when the value of that priceless pearl of Jesus' death and resurrection will be fully realized.

The righteous are those whom God has clothed with the righteousness of Jesus, whose lives have been redeemed by His blood shed for sinners. Although the wicked also have been purchased by the blood of Christ, in this life they rejected that priceless Pearl and despised the hidden treasure in the field of God's kingdom. They wanted no part of Jesus dying for them, but on that day they will learn that God will now give them an eternity to weep and grind their teeth over their loss. Dear friends, there are priceless treasures being handed out here this morning in God's Word, in baptism, absolution, and in the body and blood of Christ given for us sinners to eat and drink to our soul's salvation. These treasures are as old as God's promise to save, but they are as new as the present moment when Jesus says to you in your hearing: I forgive you. Come, follow me. The precious Pearl and the kingdom treasure are now yours. Believe it. Revel in it. Spread it around, and rejoice in it. For you have nothing to lose that you haven't already lost in Christ Jesus. May it always be so for His name's sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

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Plenty to Go Around

St. Matthew's Gospel 14:13-21

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 14:13-21 (ESV): Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves. But Jesus said, They need not go away; you give them something to eat. They said to him, We have only five loaves here and two fish. And he said, Bring them here to me. Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. As was made abundantly clear in this morning's Gospel, when it comes to the Person and work of Jesus, there is always plenty to go around. Here in this text, for instance, He feeds a crowd of more than five thousand with bread and fish until everyone is full. Throughout the Scriptures, He feeds the world with Himself, until it's filled with eternal life. And today in His Church He fills His people with peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, and in the knowledge that they belong to Him for all eternity, but none of this without a great sacrifice on His part.

Now just prior to this morning's text what we learn is that John the Baptist had recently been killed. While in Herod's prison his head is lopped off as a birthday present for Herod's daughter-in-law. When Jesus heard about it, He withdrew in a boat by Himself. But the crowds wouldn't leave Him alone. They came out on foot from the towns and villages nearby and followed from the shore. When He looked out over that mass of lost, diseased, demonized humanity, He had compassion on them. And as the compassionate Shepherd who never turns anyone in need away, He sat among them, healed their sick, blessed, and taught them.

But when evening came, Jesus' disciples came to Him, saying: This is the wilderness and the hour is late. Tell these people to go into the villages and get something to eat. The disciples were practical men with practical solutions. The crowd was big. The hour was late. Their suggestion made sense. Unspoken however, was the fact that this was also a prime opportunity to get rid of those pesky people so they could be alone with Jesus. But the disciples hadn't fully comprehended the extent of Jesus' compassion. While they saw a bothersome crowd, Jesus saw a mission field, a world for which, to save, He would give up His life. He didn't want to scatter the crowd. He wanted to feed them, to join with Him in table fellowship.

This is the same Jesus who never missed a dinner party and was known throughout Israel for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners, who caused many Pharisaic eyebrows to rise, and many religious tongues to wag for eating with the lowest of the low. They don't have to go away, Jesus said, you give them something to eat. You feed them. But we only have five loaves and two fish, they replied, not realizing that no offering is too small for our Lord to use. They couldn't see that this small amount of food could easily become a feast for thousands where Jesus was present, because with Jesus there's always plenty to go around. This same Jesus who declined to turn stones into bread in the wilderness to satisfy His own hunger, wouldn't hesitate to use His Divine authority to feed others.

You and I, when we look out over this world for whom Jesus died, it seems great and diverse, perhaps like that crowd gathered on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. There are diseased, healthy, rich, poor, religious and irreligious, from all walks of life and every part of the world. And Jesus tells us: You feed them. Make them disciples by baptizing and teaching. Bring them into table fellowship with Me. So she can be alone with Jesus, the Church, like the disciples in their unbelief, would very much like to send the crowds somewhere else. But there is no other food like this food, which gives the things Jesus wants to give, and this food He has given to the Church. That's why Jesus says to us: You feed them.

Now you might be tempted to say: But there's barely enough for us! How can our little Parish make a difference? That's the lesson of this text, that the disciple who seeks God's royal reign present in the flesh of Christ, who in turn extends that reign to fellow sinners, will lack nothing needful, for the compassion of Jesus overrules every hard-hearted excuse. You may not have all the world's time, money or resources, but you have something that can be pressed into service. You can fill the empty mouth of the neighbor whom God places in your path. You can speak about the love of God in Christ to others. No matter how meager your means, our Lord will multiply beyond measure what you place into service for Him. The last thing Jesus wants you asking is: Do I have enough bread? for the twelve baskets full of leftovers tell us that there's always plenty with Jesus, and more than enough in the end.

Give us this day our daily bread, Jesus teaches us to pray. Then He gives

the farmer, miller, baker, grocer, trucker, and everyone in between, to deliver that daily bread to us. God always works through means, whether supplying our daily bread, or forgiving our sins. When Jesus fed the five thousand, He didn't turn stones into bread, or scorpions into fish. No, He multiplied the bread and the fish He already had, and that's the second point of this miracle. When you pray for daily bread, it doesn't simply plop down from heaven onto your dinner table. Rather, God uses instruments, the farmer to grow the grain, the miller to grind it, the baker to knead it and bake it, the truck driver to transport it, and the grocer to distribute it. Jesus did the very same thing here. Rather than feeding the people directly, He used the means of a little boy's lunch and His disciples to distribute it. He used means. The disciples were the waiters, while Jesus was the Farmer, the Miller, the Baker, and the Chef.

Jesus refers to Himself as the Bread of Life, for in this Bread the very life of God is present as your only means of sustenance unto life everlasting.

That's how it is with Christ's gifts. He gives baptism, His Word of forgiveness and His Supper to the Church and then the Church distributes those gifts. That's what the Holy Ministry is all about, distributing the gifts of Jesus to His people. What Jesus died to acquire for the world, He gives out here in His Church, through the lowly, meager means of water, words, bread and wine. They might not seem like much, and to our eyes they often appear humble and weak, but Jesus multiplies them with His creative Word, amplifies their blessing, and Himself does what we are unable to do. What Jesus did with ordinary bread in the feeding of the five thousand, He now does even more so with the Bread of Life, His own flesh and blood given and shed on the cross

for the life of the world.

So whether we like the idea or not, God always works through means, and apart from such means we have no promise that He will deal with us at all. If you could just get this one thing straight, and truly believe it, I dare say you would never again let a single day go by without receiving the Word of God, or a week go by without preaching and the Supper. You would never think of your presence at the Divine Service as an option to be exercised only when you have nothing better to do. Instead of picking at the Bread of Life in the anorexia of unbelief, you would cling to the sermon and the Supper the way a hungry man clings to a loaf of bread, because he knows there's life in it. It isn't in jest that Jesus refers to Himself as the Bread of Life, for in this Bread the very life of God is present as your only means of sustenance unto life everlasting.

This familiar account then, dear friends, is far more than just a story of miraculously multiplied bread and fish. There are little pointers throughout, tiny details pushing us to see the deeper meaning. For instance, Mark

tells us that the grass they sat on was green and plentiful. Does that not remind you of Psalm 23 and the Good Shepherd who leads His flock to green pasture? Here also the Good Shepherd was feeding His flock in green pastures, spreading before them, as it were, a rich table. The green grass tells us it was spring, the time of the Passover, when Israel celebrated her exodus to freedom. Likewise Jesus, as Moses did, was feeding His people. God's Israel on the way to His exodus of death and resurrection.

That evening the people might have recalled the miraculous manna from heaven that was found on the ground every morning to feed Israel on its wilderness journey. They might have remembered that time when Elisha miraculously fed one hundred men with a few barley loaves. They might even have thought of God's invitation spoken through Isaiah in this morning's Old Testament lesson: Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters. And you who have no money, come, buy and eat without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.

What people that evening didn't know, but would soon find out, was that this feast was actually a foretaste of a greater Feast to come, the One in which our Lord took bread, gave thanks, broke it and distributed it to His disciples, saying: Take. Eat. This is My body. This is My blood, the same Feast celebrated every Lord's Day here in this very place, where the One who multiplied bread in the wilderness continues to multiply the bread of His body and the wine of His blood. And yet as great as this Feast is, it points even further down the road to a greater Feast, that Feast in which you and I will eat and drink in the face-to-face presence of our Lord Christ Himself in the kingdom of the resurrection.

You have undoubtedly heard it said that there's no such thing as a free lunch, and in almost every case that's true, except for one, where our Lord Christ sits at the head of the table and presides at that Meal bought without money or cost to us, although He paid for it dearly. There's not a one of us who deserves or merits this Meal. But nonetheless, out of Jesus' great compassion for us as His guests, we are privileged to eat and drink this Meal He died to provide us as our Host, Cook, Waiter, and Food, our Bread and Fish in the wilderness.

Come then, you whose throats are parched by the wilderness heat, who feel the burning of God's Law testifying against you, come to the cooling water of baptism and the forgiveness Christ died to speak to you. Come, you who hunger and thirst for true righteousness. Come to the Word and the Supper so that your soul might delight in the richest of fare. Come, you

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters. And you who have no money, come, buy and eat without money and without cost.

who have nothing to give to God but a contrite heart and broken spirit, who have no merit or worthiness in and of yourself, come, be filled at that Table purchased for you with the life of Jesus. Don't worry about there not being enough to go around, for with Jesus there's always plenty and even more than that plenty of bread and plenty of fish and plenteous forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Faith

Matthew 14:22-33

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 14:22-33 (ESV): Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, It is a ghost! and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid. And Peter answered him, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. He said, Come. So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, Lord, save me. Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, O you of little faith, why did you doubt? And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, Truly you are the Son of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. When you think of the saints who would have gone into Christ's presence before us, we all tend to hold them in great esteem, especially those mentioned in the Bible. Yet, if you think about it, these giants of the faith are no different than you. Indeed, no matter what sorts of great things they may have accomplished, or what great things were done to and through them, like you there were times when they struggled with their faith and were distracted by the storms of life. To be sure, as great as many of them most certainly were, and as strong as their faith often was, there were still times when God had to remind them how little their faith actually was without Him, and only then was He able to strengthen them for service in His kingdom.

Remember the account of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, when they were gathered together on a mountaintop engaging one another in a contest of dueling sacrifices? As you may remember, after some preliminary jousting, Elijah demonstrated his unwavering faith in God's power by

standing before the 450 priests of Baal, taunting them, then calling upon His God, yes, our God to light the fire of the sacrifice he had just drowned with water. The fire that fell from the hand of God not only ignited and burned up Elijah's sacrifice, but also the stones, the dust, and all the water that had been poured out upon it. It was only then that Elijah went on single-handedly to slay every one of those false prophets.

Following such an overwhelming victory, you would think Elijah would have been feeling his oats. But when Queen Jezebel threatened him with death, Elijah turned tail and ran, fearing for his life. Even though God had sustained him through a solitary journey of some forty days and nights, and in spite of the fact that God brought him safely to Mount Horeb, Elijah was filled with fretting and worry. When God inquired of him why he was

It was only after Elijah was able to see how little His faith was without God, that God was able to strengthen him for work in His kingdom.

hiding, Elijah replied, saying: I am the only one who has remained faithful to You, and everyone else is seeking to take my life! That was when God told him to go hide himself in the cleft of a rock since He was about to pass by. But God didn't show Himself to Elijah in a great wind, an earthquake, or a fire, but rather in a still, small voice. He reminded him that he wasn't the only one who had remained faithful, that God had reserved for Himself seven thousand in Israel whose knees had not bowed to Baal and whose mouths had not kissed him. It was only after Elijah was able to see how little His faith was without God, that God was able to strengthen him for work in His kingdom.

And that brings us to this morning's Gospel.

After having fed well over five thousand men, women and children with just five loaves of bread and two fish, as John tells the story, the people were desirous of making Jesus king if necessary, by force. So, sending the crowds away, our Lord instructed His disciples to cross over to the other side of the sea by boat while He retired to pray. As they headed out across the open water the disciples soon found themselves battling a terrible headwind and fierce, demonic seas. Their progress was snail-like. They had been rowing for hours and yet were only about halfway to their destination. It was then, somewhere between 3:00 and 6:00 in the morning, that Jesus approached their boat, walking on the water. When they saw Him they were terrified, for they were sure they were seeing a ghost. They were exhausted, and the wind and waves were getting the better of them. They may even have been on the verge of giving up. Perhaps they had forgotten the miracles they had seen Jesus do, including the miracle of the feeding of the multitudes, and so they were greatly afraid.

Wanting to calm their fears, Jesus called out them, saying: Be of good cheer! It is I. Do not be afraid. And His Words apparently comforted them,

much like a parent's voice might comfort a child in distress, for Peter cried out: Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water. Now this was a statement of great faith. Peter wasn't trying to test Jesus. He was simply saying: Since it is You, Lord, command me to come out to You. Peter believed that if his Lord desired it, even he could do the impossible. Peter had seen Jesus' miracles. He had heard His preaching. He knew he dare not climb out of the boat on his own. So he trusted that if Jesus commanded him to do it, he could do it. When Jesus told him to come to Him, Peter began walking on the water toward His Lord. Peter was a fisherman. He knew people can't and don't walk on water. Yet, there he was, doing just exactly that!

But that was when Peter began to waver. Taking his eyes off Jesus, he looked down, felt the wind and saw the waves. His attention diverted from the Object of his faith, his fear grew and he began to sink under the water. That was when he cried out: Lord, save me! And immediately, we read, Jesus stretched out His hand, caught him, and said: O you, little faith, why did you doubt? After they stepped into the boat the wind ceased, and all of them worshiped Jesus, saying: Truly, You are the Son of God. They had all seen with their own eyes what had just happened and how Jesus had brought them peace in the midst of this storm. They too, having a little faith, God was able to strengthen for work in His kingdom.

Peter believed that if his Lord desired it, even he could do the impossible.

Now you may not be called on to stand up to a host of God's enemies in public like Elijah. And you probably will never have occasion to walk on water as Peter did. Yet, there will be times when, like the disciples, you have to suffer through periods of unbelief, doubt and fear due to the storms of life which I'm sure many of you are going through right now. Though you know Jesus died for your sins on the cross, and in spite of the fact that you know well the promise of our heavenly Father that He will always watch over you, you also must bear Jesus rebuke that apart from Him your faith is little. During those times when you place too much trust in your own efforts, yes, even in your own believing, you have to be reminded that it's Jesus, not you, who will carry you through to the end. When you find yourself distracted by the cares and concerns of the world, take your eyes off of Jesus, and attempt to weather the storms of life all on your own, that's when God will have to lift you up out of your troubles to remind you how little your faith is apart from Him.

From the cross, Jesus stretches out His hands to save you by His agonizing death, in which He took all your sin upon Himself and put it away forever. There He reached out, lifted you up, and made you His child through the flood of holy baptism. Having reached out to save you, He now gives you of Himself through the Meal of His most precious body and

blood, given and shed for us sinners to eat and drink for the forgiveness of our sin. Admittedly to most of the world and sometimes even to you and me, these things may not look like much, but in fact, they are everything. For God's Word and Sacraments to you who are His own are the still small voice of Jesus telling you how much He loves you and how much He has forgiven you. And as you see and hear over and over again that your sins are forgiven, like the disciples in the boat, you also will be able to declare with them that truly Jesus is the Son of God who has saved and delivered you from all your sin. O you little faiths, you dear children of God, be of good cheer! It is Jesus. Do not be afraid, for your Savior will bring you safely to the other side where all the storms have ceased. And there with Elijah, Peter, the other disciples, and all the saints who have gone before, you will join in the unending worship and praise of our Savior at the heavenly table of the Lamb's high feast, which will have no end. God will grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

The Great Faith of Little Dogs

Matthew 15:21-28

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 15:21-28 (ESV): And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon. But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, Send her away, for she is crying out after us. He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But she came and knelt before him, saying, Lord, help me. And he answered, It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. She said, Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. Then Jesus answered her, O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire. And her daughter was healed instantly.

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

In last week's Gospel we saw the little faith, of St. Peter, a faith that enabled him to walk on water, but also caused him to sink when he saw he was about to be swallowed up by wind and wave. Now contrast that little faith, of Peter, with the great faith, portrayed in today's Gospel, the faith of a Canaanite woman with the demon-possessed daughter. To the people of her day she was a nobody. To be sure, we don't know her name, age, or anything else about her, except that she was a Gentile from the region of Tyre and Sidon.

But this Gentile woman had heard about Jesus, and in that hearing, great faith sprang up in her heart. Scripture teaches that faith comes by hearing, so undoubtedly this woman must have heard the Good News about Jesus and trusting it came to Him with this prayer: Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David. My daughter is severely possessed by a demon. Now to fully comprehend the gravity of this woman's behavior, you first have to know what an act of boldness it was on the part of any Gentile to address a Jew. And, that it was even more audacious for a woman to

address a man, much less a rabbi in public. But this woman's need was far greater than human convention. Her little girl was possessed by an unclean spirit.

But does Jesus appear to be moved by this woman's courage? No. In fact her prayer is met with stony silence. In Psalm 28 King David cried: To Thee, O Lord, I call! Be not deaf to me, lest, if You be silent, I become like those who go down to the pit. The silence of God, you see, is a terrible thing. You and I hate this silence so much that we try to cover it with background noise. We turn up the stereo, the television, and our MP3 players so as to surround ourselves with anything but silence. That's why it's so hard to keep your mouth shut when no one else is talking. We can't bear not to hear something and so, with the Psalmist, we cry out: O God, do not keep

When you pray and hear nothing but silence, God's desire is that your faith be strengthened, for true faith clings only to Christ and His Word.

silence, hold Your peace, or be still!

Hence God has chosen to preach His Word so that our ears might ring with the blessed sound of His voice and the Good News that we have been reconciled to God in Christ. Imagine, you are on speaking terms with God because Jesus paid the price for your rebellion! The Father has promised to hear your prayers through His Son and invites you to come to Him in every circumstance.

And when you pray and hear nothing but silence, God's desire is that your faith be strengthened, for true faith clings only to Christ and His Word, not to the way He answers your prayer. It clings to Jesus' death and resurrection not to the favor He shows you. If in this life God never responded to a single one of your prayers, if He

were to reserve all His Yes for the Day of the resurrection of all flesh, and even if you received nothing but suffering and silence in this life, God still wants you to know that you have Christ, His kingdom, His forgiveness and His Word, His Yes even when it sounds like No. That was the great faith displayed by this woman from Cana.

So can you imagine the shock she must have felt when Jesus told her that He had been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel? Wasn't this the same Jesus who had earlier said: Ask and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened? Was He now slamming that same door in the face of this woman who believed in Him? No. He was simply reminding her that since He had come first to the Jews, the Gentiles would have to wait their turn and their turn, properly speaking, would come only after Christ's death and resurrection.

So Jesus' words to this woman remind us that this is the second way God tests and tries our faith in order to strengthen it, acting at times as if He's rejected us, dealing with us as if He hadn't come for us at all, as if

there were no place for us in His kingdom and as if we had no business seeking His favor. That's certainly how Christ dealt with this woman. But there's another side to this story. For in Jesus' apparent rejection of this woman's prayer, He is teaching us that we need trust nothing nor anyone other than Him, not our own prayers or the prayers of others, but only Jesus.

Yet because we are often impatient, stubborn, self-willed, and self-centered, this is a hard lesson to learn. We are accustomed to having things our own way in sixty seconds or less. Habits that took years to form, you want to change overnight. When you call someone on the telephone, don't you expect them to answer instantly, drop everything and devote all their time and energy to what you want? Is it any wonder we expect the same from God, imagining that He ought to deal with our prayers immediately, and not put them in some heavenly to do file?

Still, even in the face of Jesus' seeming rejection, this woman persisted all the more. She fell to her knees with a much shorter, more fervent prayer. Lord, help me, she cried. Then He responded, saying: It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. How cruel and insensitive His words must have seemed. This isn't the kind, gentle Jesus we learned about in Sunday School. Yet, this is the third way God exercises faith, by breaking down our pride and humbling us. In a manner of speaking, He puts us down with the dogs. As our Lord's mother reminds us in the words she spoke before His birth: He humbles the exalted, and exalts the humbled. He fills the hungry with good things, but the rich He sends away empty.

Friends, if you or others have placed you on a pedestal, watch out! You are going to fall. If you are resting on your own achievements, works, piety, or intelligence, watch out! You are about to be humbled. If you look down on others from a position of self-importance, then prepare yourself for a comeuppance. For it is only when you are on your knees with empty hands, a broken heart and a contrite spirit that you are able to receive God's gifts. Your hands have to be empty before they can be filled. Before you can be exalted, you first have to be humbled. Before you can live in Christ, you have to die to self.

There's a Latin saying popular among Lutheran theologians. It's Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio, or, in English, prayer, study, and testing. These are what make a great theologian, says Luther. And while many give lip service to these words, the truth is, none of us ever do enough of any of these things. Prayer and study sound good, and I doubt there isn't a one of you who wouldn't confess you could use more of each. But testing, that's another matter! Testing means suffering, humiliation, and a cross. Nobody

If you look down on others from a position of self-importance, then prepare yourself for a comeuppance.

wants that, for it means God's silence toward us, His rejection of us, and the humbling of our spirit. And though none of us like the idea, the truth is that the cross must come also to you if you are to have any hope of being saved. Deep down inside, you know your own suffering and humiliation can't save you, but only Christ. You may be tempted to sing: Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you are perfect in every way, but you have to remember that of yourself it's impossible to be forgiven. God's humbling is what keeps you on the faith-receiving end of Christ's gifts.

So what should you do when the Lord calls you a dog? The woman from Cana could have been indignant, walked away and preserved her self-esteem. But instead, she confessed that what Christ said was true. Yes, I may be a Gentile dog, but at least dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from their Master's table. This woman with a great faith trapped Jesus in His own words and held Him there. If You say I'm a dog, she confessed, then I'm a dog. But dogs get to eat the rich crumbs of the Bread of Life that fall from God's table. And with these words of great faith, it became apparent to Jesus that her prayer would not be denied her. O woman, great is your faith! Jesus said to her, Be it done for you as you desire. This woman's faith, you see, was great because she knew she was nothing and Jesus was everything. Her faith was great not because it was strong, but because it clung to a great Jesus.

And Jesus is great, greater than the Law that separated Jew from Gentile, greater than the demon that possessed the little girl, even greater than your sin and death. God's Law calls all of us something far worse than dogs. It calls us sinners. And since God is righteous in all His words and justified in all His judgments, all you can say in the face of such a stinging judgment is: Yes, that's what I am, a poor miserable sinner! But I also know Christ came for sinners, of whom I am chief! That, dear friends, that is repentant faith. That's great faith, faith that knows you have been given to by God, given to on His terms, not your own. When you understand that, you will not only be able to eat the crumbs of the Bread of Life that fall from God's table, but you will also rejoice in the fact that as one of God's own dear children, He has also reserved for you a place there. And because God has promised it in Christ, you can believe that it's true. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

The Gates of Hell

Matthew 16:13-120

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples: Who do people say that the Son of Man is? And they said, Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. He said to them, But who do you say that I am? Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered him, Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In this morning's Gospel our Lord Christ asked His disciples what might well be the most important question ever asked of anyone: Who do you think I am? Peter, responding for them all, replied literally: You are the Christ, the Son of God, the Living One. And that was when Jesus spoke these words: You are *Petros*, and upon this *petra* I will build my Church. The difference between these two words, *Petros* and *petra*, is that *Petros* is the disciple, Peter, while *petra* is the foundation upon which Jesus promised to build His Church. A *petra*, properly speaking and understood, is a rocky cliff, while a *petros* is a portion of that cliff, detached or broken off. Hence, if you wanted to make this translation more literal, you might say: You are *Petros*, the Rockman, and upon this *petra*, this thing which makes you a Rockman, upon that I will build My Church, and the gates of Hell will not be able to stand up against it.

What made Peter so rocklike that Jesus would give him such a name? Was it his steadfast character? That's not very likely. Remember, it wasn't too long after he spoke these words that Jesus gave Peter another name: Satan! And it was only short time after that that Peter showed his true character to be more like Jell-O by denying Jesus three times in quick succession on the night of His arrest. So, Peter's rockiness certainly wasn't founded upon the strength of his character, for his was no better than yours or mine. So, what made him so rocky? It was Peter's confession of

Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, the Living One, his confession that Jesus is the true Rock, the impenetrable Foundation upon which God builds His Church.

And inasmuch as you also make that very same confession about Christ every time you recite the words of one of the Church's Creeds, it is therefore proper that you also be called *petroi*, Rockmen and Rockwomen, even as Peter himself would later write in his first epistle: You, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, when you come to Him as to a Living Stone, rejected by men, but chosen by God and precious. Dear Christian, Jesus is that Stone who has become a Rock of Stumbling for many, but Life and Salvation for all who know Him as the solid Rock upon whom the Church is built.

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any longer.

So, with Jesus as your Rock, it's both right and proper for you to see yourself as a part of that Church our Lord promised to build, and against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. But remember, gates don't attack anything. All they do is keep people in or out. That's why, as a Christian, Christ's promise is that the gates of hell cannot keep you trapped inside your sin any longer, no matter how great it might be! Still, in this modern-day world where the identity of our Savior is always being called into question, there will always be a temptation to leave this

confession behind and align yourself with the rest of society. That's why it's essential you never lose sight of all that our Savior accomplished, those things that enabled St. Peter to make his rock-like confession.

The reason Jesus came into our world was not to be an earthly King, or to show you how to live a more victorious life. It was suffer, die and rise again for the life of the world, for your sin and mine. If Jesus had not accomplished this, you would still be in your sin and facing an eternity in hell. Hence, Christ willingly allowed Himself to be abandoned on the cross and left to die filthy with your sin even while His holy, precious blood was being spilled out on the ground to pay your ransom. Christ came as an ordinary Infant, lying in a manger, born of a virgin, even as Holy Scripture attests. But even though He came humble and lowly, He is nonetheless still your Rock and Fortress, the One who has come to change you into the Rockmen and Rockwomen He desires you to be. He comes in words, water, and ordinary bread and wine, saying: Take eat, this is My body. Take, drink, this is My blood, given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of your sin. And with these words He bids you to partake of this Meal and confess that what you are really receiving is the very flesh and blood of Him who is the Christ, the Son of the God, the Living One, the One in whom alone forgiveness is now yours.

Though in this life Satan will continue to be your accuser, though he

will attempt to hold you in the chains of your sin, your comfort rests on the fact that the Holy One of Israel, our Savior, descended into the very depths of Hell itself to declare Himself Victor over sin, death and the devil. Because death could not hold Him, neither can it hold you who cling to Him as your Savior! What joy is yours, then, as a member of Christ's Church, to be able to use the keys our Savior gave to St. Peter so that Satan-accused, tormented sinners such as yourselves might be released from Satan's prison house and given access to the heavenly place through the glorious gates of our Lord's Church. Our Savior exercises these keys when His pastors speak Christ's Absolution into your ears, and when He declares this Absolution is for real, in His very own body and blood that He gives you to eat and drink. These keys bind and loose even as they also declare God's holiness and grace. They show us sinners the horror of our sin, while at the same time pointing us to our Savior. And while they condemn error and errorists to Hell, they also set free even the most obscene sinner from all his sin, yes, even you.

When the Church uses these keys, when pastors preach the demands and promises of God, the Law and the Gospel, when Christians hold in high regard the sacraments of Holy Absolution, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the Church is making Her assault on the gates of hell, and Satan is robbed and despoiled of his kingdom. Indeed, that's the Church's work here on this side of heaven. She isn't to merrily sit on Her hands silently awaiting Jesus' return, but to actively attack Satan's stronghold in the knowledge that Christ the Rock is stronger than the evil one, and that the devil has already been destroyed on Calvary's cross.

But what part do you play in this plundering of Satan's kingdom? I'd like to suggest that when you bring your children to the Font, and continue to bring them here to God's house to hear and receive God's Word, that that is precisely what you are doing. You are acting as a marauder of Satan's kingdom, a plundering thief stealing your children back from him in the waters of holy baptism. When you partake of the Lord's Supper you're not only receiving Christ's promised forgiveness, life, and salvation, you're raiding Satan's kingdom and proclaiming to the world that our Savior, Jesus Christ, not only died for you, but also has risen, and will come again. Your faithful confession of Christ as the Rock and Foundation of the Church both cripples and infuriates the devil.

Dear Christian, so long as you remain in Christ's Church where the Law and Gospel keys are being exercised, you will be privileged to enjoy sweet victory over Satan's kingdom, because your crusade is being carried out by the blood of Christ and in the power of His resurrection. As we sang in

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the words of Luther's well-known hymn just a few moments ago: Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us, we tremble not, we fear no ill: they shall not overpower us! This world's prince may still, scowl fierce as he will, he can harm us none, he's judged, the deed is done, one little Word can fell him! And that Word, dear Christian, that Word is Jesus; the suffering, dying One, the Christ, the Son of God, the Living One!

In Him our Lord and God has freed you from the devil's prison, enabled you to ravage and pillage that prison to free the souls of others. You do this every time you hear and believe Christ's Word, trust in His Absolution, receive His very body and blood into your mouth, and confess the death and Resurrection of Jesus in your place until He comes again in glory to take you home. This victory is yours because Peter's confession is true, and the Rock he points you to is the Church's one Foundation. This Man on the cross, battered, bleeding, and dying, this piece of bread and cup of wine, Christ's true body and blood, and God's voice of Absolution and of forgiveness spoken into your ears, these are nothing other than the Christ, the Son of God, the Living One, in whom the Father's love is certain, and in whom you have a sure salvation. May it always be so for His name's sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Living With Our Crucified God

Matthew 16:21-28

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 16:21-28 (ESV): From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you. But he turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man. Then Jesus told his disciples, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Last week's Gospel centered on St. Peter, specifically his confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, the Living One. This was a turning point in our Lord's life and ministry, because from that moment forward, He would be constantly explaining what it meant that He was the long-promised Messiah, that soon His life would end on Calvary's cross, and that following His exodus to Jerusalem He would suffer many things, be killed, and raised to life again on the Third Day. On the surface this all seems quite straightforward. We've heard the story so often that much of its impact has been lost on us because we know how it ends! But put yourself in the disciples' shoes, standing there before the Lord and Ruler of the universe, the One by Whom things were made, and He says: I must go to Jerusalem and be killed. No wonder they were confused!

As Luther studied Holy Scripture, he discovered there were two ways people think and talk about faith. The first he called the theology of glory, which is how the world and sinful human reason approaches faith and

religion. The second he called the theology of the cross, which is the way Scripture teaches us to think. Here in this text Peter was operating under the theology of glory, that is, He wanted a popular, successful Savior, and along with it, a popular, successful Church. But what Peter soon discovered is that God, having a very different measure of success, isn't all that interested in popularity.

What ought to frighten you about this is the fact that your own way of thinking falls right in line with Peter's, for by nature we lean toward that theology of glory. We often don't have in mind the things of God, but of men, and even worse, we are also satanic in our opposition to the will of God. We don't like hearing Jesus' pronouncement that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of His enemies, and be crucified under Pon-

We are inclined to believe that God has no mercy or compassion toward us in our suffering, or else just doesn't care.

tius Pilate for our sin. Yet that's precisely what Jesus does, because it's God's plan for our salvation, promised and revealed throughout the Old Testament, the very core and foundation of the Christian Church!

But what do you suppose happened to Peter, who only a few moments before had received Jesus' promise that upon his confession the Church would be built against which even the gates of hell could not prevail? Having just heard Jesus' promise, Peter then went on to become a stumbling block in the path of Christ's journey to the cross. Because Peter embraced the theology of glory he thought it was OK to lecture Jesus about how a real Messiah ought to carry out God's will. Peter

couldn't get his head around the idea that God's plan might entail a cross and suffering. So, motivated by the theology of glory, as we ourselves often are, Peter, the so-called rockman, sought to take charge of our Lord's life and Mission, and so dictated to Him how He ought to; take care of business.

But was Peter doing anything different than what we do? I want you to think for a moment. What's the most common question people ask about God? Is it perhaps: Why does He allow Christians to suffer? Or, better yet, Why does He allow good people to suffer? Why do people think God owes them an answer to that question? The truth is, not a one of us is good, and none of us deserve anything good from God. Indeed, every breath you breathe is due solely to God's unmerited grace. Yet, when you suffer loss or endure some hardship, is your first tendency not to cast blame, get angry, bargain with God, or turn your back on Him? Friends, in spite of the fact that you all deserve far worse, God still daily showers you with countless undeserved blessings: sunshine, rain, and daily bread, just to name a few. Still, we are all inclined to believe, contrary to the teachings of Scripture, that God has no mercy or compassion toward us in our suffering, or else just doesn't care at all.

Consider everything Christ has freely won for you with His life, suffering, death and resurrection. As the sinless Son of the Living God, Jesus most certainly didn't deserve any of what He received. The holy, righteous Son of God was utterly and entirely blameless in all matters. And yet, for us poor sinners, He willingly suffered an agony so great that we can't even begin to imagine it. So don't think for a moment God doesn't care about you or your situation or that He couldn't possibly understand the pain you are going through! He understands far more completely and fully than you or I will ever know.

But God's Word not only teaches that suffering comes as a result of the fact that we are sinners living in a sinful world, but also because we are Christians bearing the cross of Christ. St. Paul instructs us that we are to rejoice when God counts us worthy to share in this suffering, because it also means we have a share in everlasting life. And though you may wonder with Jeremiah why your pain sometimes seems unending, and why it's so much harder to bear up under in the knowledge that it may be the result of your faith, may I suggest to you that the reason such suffering is so hard to bear is because, by nature, like Peter, for some unfathomable reason, we all keep falling back into that dreadful and deadly theology of glory, thinking our life ought to be a bed of roses even if no one else's is.

You must learn how to live, and how to die, from the example of our Crucified God Himself.

When our Lord called Peter Satan and said to him: Get behind Me! And also when He said: Anyone [who] would come after Me must take up his cross and follow Me, He actually used the very same Greek word. Now that might seem rather trifling, but it's significance lies in the fact that Jesus wasn't so much saying to Peter and us that we need to get out of His face and leave Him alone, but rather that we ought to get back in line and follow Him. You aren't supposed to take your lead from the devil, the world, or your own sinful flesh, but only from Christ. And no matter how foolish, weak, painful, unpopular, boring, or whatever, His way might seem to you at any particular moment, you have no right to question, but only to follow. Here, then, is Christ's call to true discipleship, that in the fullest sense of the word, you must learn how to live, and how to die, from the example of our Crucified God Himself!

True Christian discipleship isn't a program or a gimmick, it's a way of living your entire life 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. It means bearing your cross patiently, joyfully and confidently in the knowledge that you are carrying the cross of Christ Himself. As a disciple of our Crucified God, everything you are and ever will be has already been shaped and patterned after His cross. You live, as it were, a crucified life, believing that as you died with Christ in baptism, and that as you die with Him on a daily basis through repentance, you will also live with Him forever. That's

the paradoxical heart of Christianity, that death abounds wherever there's true life, that whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and that whoever loses his life for Christ's sake will find it.

As a Christian, and this, dear friends, is what it means to be a Christian, your entire life, body, soul and everything you have, is offered up to God daily as a living sacrifice. But when you look in the mirror and consider your life, what do you see? Is it difficult to drag yourself out of bed on Sunday morning? Is it hard to set aside even a few dollars for the Church and ministry of Christ? Is it embarrassing to pray before eating a meal in public? Is it too much bother and fuss to pray and worship daily with your family at home? Is it just too much trouble to spend a few minutes in God's Word each day so that God can feed you? Remember Jesus question to His disciples in the Garden: Could you not watch and pray with Me one hour? Is even that more than you are willing to suffer, for the sake of Him who suffered everything for you?

Not a one of us is as faithful as we ought to be. None of us are following after Jesus in the way of the cross as He bids us to do. Believe me, I know from personal experience. It's one thing to live your life this way when everything's coming up roses, but it's a different matter entirely when life comes crashing down around your ears. The spirit may be willing, but the flesh is very weak. Yet, if even the great apostle, Peter, could go from a beautiful confession of the faith one moment to a satanic temptation the next, you shouldn't be all that surprised to find such inconsistency and failing within your own life.

Now I don't intend that to be a cheap excuse, I'm simply offering it up as another example of your need for the very cross we all try so very hard to avoid, not the cross we carry for ourselves, but the cross God's own dear Son carried for us, the cross on which His holy, precious blood was shed for the forgiveness of your sin, that cross which stands forever between the righteous wrath of God and our pathetic unfaithfulness, as it shields us with the Body of our Savior, and is granted to us freely as gift by the pure mercy and grace of our God, Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit, in the waters of holy baptism.

Maybe you were too young to remember your own baptism, but it hasn't been all that long ago that here in this place, right here at this very font, you heard the very same words spoken by the mouth of this pastor that were also spoken over you on that day God took you into His kingdom by baptism: Receive the sign of the holy cross both upon your forehead and upon your heart, to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the Crucified. In these words, God seeks to remind you that, like all those who are baptized into Christ, you also belong to a Crucified God. This makes no sense to the world, of course, but then neither do you as a Christian. Your entire life is a life lived out under the shadow of the cross of this Crucified God, and in the shelter of His outstretched arms. This is the same God who once carried the cross for you, and who now carries it with you. It's the same God

who will graciously watch over and protect you until the Last Day arrives, that Day when He will come into this world one final time in glory to carry you, me and all His children out of this vale of tears to Himself in Heaven, and all this He will do solely by the power of His own Name, and all of it for the sake of your salvation. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Dealing With Sinners, Like Us

Matthew 18:15-20

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 18:1-20 (ESV): At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of

you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. In this morning's Gospel, our Lord Christ continues down the path He began only two weeks previously. Having established His Church on the Rock foundation of His Gospel and Sacraments, He now lays down some house rules, to guide those who live within the walls of His Church. These rules are pretty straightforward, but the long and short of it is crystal clear, namely, that God takes sin quite seriously, and consequently so must we. The problem is that taking sin seriously runs contrary to the way we think. Most of the time we're so busy trying to find ways to excuse our sin or winking and nodding at it as though it were no big deal that we don't have time to take it seriously.

Now it's true that that most of us are willing to admit that we're sinners, so long, of course, as everyone else is willing to admit it along with us. But doesn't it make you more than just a little uncomfortable when the accusation of the Law strikes close to home? Don't you squirm when you realize that what's being said about sin in general is applicable to you personally, when you realize, Hey, that's me he's talking about! and when you find yourself running for the fig leaves so you can hide both you and your sin from God? You know the truth, when God calls all men sinners, He's looking directly at you!

Consider the Commandments: Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, lie, or covet. How does the world deal with these? Adultery is taken so lightly hardly anyone blinks at it anymore. It's hardly a secret that even our government defends the murder of unborn children as though, instead of being a sin, abortion was some kind of sacred right. And no one need remind you of the market for stolen items that exists in our country, or the lies everyone's willing to tell so they can cover their own tracks, and all of this fueled by a flagrant abuse of God's command against coveting!

What this means is that in spite of what we try to convince ourselves, God still takes sin seriously. Just look at today's Old Testament lesson, where Ezekiel speaks of the burden God places on those He sends to shepherd His people. On Judgment Day God is going to hold the pastors of His Church accountable for the souls entrusted to their care. If I fail to faithfully preach to you the Word of God, both the judgment of the Law and the comfort of the Gospel, then I'll share in the responsibility for your sin before God on the Last Day. If I fail to warn you about the snares being laid for you by the devil to trip you up, God will hold me accountable should the devil thereby lead you astray.

God takes sin quite seriously, and consequently so must we.

Our Lord is not playing games. He's not going to buy the sorts of excuses that are so easily tossed around by us, excuses like: Hey, times have changed, Everyone's doing it, or Surely God wouldn't punish me for that! The sad reality is, there are going to be a lot of surprised people in hell on Judgment Day, because God not only can but will hold everyone accountable for their sin apart from Jesus Christ. To be sure, apart from Jesus Christ we all would have some serious trouble ahead, for indeed, not a one of us have ever kept the Commandments, not a single one of them! And in truth, we're all poor, miserable sinners, deserving nothing other than God's wrath and hot indignation. There is none righteous among us, no, not even one, says the Prophet, for all our righteous deeds are as filthy rags before the Lord.

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But happily that's not the end of the story. God's wrath and anger aren't the only result of Him taking sin seriously. God also did something about sin. He gave His only begotten Son as full payment for it. He handed Him over to crucifixion and cruel death so that you might live. That was the punishment sin required, and so God, out of His great compassion, paid the price Himself. That's how our Holy Triune God deals with sinners like us, and that's how you, as a forgiven sinner, must also deal with others, taking sin seriously, to be sure, but above all, confronting it

on the basis of God's Word.

You see, you can't possibly understand this morning's Gospel if you don't understand that mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation between Christians is the ultimate goal and objective of Christ's words. As Christians, you and I are required to approach each other individually with our concerns, and especially to avoid bringing the sins of another into a public forum if those sins weren't committed publicly. To be sure, the entire purpose of Christian discipline, as our Lord lays it out here in today's Gospel, is that repentance be followed up with forgiveness for those who have sinned, and that reconciliation take place with those against whom they sinned. Excommunication isn't a process for getting rid of people or cleaning up the Church rolls, but a means to bring the erring back into the fold of the Church. The necessity of two or three witnesses was taken so seriously by Jewish rabbis, that a single eyewitness was never enough to convict someone, even if they had been caught with a bloody knife in their hand! And while that might seem a bit extreme, the purpose was to protect the innocent from being wrongly punished for something they may not have done. You might remember how, in the case of our Lord's trial, just before His crucifixion, His accusers couldn't get even two or three lying witnesses to agree on the charges being trumping up against Him.

The final step in the process of Church discipline, taking it to the Church,

also has parallels in the practice of the synagogue, for synagogues weren't only a place of worship, but the center of the community. There was where public discipline took place, where those who belonged to the synagogue were measured according to the objective standards of the community. When a person was removed from the synagogue it meant they were to become, quite literally, like the pagans and tax collectors who were excluded from participation in the religious life and community of Israel. Giving the accused a public warning, one last chance to repent, was an act of mercy designed to save them from being excluded for all eternity.

Yet, even dealing with these persons as if they were pagans or tax collectors didn't mean they were to be written off. It meant excommunication from the Church, to be sure, for they were to be bound in their sin and excluded from the Holy Communion, but it also meant they were to once again become part of the great mission field outside the Church. Thus, even after the painful process of excommunication, the ultimate goal was always that that person might repent and return to the fold and fellowship of the Church.

Sadly, however, the principles laid down here in this text are probably some of the most commonly ignored in all of Scripture. See how we often we deal with one another in ways that ought to make us ashamed, heaping sin upon sin, bringing disgrace to the Name of Christ, and driving a wedge between us and His Church by our disobedience and stubborn refusal to forgive one another. The fact is, none of us will ever be able to deal with anyone else as we ought, except insofar as we're living in Christ and He in us. He alone can melt your stony heart and turn it into a well of compassionate and mercy. That's why this Gospel concludes the way it does, with the promise of Christ's presence among those who are His.

This is a special presence of Jesus that takes place among those who gather in His Name, in the divine service of His Word to receive His Holy Sacraments together. That's what Christ's promise really means. It's not referring to any and all casual gatherings of people who happen to be Christians. The fact that Christ is present among two or three who gather in His name for worship in Word and Sacrament is significant for two reasons. First, it doesn't take a huge crowd to have a divine service, for Christ promised to be present even in the midst of a small handful of His people. But on the other hand, Christ never intended His Church to exist in lonely isolation. One person can't gather by himself and properly claim to be the Church, for there's no such thing as private Christianity.

It's true that each of you has to have his own faith, but, that faith is

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what links you to Christ and the entire body of believers. What's more, the salvation we Christians look forward to is something already begun here and now in the community and worship of the Church. Here in the Church on earth, in Christ's Gospel and Sacraments, is where God deals with His people. That's why the Epistle to the Hebrews warns us not to forsake gathering together for worship, as some are inclined to do. For those who do so cut themselves off, not only from the Church, but also from Christ, who is present in His Church.

So, exclusion from the community, or excommunication, is a deadly serious matter. Without repentance and reconciliation with the Church, the person thus removed from the fellowship of the Church on earth has likewise been removed from fellowship with her in heaven, even as the one who is reconciled with the Church on earth has been reconciled with the Father in heaven. Dear Christian, Christ's cross and passion is what reconciled you and all the world to our Father in heaven. Through the washing of water with the Word in holy baptism, Christ has welcomed you into His Church, given you His Holy Spirit, and bestowed on you the right to be called children of God. Now, by His Gospel, and through His Holy Supper, He holds out to and gives you the fruits of His Cross, forgiveness, life and salvation. In spite of your constant failure to deal with sin and one another in the way of Christ, our heavenly Father, for the sake of His Son, still continues to come among us with His mercy, grace, and forgiveness. And as a result, God has not only bestowed His forgiveness on you, but also teaches you how to forgive one another. May it always be so for Christ's sake, Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Forgiveness as Self-Preservation

Matthew 18:21-35

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 18:21-23 (ESV): Then Peter came up and said to him, Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him. I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything. And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, Pay what you owe. So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, Have patience with me, and I will pay you. He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you? And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. As you listened to this morning's Gospel being read, one thing had to be crystal clear, namely, Jesus doesn't believe forgiveness is an option, as if you had the right or authority to choose who you are going to forgive or not forgive. In fact, a careful reading of this text will show quite plainly that Jesus makes forgiveness a duty and obligation for all who belong to Him and that it doesn't matter how hurt you might feel, how deeply angry

you might be, or how little your neighbor actually deserves your forgiveness. You are simply to forgive and be done with it!

Consider the mother who says to her young son: You had better stay out of that street, and if you don't, I'm going to boot your backside into next week! Why would a mother speak so harshly to her child? Does she do it because she hates him, or wishes him to live in fear? Of course not! Almost any parent would tell you that even though she speaks harshly to him, that mother probably loves her child more than her own life. She simply wants so deeply to care for and protect him, that she's willing to lay some heavy law down and speak to him in the severest way possible so that he knows beyond any shadow of a doubt that if he ventures out onto the road he is going to regret it.

God has never spoken a commandment to you that wasn't intended for your own blessing and benefit.

Now to be sure, there's a fairly good chance the boy doesn't have a clue as to what sort of danger awaits him out there. All he knows is his mother's law, and since the street seems like such a good place to play, his mother's law simply seems harsh and unreasonable, maybe even impossible to keep. So the child wails and bellows because his mother won't allow him to play in the street, but momma isn't the least bit softened or moved by his tears. She simply says to him: If a passing car doesn't kill you, I will!

Dear Christian, you need to know that God has never once spoken a commandment to you that wasn't intended for your own personal blessing and benefit, even when that commandment was spoken harshly. For example, what is the first and greatest Commandment? You shall have no other gods. This First Commandment is really all about and for you. God commands you to have no other gods (not that there actually are any other gods) because He alone is the only God you need. By Himself He will preserve and protect you eternally as He rules over you in mercy and love. All others that might claim to be god will only exploit and destroy you. Hence the one true God commands you to have no other gods so that you might live and not die.

Take the Third Commandment as another example: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. With these words, God requires that you devote yourself and your whole life to the hearing of His Word and the faithful reception of His Holy Supper. God commands that you worship Him alone, not because He's going to take attendance on Sunday morning, but because His Word and Sacraments and only His Word and Sacraments are able to provide you with His divine life, apart from which you most surely will die.

In the very same way, all the commandments of the Second Table of the Law, that is, the Fourth through the Tenth Commandments, are as

much about you as they are about your neighbor. Honor your father and your mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. These commandments are all about God and how He takes care of your physical body and life. The other Commandments of the Second Table: You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, and You shall not covet, are all about God taking care of your possessions and reputation until your last hour comes.

If you think about it, God is kind of like a mother that way. In the very same fashion that a mother might lay down the law for her child in the harshest of terms, that is, to preserve and protect him, so likewise God lays down His Law for you, yes, even those laws you may find difficult or unacceptable. God speaks His Law and gives you His commands to preserve and protect you. And so today God says to you in the clearest of terms: You Shall Forgive Your Neighbor. Not only must you forgive, but you must never cease forgiving.

Here in this text Peter approached Jesus and asked Him: Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus replied: I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. Jesus commanded Peter, and He commands you, to forgive your neighbor a ridiculous number of times. There are no options for Peter, and there are no options for you. Cry, weep, and rant all you want. Your protests about how your neighbor doesn't deserve your forgiveness will fall on deaf ears, just as a child's tears and pleas to his momma that he be allowed to play in the street will likewise be ignored.

God has never once spoken a command to you that wasn't intended for your own personal blessing and benefit, and this command is no exception. Jesus commands you to forgive, not merely for your neighbor's benefit, but for your own benefit, as well. You are not to nurse your resentments toward your neighbor because it will only grow into an incurable infection. Instead, let it go. Think of forgiveness as an antibiotic that will prevent your injury from growing worse. Think of your baptism as a washing and healing of your wounds, so that they no longer require your attention. Bitterness is a dead end street. The longer you remain bitter toward your neighbor, the more likely you will also grow bitter toward God, since God is the One who allowed that neighbor into your life. As Paul reminds us in his letter to the Ephesians: Let all bitterness and wrath be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

That's the real point of forgiving your neighbor, isn't it? To be sure, your

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neighbor may have done some very bad things and treated you wrongly. But really, how do your neighbor's sins against you stack up against all the many sins you have committed against God? Yet God has freely forgiven you every one of them because of His grace and mercy in Christ. So when you forgive your neighbor, all you are doing is proving that you believe you have been forgiven by Jesus, and perhaps for even worse sins than your neighbor committed against you.

Jesus told a parable in today's Gospel, and while sometimes our Lord's parables are somewhat difficult to understand, this isn't one of them. An indignant king said to his unmerciful, unforgiving servant: Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you? And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. The kingdom of heaven has come to you, dear Christian. All the debt you rightly owe to your Master has been so fully forgiven by Him that not even a penny of it remains. As you play out this parable in your own life for a moment, give it a different ending, an ending where your forgiveness toward your neighbor not only means happiness for your neighbor, but also happiness for you, an ending whereby your forgiveness toward your neighbor also points that neighbor to God's forgiveness toward him in Christ. For that's ultimately where it must end for all of us. Though we deserve nothing from God, God has nonetheless given it all to us in Christ, and in Christ we also give it to one another; so that thereby God's kingdom is enlarged and His will accomplished, and all of it for the sake of His Son, who freely gives us all things. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Getting What We Deserve

Matthew 20:1-16

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 20:1-16 (ESV): For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you. So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, Why do you stand here idle all day? They said to him, Because no one has hired us. He said to them, You go into the vineyard too.

And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first. And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. But he replied to one of them, Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? So the last will be first, and the first last.

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Do you know why photographs and paintings have frames? Well, frames serve a number of purposes, but their main function is to bring the framed object into sharper focus. If the right frame is wrapped around a painting or photograph, it will enhance it, highlight it, and draw attention to it. But the frame isn't restricted for use only with paintings and photographs. It's also a literary device. What I mean is that a well-written book will always surround the main body of the story in the words of a literary frame. When you pick up a book and start reading, how likely are you to finish it if the first few pages don't reach out, grab you at-

tention, and beg you to read further? In the very same way, a well-written book will also tie up all the loose ends neatly with a well-written closing. So, when a story is properly framed, it's sharper, clearer, more focused, easier to understand, and more enjoyable to read.

So it is with today's appointed Gospel. In this very familiar Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, our Lord Christ framed the words of this text in a most compelling way. In the last verse of this reading Jesus says: So the last shall be first, and the first last. And, not surprisingly, the verse immediately preceding this Gospel makes the very same observation. So then, the parable before us this morning is actually framed, if you will, by a not-so-obvious, surprising truth about the unseen order of things eternal. And as a result, this parable becomes much clearer and easier to understand.

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Now the unusual conduct of vineyard owners is something we dare not overlook, either. I say that because in contrast to the way most vineyard owners operate their businesses, the pay this particular owner offered to his prospective workers was quite generous. When he spoke to the men he had hired, saying: Whatsoever is right, that you shall receive, his remark, if nothing else, was a very modest understatement! Another notable fact about this parable is that it was the owner himself who did the hiring in person rather than delegating the responsibility to an employee. He

was one of those rare employers who had more interest in the welfare of his workers than in the amount of work he might have expected from them. How else can you account for the fact that he was willing to hire and pay the very last group of workers, those from whom he could only have hoped, at most, to get only an hour's worth of work, the exact same wage as those who were hired at dawn?

But it was after the work day ended that the really strange behavior began. When it came time for the workers to pack up for the day, the owner of the vineyard called them all together and paid every last one the very same amount! Those who had worked only one hour received the same as those who had worked all day. Now we all know that unequal pay for equal labor isn't right, but what about the scenario played out here, equal pay for unequal labor? Looking at this story with earthly eyes and human logic, the only conclusion you could draw is that it doesn't seem fair or equitable, which is precisely the objection that was raised.

Still, there's yet one more puzzling twist. The vineyard owner, almost as if trying to add insult to injury, instructed his manager to pay the workers in reverse order, beginning with the last ones hired, apparently so that everyone would see what sort of pay the others were receiving. Perhaps now would be a good time to hear again the words of our Old Testament reading, where God reminds us that His thoughts are not our thoughts,

nor His ways our ways. And this parable is a classic case in point. If this is actually a true depiction of how God operates and it is then, truly, His ways are not our ways.

What this parable teaches us is that God is always kindly calling sinners into a relationship with Himself through Christ. That relationship is pictured here in this parable as employment, a term that suggests we are to render service to God, but which inadequately describes the sheer pleasure that is ours as we render that service. Intensely personal in His relationship with us, God is also incredibly generous, doggedly persistent about our welfare. There is pay for our service, if you want to call it that although actually, what we receive from God is far too generous to merit the word *pay*. More often, the Bible calls it exactly what it is, a gift. In Ephesians we are told, for example, that salvation and faith are the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast. But call it what you will, this parable makes it crystal clear that the blessings you receive in your relationship with God are totally independent of any personal status, merit, or worthiness of your own.

God's blessings are not related to the quantity or quality of your service, or even to whether or not you understand God's ways. Whether you work many hours, one hour, or no hours, whether you bear the burden of the heat of the day, or only the cool of late afternoon or early evening, God still gives to all who are His the same generous gift. The same heaven is given to all believers in Christ Jesus whether they have been in His kingdom since infancy, or only come to faith on their deathbed, whether they are lifetime pillars of the congregation, or recent converts. It wasn't only St. John who could properly look forward to the glories of heaven as he wrote Revelation on the Isle of Patmos, it was also a dying thief who was assured by his Lord as he neared the moment of death: Today you will be with Me in paradise. Using the words of this parable, we might observe that both these men received the same pay.

Is this shocking? Of course it is, but only in terms of ordinary human understanding. Because, ultimately, through the Holy Spirit's Gospel persuasion, the truth of this parable will eventually begin to sink in and bring you to a fuller understanding of our heavenly Father's goodness and mercy. Thanks be to God that He chose to be so unfair to you! That, you see, that is the kind of God you have. Our Giver-God makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good alike, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. Open sinners and harlots enter into the kingdom of God before the righteous scribes and Pharisees. The lowly tax collector goes home right with God rather than the respectable Pharisee who fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of all he possesses. Those who are poor, meek and lowly, who rightly recognize their sin are called blessed and are granted the kingdom of heav-

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en. Those who are least in the kingdom are said to be greater than John the Baptist. A widow's mite constitutes a greater gift than the much larger donations of the wealthy, and the person who loses his life is the only one who truly finds it.

On and on it goes. According to the clear teaching of God's Word, every single one of God's blessings come to you solely by grace, by grace alone, and only through the work and merit of Christ. What a delightfully, upside-down, topsy-turvy kingdom. God's kingdom is a kingdom in which the first shall be last, and the last first. Suddenly, those frame verses that begin and end this reading turn out to be far more than just some literary device used to hold a story together. Rather, they have a real function. They not only frame this parable, but in fact they are precisely what this parable is all about. They are not only the clue and the key to this parable's meaning, but indeed, they are its meaning. In God's world, dear friends, those who are last, who recognize their sin and their unworthiness before God apart from Jesus, truly are first, while those who trust in themselves, their works, and their own righteousness will, on the Last Day, find out not only that they are last, but left out all together from the blessings of God's kingdom. And every bit of this happens and comes to you who are Christ's purely out of God's goodness and mercy and all of it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now, that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Doing the Father's Will

Matthew 21:28-32

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 21:28-32 (ESV): But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, Son, go, work today in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not, but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir, but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said to Him, The first. Jesus said to them, Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but tax collectors and harlots believed him, and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The word *no*, is an important part of our culture's vocabulary. Indeed, it's hard-wired into our brains. You remember how it was when you were a child. You heard the words: Pick up your room, Take out the trash, or Get ready for Church and the word *no* immediately popped into your head. Now to be sure, you may not have always said it, but you thought it. This attitude came down to us from our first parents, who said No! to God while saying Yes! to themselves and the lying serpent in the Garden. And this same No has been passed down to every succeeding generation since.

As children grow older, their in-your-face No often becomes: Do I have to? usually whined in such a way that it seems doubly irritating. But in the end it's nothing more than a subtle, more annoying way, of saying No! In today's Gospel, we have the example before us of two sons. The first was testing his father's authority, maybe even denying it, though later he did what he asked him to do. The second was more sneaky, but he was doing the very same thing. The way of the second son is how we often operate. We aren't quite as likely to be rude and say No! to someone's face. Rather like the second son we say Yes!, maybe even Yes, sir!, maybe even smiling while we say it to be more convincing, but then do exactly what we want instead.

When Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai as Moses was delivering the Ten Commandments, the people responded, All these things the Lord has commanded, we will do! Then about a month later they went out, col-

lected everyone's jewelry, made a golden calf, and bowed down in worship before it. Peter denied our Lord three times on the eve of His trial after he had said to Him, Even death will not cause me to forsake You! And so it goes with us, too. You say one thing, but do something else. The good you want to do you don't do, and the evil you hate you end up doing. You honor God with your lips, but your hearts are far from Him. You nod a polite Yes! to God's Law, but in the end the immorality, greed, arrogance, ruthlessness, self-centeredness, gossipy nature and refusal to forgive others, which infects us all, shouts a deafening No!

The meaning of the word *hypocrite* is one who acts, one who hides behind a mask appearing to be someone he isn't. That was the second son. He appeared good, obedient, maybe even perfect, not at all like his brat of

That's religion without repentance, a polite Yes sir! to God's face, while defiantly shaking your fist behind your back.

a brother who was always saying No! This son learned to hide his hatred for his father behind a shiny halo of politeness. He said Yes, sir! to his father's face, while shaking his fist behind his back. That's religion without repentance, a polite Yes sir! to God's face, while defiantly shaking your fist behind your back.

Jesus, of course, was able to see that same empty, hypocritical Yes! at work among the religious leaders of Israel. They said the right things, but did just as they wanted. They honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him. They had all the motions of their religion down cold, right down to the smallest detail. They knew how long they could make the fringes

on their garments, the exact size of their prayer boxes, and how much they could give to God and still get away with keeping much of it for themselves. But they neglected the important things. They failed to see themselves as utterly sinful. Though their lives looked tidy and ordered, in reality they were nothing more than willful children defying God, their true Father.

When John came preaching a baptism of repentance, calling people to confess their sins and be bathed in God's forgiveness, the Pharisees and religious authorities kept their distance. They had no need of John's baptism. And when they saw John baptizing tax collectors, hookers, and other notorious sinners, they were even more convinced John's baptism wasn't for them. How could John even dare ask such fine, upstanding, Church-going citizens to humble themselves and be washed in the same bath with prostitutes, turncoats, and tax-collectors?

But honestly, who would you rather have sitting next to you in Church, a penitent prostitute, or a proud Pharisee? I dare say most would pick the Pharisee, who's much more likely to be an upstanding example of family values, decency, and morality. But let me remind you that it was both sons in this parable who sinned against their father, the first by what he did,

the second by what he didn't do. That must be your confession, as well, for we all have sinned against God by what we've done and left undone by our rebellious No! as well as our falsely pious Yes! We haven't loved God with our whole heart. Our response to His Word is half-baked as we turn His Ten Commandments into the Ten Suggestions and ignore them at will. We say Yes! to them only so long as they apply to the sins of others.

So, which of the two sons did the will of his father? The answer of those who heard Jesus ask this question was that it was the son who initially said No! But note Jesus' response. Assuredly I say to you that tax collectors and harlots are going into the kingdom of God before you do. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you didn't believe Him, but the tax collectors and harlots believed Him and even after you saw it, you still refused to repent and believe! So turning, not doing, that's what this parable is all about. But it's not about you turning. It's about you being turned by God changed in both heart and mind. Though you see yourself only as a sinner, you need to be turned and see yourself the way God sees you in the light of Christ as a saint, a child of God, an heir of eternal life. Though you see God only as Judge, fearing His wrath, you need to be turned to see Him as a loving Father, the One Who has thrown the sins of both your past and future as far as East is from West. Though you are bent on living life according to that way which leads to death, it's time for you to be turned so that you can do the will of your Father in heaven!

And, what is the will of God? There's a million dollar question! Jesus has given us the answer: the will of my Father is that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day. That's God's will for you that you look to Jesus crucified for you, raised for you, reigning for you, that trusting in Him you might receive the free gift of eternal life and be raised on the Last Day to live with Him forever. That's what God is working in your life, not that you be happy, healthy, wealthy, or wise, but that you be raised on the Last Day by the faith He has given you in the life and merit of His one and only Son!

Many today falsely believe Christ and His Church are only for those who think they're better than others, but hear what God says: Why will you die, O house of Israel? I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, so turn, and live. God doesn't want to see anyone dead. You are His workmanship. He has no desire to destroy the life He's created in you, in fact, to do so would be contrary to His nature. God has most certainly promised that the soul who sins will surely die. And because you are a sinner, as am I apart from Christ, you have no choice but to die. That's what happens to sinners. They die, because the wages of sin is death. That's the wage we've all been

Though you see God only as Judge, fearing His wrath, you need to be turned to see Him as a loving Father.

working for, and sadly, that's the paycheck many will find in their pay envelopes on the Last Day.

But it doesn't have to be that way, because God also provided an alternative death in the death of Jesus, a death into which we sinners may die now, and live forever. Of course you've heard it all before, but it never hurts to hear again how God took His Son, placed on Him the sin of the world, nailed Him to death, and damned Him on the cross in your place so that now God can offer and apply His death to you in Holy Baptism, in His Word, and in His medicine of immortality, the Lord's Supper. Cling to this death, He says. It's Jesus' gift for you. Die with Him now and live forever, but live without Him now, and you'll die forever!

As with all of Jesus' parables, Christ is the Key to understanding this one, as well. Jesus is the third Son of the Father, the One not mentioned here. He's the Son who said Yes! to His Father before the foundations of the world were first laid, when the Father said to Him, When they turn from Me, You go and save them. You do what they won't, do what they can't do. You keep the Law perfectly in their place. You to be their Sin. Their disobedience will be Yours, and Your obedience will be theirs. You'll be the adulterer, the thief, the murderer, the liar, the cheat, the gossip, the sinner, and through You taking on their sin, I'll restore them to be My children. And hearing these words, Jesus said Yes! and then He went and did it all perfectly for you.

As St. Paul's letter to the Philippians says so beautifully, the eternal Son did not consider His equality with the Father something to be held on to, but instead emptied Himself of His divine honor and glory, and assumed the humble clothing of a servant. The King left His throne to become a Peasant. God became the lowliest of men. Born of a poor, humble virgin, He worked, sweated, labored, wept, and bled. The Creator of all things, clothed in our humanity, humbled Himself, buried His divinity, and touched us with truly human hands. He became obedient to His own Law, kept it perfectly in our place, and came under its sentence of death on a cross. So then, which Son did the will of His father? Jesus did. He did the will of His Father for those who wouldn't, who couldn't. He did it for the son who said No! and the son who said Yes! He did it for the religious and irreligious, the harlot, the Churchgoer, the tax collector, and the Pharisee. But most of all, He did it for you!

Therefore the Father highly exalted Him, raised Him from the dead, enthroned Him at His right hand, and placed His name over all things, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Dear friends, Jesus' death is your death, His resurrection is your resurrection, His ascension is your ascension. Baptized into Jesus, you have already died, been raised, and seated with Him at the Father's right hand. So be turned to Him who turned to you in love

to forgive, raise you up, and make you His own. Cast your gaze no longer on your own sin and death, but on Him who hung on the cross for you. Be turned to Him, confess your sins, and receive absolution. God is faithful and just, and will forgive all your sin. Be turned to Him and live. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

To Live or to Die

Matthew 21:33-44

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 21:33-44 (ESV): Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.

Finally he sent his son to them, saying, They will respect my son.

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance. And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? They said to him, He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons. Jesus said to them, Have you never read in the Scriptures: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.

Grace to you, and peace, from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. According to the last two verses of this morning's Gospel, there are only two alternatives in this life. One is that you be led by the Holy Spirit to a broken-hearted, repentant faith in Jesus as Lord, and the other is that you elect to hard-heartedly turn your back on Him. In like fashion there are only two alternatives in death. You can die now in the death of Jesus and live forever or, you can die apart from Jesus, and die forever. There simply are no other options either in life, or in death. And that brings us to the parable we just read concerning a certain landowner who had set up a vineyard by digging the soil, planting the plants, building a protective wall around it, digging the winepress, and erecting a watchtower. But then he was called away to live somewhere else, where, we are not told. But before leaving, he rented his vineyard out to some

tenant farmers who were to weed, feed, water, pick the fruit, and give the landowner his fair share. Everything else had already taken care of.

But later, when the owner of the vineyard sent servants to collect his due, they bullied one servant, beat another, and killed a third. Now I understand landlords and tenants often don't see eye to eye, and truth be known, most renters would rather be owners. But, if you own property, all the attendant problems that go along with any profit you might enjoy are yours, as well. Yet, whether you would prefer to be an owner or a renter, as far as your life here is concerned, ultimately all of us are renters. God is the Landowner, and we are dependent on Him for everything. He gives you your clothing, shoes, food, drink, house, home, your reason, and all your senses. He gives you His Word and in it you have life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins. He also gives you His Holy Spirit, the Church, Absolution, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, not to mention His promise to grant you eternal life and raise you up on the Last Day. And finally, He gives you the means to live fruitfully and productively to serve both Him and your neighbor with the overflow of His tender care and mercy.

To be sure, God is really quite stubborn when it comes to handing out His mercy as He continues giving it to you even when you are ungrateful, even hostile, to His giving. In this parable the tenant farmers beat and killed their Landlord's servants, yet He continued to send them indeed, He did something even crazier: He sent his Son! When they saw Him, they seized the opportunity and took His life, believing that if He was out of the picture the inheritance would be theirs. They figured that if the Landowner wasn't coming back, and with His Son out of the picture, the land would revert to whomever had a claim on it at the time, which would have been them, or so they thought. So they took the Son, threw Him over the wall of the vineyard, and killed Him.

It was at that point in the parable where Jesus posed a question. He asked His hearers: When the Owner of the vineyard comes, what will He do to those tenants? But the question behind the question was: What will God do with those who despise His grace, act as if His gifts were their own, and kill both His servants and His Son? Of course the answer He was given was the obvious one, the answer that runs in the way of the Law, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. God would do to the tenants what they had done to His servants and His Son, and after that He would rent the vineyard to others who would give Him His fruit in due season. Isn't that what you would do if you were the Landowner? Wouldn't you prosecute those scoundrels to the fullest extent of the law, evict them, throw them into prison, and find better tenants?

Then consider who this parable is really talking about, God's people,

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His Word and
in it you have
life, salvation,
and the
forgiveness
of sins.

Israel, whom God set free from the bondage of Egypt, and brought safely through the wilderness and the Red Sea, the ones to whom He had given Canaan as an inheritance. He had given them the worship of His Name, the Tabernacle, the Temple, the Covenant, the Sacrifices and the Priesthood. He had sent prophets to them to preach His Word, but they rejected, despised, imprisoned, beat and killed them. And all this they did right up until that moment when God decided to send His own beloved Son and then they killed Him, too!

What do you suppose God will do with you, His people of the end times? After all, He planted and protected His Church as a vineyard. He sent prophets, apostles, and evangelists to preach the Holy Scriptures to you, pastors to give out His gifts and to teach you by means of His Word

This parable is stern warning for you to use Christ and His gifts, or risk losing everything, lest the kingdom of God be taken away from you and given to others.

how to live as the free, forgiven children of God. He gave you new life in the water of holy baptism and reconciled you both to Himself and one another in the forgiveness of your sins. As often as you want it, God stands ready to feed you with the Living Bread of His very own body to nourish you with His own life-giving blood.

And what do you do? Like Israel of Old, you push Him out of His own vineyard, shutting your Bibles, your ears, heart and mind to His Word, and closing your mouth to His Supper. On any given Sunday morning, most barely give themselves more than an hour to receive the gifts He brings. In far too many places the Sabbath day of Old Testament times has now given way to one sweet hour of prayer and not one minute longer! Some, as St. Paul warned, have turned to serve a belly god instead of the true God, and in that turning have

made themselves enemies of the cross, and when you turn your back on the gifts God offers in the cross of His Son, you are crucifying Him all over again!

So, this parable is stern warning for you to use Christ and His gifts, or risk losing everything, lest the kingdom of God be taken away from you and given to others. This parable was spoken to warn the Jews that they were about to be served an eviction notice. The reign of God would soon be taken from them and given to others, to the Gentiles, to you and me. You see, God had given His Israel a trust, a stewardship, to be a light shining in the darkness, to guide others to the worship of the one true God. But instead of being a light to the Gentiles, Israel chose to darken God's light with idolatry and faithlessness. Instead of good grapes, our Lord found sour grapes. Rather than faith, He found unbelief.

Today you also have a stewardship, a sacred trust from our Lord that you freely receive the gifts Jesus died to give us and that you proclaim His saving death with your lips and lives until He comes again on the Last Day.

The Church doesn't exist only for Her own life, but for the life of the world, so that all might trust in Christ for life and salvation. You aren't here today to receive only for yourself. You are here so that you can take something from this place and bring to others the saving presence of Jesus, for to refuse and reject God's beloved Son and His gifts is to live with a great risk hanging over your head, the very real possibility that God might just decide to take His gifts elsewhere.

That's why daily and continually you each need to pray: Thy kingdom come. Indeed, as the Small Catechism reminds us, God's kingdom doesn't need our prayers in order for it to come, but we need to pray that this kingdom will come among us, that God would preserve us as faithful tenants in His vineyard that He would continue to send us His Spirit, preach His Word, and royally reign over us by Jesus' death and resurrection, and all so that we might cling to Christ and lead lives that honor Him. Jesus, as the beloved Son of the Landowner, is the One whom the tenants cast out of the vineyard and put to death on a cross. He was despised and rejected by His own people, who thought they were doing God a favor by killing Him.

When you think about it, though, in an upside-down, backward sort of way, the wicked tenants were right all along in their belief that if they killed the son, the inheritance would be theirs. Indeed, it's because of the death of God's Son that the inheritance has now gone to those who least deserve it. Precisely because Jesus died, you can now be called a child of God. So, returning to Jesus' question: What is it that the divine Landlord does with those wicked tenants? Does He put them to a wretched end as the Pharisees suggested? Hear again the prayer Jesus prayed as He was dying: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Listen to Peter's words at Pentecost, where he said: God made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. When the people who heard it cried out in terror, saying: What shall we do? Peter replied: Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

Jesus said: He who falls on this Stone rejected by the builders of Israel will be broken to pieces, but he on whom It falls will be crushed. Dear friends, if you fall on Jesus and acknowledge your sin, you too will be broken to bits, but you will also be raised to life again in the power of our Lord's resurrection. On the other hand, if you stubbornly resist and refuse to be broken, if you try to protect yourself against God, you will be crushed. Your only options, then, are that you be broken on Jesus, or crushed resisting His will to save you. This morning God is holding before us all both a warning and a promise. Don't take the gifts of our Lord lightly

To reject God's beloved Son and His gifts is to live with a great risk hanging over your head, that God might take His gifts elsewhere.

or refuse the Son who comes to you from the Father in blessing. And most of all, don't be offended by the Son who was killed by the wicked tenants. Baptized into His death and believing on His name, both the vineyard and the kingdom are now yours by right. The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Infant Baptism

Matthew 11:25-30

Third Sunday After Pentecost

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. At some point, most of you have been confronted by someone who has questioned or rejected the Scriptural practice of infant baptism. You have heard some of the arguments. There is no way a little child can understand Christianity or make a personal commitment to Jesus. No one should be baptized until they have grown up enough to decide for themselves if they want to accept Jesus. Now admittedly, according to human standards, these arguments make good, common sense. But there is a problem with this way of thinking. It is wrong-headed, inside-out, upside-down, and finds no foundation in Scripture which, in fact, teaches precisely the opposite namely, that the power of baptism is found in God, not in us or our decision.

Does Jesus say: Let the grownups come to Me, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these? or, Unless you are an adult, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God? Does St. Peter say: Baptism doesn't save you? Of course not! Rather instead, our Lord holds up little children as the model and example of true faith. Jesus says that anyone who doesn't receive His Kingdom like a little child will never enter into it. And Peter says that baptism actually saves you, by connecting you to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, in today's Gospel, Jesus praises the Father for revealing this Good News to infants instead of the wise and learned. He says that you must become like a helpless little child if you are to have any hope of entering into God's Kingdom! But you don't like to hear that, do you? Because you know the kind of care infants require — that 24 hours a day someone has to do everything for them. And that if they don't provide that kind of care, the infant will

Does Jesus say:
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grownups
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for the
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these?

likely die! Even babies seem to sense this. Consider how a newborn automatically searches for his mother's milk, how quickly he recognizes the voice and presence of mom and dad and clings for dear life to the parents whom God has provided.

That's where you stand in relation to our heavenly Father. And that's true whether you acknowledge God as Creator or not. The Scriptures testify everywhere that God causes the rain to fall and the sun to shine on all mankind, even as He gives each of us our daily bread. As a Christian, you recognize God's gracious hand in all this. You realize that He has done everything for you lest you die. That's why, in faith, you look to Him for all you need to support your body and life. But unfortunately, your sinful human pride frequently rejects this work of God. That's why we often

God reveals Himself to you in Christ and gently leads you back into His Kingdom so that, like newborn babies, you once again hunger and thirst for the precious gifts of God as if they were mother's milk.

stubbornly insist on asserting our independence from God and everyone else.

We don't like to think that our very existence depends entirely on God, and that we have very little to do with providing for our own health and well being.

When you start having such thoughts, that's when God, by means of trials and heartaches, drives you back to Himself to remind you of the necessity of this child-like relationship with Him. He reveals Himself to you in Christ and gently leads you back into His Kingdom so that, like newborn babies, you once again hunger and thirst for the precious gifts of God as if they were mother's milk. That, you see, is the very essence of faith, a simple, child-like trust in Christ, similar to the trust an infant has in his parents.

You surely remember the story of Nicodemus, who, in response to Jesus' statement that you must be born again, asked: Can a full-grown man enter again into his mother's womb? But the womb of which Jesus spoke isn't the physical womb of an earthly mother. Rather it's the womb of the Church and the font of Holy Baptism. For just as the Church is depicted as the Bride of Christ, so also is She the Mother of every Christian. And the font is the womb where the Church gives new birth to the children of God. In the font is where you received this Kingdom like a little child.

Regrettably, though, there's a negative side to all this childishness, a mischievous obedience that causes you to try and crawl out from under the care and supervision of our heavenly Father. From time to time, like restless teenagers, you rebel and go searching for freedom, and indepen-

dence from God. You push the boundaries of His authority. You test the limits to see what and how much you can get away with. You strive for the feeling of the true independence of one who is all grown up, living on your own, and standing on your own two feet. But when you do that, when you fail to recognize and seek God's gracious preservation in your life, when you cease looking to Him for all the things necessary to sustain you, body and soul, or when you seek to find these things in places other than where God has promised to give them, when you think you have finally made it, that you're now among the wise and the learned, that's when the Gospel becomes, for you, a hidden mystery. That's when Jesus has to invite you once again to come to Him alone for the rest and the safety you so desperately need.

When you vainly attempt to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, Christ isn't going to give you any peace. He is going to come after you to try and rescue you. He is going to seek you out and bring you back to the Father. And of course, the Father will always welcome you back with love and forgiveness, remind you that you are His child, and urge you to receive His Fatherly, divine care and mercy. When you recognize the Fatherly hand of God in this way, when you will be able to live your life and go about your work with joy, knowing that God is taking care of you, and come what may, He will always be with you. Living the Christian life ceases to be a burden when you understand that Christ has already given you Himself and all good things, forgiveness, life, and salvation, freely, with no strings attached.

His yoke isn't just another heavy load you have to bear, but a joyful privilege, a share in that life which is hidden with Him in God. Dear Christian, our Lord is no cruel Taskmaster, but a gentle Savior. He didn't make you to be His child so as to enslave you and put you to work for Him, but so that you might live freely with Him as a member of His family. And while the yoke of Christ may at times seem heavy and burdensome, it lightens considerably when compared to the reality of facing life without hope in Christ, without the abiding presence and power of our Lord and Savior sustaining you on your way.

That's why this morning's Gospel text is such a great comfort, for it not only reminds you of God's desire to govern all things according to His gracious will, but it also speaks to you of God's great gentleness and tenderness toward us sinners in Christ. In this text you see Christ, the obedient Son of the Father, who humbled Himself unto death, like a sheep being led

The Father will always welcome you back with love and forgiveness, remind you that you are His child, and urge you to receive His Fatherly, divine care and mercy.

to the slaughter, as He tenderly invites you to lay all your cares upon Him. Here you see Him as He really is, a gentle Savior caring for His children, inviting you who are weary and burdened to come to Him for a much needed rest. And all of this He does just so that He might care for you like the infant that you are, cradling you gently in His arms, carrying you into heaven, safe and sound forever. May it always be so for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds, by faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.

Knowing the Trinity Through Baptism

Matthew 28:16-20

Holy Trinity Sunday

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. I think it safe to say that this morning's Gospel, known by many as the so-called Great Commission, is one of the most well-known passages in all of Holy Scripture. Here we find Jesus and His disciples on a mountain near Galilee as He was preparing to ascend back to the right hand of the Father. The place where this event happened is especially interesting because throughout the Bible mountains are often portrayed as points of contact between God and His people. For instance, God first came to Moses in the burning bush on Mount Horeb. Later He gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. In the New Testament, the Sermon on the Mount stands out as another example, as do the mountains where Jesus was transfigured, crucified, and of course ascended. In each of these, a mountain was where God revealed Himself to man. And in every case, the God who revealed Himself is the Triune God.

In the beginning, the Father was at work speaking our world into existence. The Spirit was at work hovering over the face of the deep. And with them both was the Son, who was, as John reminds us, with God and was God, the One through whom all things were made. Because God is Triune, when He created man, He spoke, saying: Let Us make man in Our image. The Holy Trinity, you see, is the essential reality of who God is and what He has done. And although it is impossible to entirely comprehend this, we must still believe it. It is the Father who has filled with Fatherly, Divine goodness, made all things and still preserves them, loved the world, had mercy on us poor sinners, and sent His only Son to die in our place. It is the Son who out of love for His Father, you, me and all people, came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, was made Man, was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered, died and was buried. And because we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him, the Holy Spirit is the One who joins us to

the Son, makes us God's children, and bestows on us the blessings of the cross, namely, forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life.

To be sure, the mystery of the Trinity is impossible to understand. Indeed it is a true mystery, a mystery, which if you try too hard to comprehend it, will set your head to spinning. Perhaps that is why we require much more comfortable talking only about Jesus. But isn't that how it ought to be? There is no way you can ever know the One True God except through Jesus, in whom God's plan of salvation is revealed. In Christ, even the smallest child can understand the mystery of the Trinity as well or better than even the greatest theologian. Jesus Christ comes to you in ways you can understand. He speaks to you on your level, bridging the gap between God and man by the perfect life He lived for us all and the death

Jesus Christ speaks to you on your level, bridging the gap between God and man by the perfect life He lived for us all and the death He died in our place.

He died in our place. In a sense then, Christ is the Mountain of God, the Place where God and Man perfectly come together, the Place where you must go to hear the Words of eternal life.

And just as Jesus once designated that mountain where He would meet His disciples to depart back to His rightful place in heaven, He has likewise shown you the mountain, on which you must meet Him. He has given you His Word through the prophets and the apostles. He has attached that Word and promise to the sacraments. And He administers these gifts to you by means of pastors through the power of His Holy Spirit. These men who are sent by Jesus to shepherd His sheep are how you hear the words of Jesus. Through this ministry the Holy Spirit is at work reconciling you to God and uniting you with Christ, so that connected with Him, you

come to know God as He really is, Triune.

Nowhere is this more true than in holy baptism, that is where you first encountered this Triune God. Concerning the baptism of Christ, Luther writes, Do you think it was a joke that the heavens were opened, with the voice of God the Father declaring Christ to be His beloved Son, and with the Holy Spirit coming down upon Him as a dove. Luther wrote these words to impress on us that our knowledge of the Trinity was given in baptism through our Savior, for you first encountered our Triune God in holy baptism, and it is there in the font where the Holy Spirit first united you with Christ.

In baptism, God became your Father, and you His child. God gave you His Holy Spirit, who brought with Him Christ and all His benefits. And all this took place because, as Luther points out, the baptism of Christ sanctified the Jordan and all water to be a rich, full washing away of sins, and a gracious water of salvation. His baptism became your baptism. He

entered the water for you, and you have now entered the water with Him. Holy baptism is where a Great Exchange took place, where Christ went down into the water holy and righteous, but came out covered with your sin. While at the same time you went into the water corrupted by sin, yet emerged dripping wet with the righteousness of Christ.

Buried and raised with Christ in baptism, God gives you His Name, and you become His child. Now, because you bear in your own body the name of our Holy Triune God, as you go about your day, no matter where that day might take you, you carry within you a living portrait of the Trinity. For you, as a baptized child of God, the Father Son and Holy Spirit aren't some abstract concept. They are the roots of your family tree! That's why, in the Lord's Prayer, our Lord Jesus tenderly invites you to address God as your Father. You come to Him in prayer just as little children come to their dear father, because you are His children. And as such, you pray that this Name given you in baptism might be hallowed among us. And God's Name is hallowed whenever His Word is taught in its truth and purity, when you, as the children of God, live in harmony with it, and then, as you go on your way, you teach others to receive and believe all the things Jesus has given to you.

And all this comes into proper focus every time we gather in His presence for worship. In fact, the only suitable response to a proper knowledge of the Holy Triune God is worship. But what does worship mean? No doubt, you could find any number of answers to that question. But the highest worship of all is not that you do something for God, but rather that you receive everything from Him by faith. To worship God is to acknowledge Him as the only true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Maker of heaven and earth, the Redeemer of all mankind by the blood of Christ, and the Sanctifier of the Church by Word and Sacrament. To worship God is to fear, love and trust in Him above all things, to rely on Him completely, literally, to place your life into His hands. Such worship begins with baptism, and continues whenever you come to hear the Word of God, or receive Christ's body and blood in the Supper.

Yet, instead of worship, far too often we are plagued by doubts. You all know the doubts you face in your own life. Perhaps a loved one has died, and you wonder if God really cares. Maybe money is tight, bills are coming due, and you wonder how you are going to make ends meet. When it seems as if everything is falling apart, it is hard to believe God really cares. All of us have such doubts. Even on the mountain where this morning's Gospel took place, Matthew records the fact that the disciples doubted. And of

Yet, instead of worship, far too often we are plagued by doubts. When it seems as if everything is falling apart, it is hard to believe God really cares.

course, who can forget the account of Thomas, where he refused to believe Christ had risen until he had felt for himself the wounds of His crucifixion and death?

It may well be that doubt is the most frustrating thing a Christian experiences because doubt is the very opposite of faith and worship. It's the lingering well-spring of sin that remains with you throughout life. Remember how Satan tricked Eve by planting doubt in her mind? That's what he does to you as well. Which is why you must daily return to your baptism, and to your life with God in Christ. That's why you must cling for dear life to the Word and Sacraments, in which, and through which, Christ has promised to be ever present with you. Indeed, that day when He left this earth bodily to ascend to the Father, He promised His disciples: Lo, I am with you always! And He is. Whenever you confess your sins, you are returning to the water of holy baptism. You are drowning the Old Adam with all his sinful thoughts and desires, and allowing the New Man, Christ Himself, to rise up again in your heart. Likewise, whenever you come to the Supper of Christ's body and blood, you are returning to the reality of your baptism and again, participating in the death and resurrection of our Lord.

One of the Early Church Fathers put it very nicely. He said: Like little fishes we are born in the water. And as fish, we live our whole life in the water of our baptism. That was certainly the case for Dr. Luther. The answer to his frequent doubts, and also the assaults of the devil, was a simple assertion of faith. He said: I am baptized. Because God has called me to be His own dear child, He will never leave nor forsake me. I was buried with Christ in His death, and I am raised in His resurrection. I am covered by His blood. I am baptized! By the grace of God, dear friends in Christ, that is also your confession. By your baptism, you became a child of God so that the Father even sets a table at which you may now feast upon His own dear Son. Once He was given unto death for the salvation of the world. Now He is given to you under bread and wine for the forgiveness of your sins. By the Holy Spirit, you cling to that body and blood of Christ in true faith and in it you receive His forgiveness, life and salvation.

God has given you the grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith. By means of His blessed Word and Holy Sacraments, God's promise is that He will continue to keep you steadfast in this one true faith and worship until life's end, even as He will also defend you from all your enemies! This is God's promise and pledge, and He will continue to deliver on it for the sake of His Son. Amen.

And now the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of His Holy Spirit will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

A Change of Heart

John 7:37-39

The Festival of Pentecost

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. It was the last day, the eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles. All the Jewish faithful were gathered together in Jerusalem to thank God for the autumn harvest, where they stayed in tents to remind themselves of the years their forefathers wandered in the wilderness following their delivery from the bondage of Egypt. The eighth day was a Sabbath, a day of rest, the climax of the week when they were to remember the salvation of God that had been celebrated throughout this feast. On each of the seven preceding days, the priest, at the morning service, would take a golden vessel, fill it with water from the well of Siloam, and mix it with wine from the drink offering. Then, while trumpets were sounding and a song of praise was being sung, he would pour it into two perforated silver bowls on the Altar of Burnt Offering as the people chanted: Therefore with joy shall you draw water out of the wells of salvation.

It was on this last day of the Feast that Jesus stood up, and with an impassioned voice, cried out: If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. For some, Christ's words only verified their suspicion that Jesus was a blasphemous deceiver because He was saying: I AM the Fountain of living water. I AM the Water that flows to you from God's altar. I AM the One who alone can quench your thirst, and sooth your parched, dry lips. Shortly after these words were spoken, a disagreement arose among the people concerning Jesus' identity. And some, Holy Scriptures teach us, wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him.

Jesus' words obviously infuriated some who heard them, while others were brought to faith. This saying of our Lord gave them joy and comfort in the knowledge that in Jesus they were seeing the fulfillment of all of the promises of God. They wanted to believe. They did not want their thirst to return. They did not want to go back to living as enemies of God. They wanted the Living Water He spoke of to fill them through and through. They wanted to be alive toward God, and they wanted Him to live in them. They no longer wanted to live an empty, godless existence. I suspect that when it came to spiritual matters, one of their greatest fears was that they knew their own hearts all too well. And isn't that true of us also? Do we not like to think of our hearts as the center of everything good and right? And

yet the truth is that our hearts often fail us, for our motives are impure, and our wills bent toward self-service. How many times have you struggled to come to a God-pleasing decision about something important in your life, only to have someone counsel you to look into your heart to discern God's will? But is it not more than just a little strange that we who ought to know better still harbor this weird notion that truth can be found in our own hearts when we know what Holy Scripture says, that our hearts are the problem?

One of the first heart references in Holy Scripture is found in the sixth chapter of Genesis just before God told Noah He was going to destroy the earth with a flood. God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And lest you think something may have changed, that the hearts of men suddenly became holy, you need look no further than the words of Jesus in Matthew 15: Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies.

There is therefore now no condemnation, Paul tells us, for those who are in Christ Jesus.

St. Augustine once reflected about the state of his own childhood, writing: When people didn't do what I wanted either because I couldn't make myself understood, or because what I wanted was bad for me, I would become angry with my elders for not being subservient, and with responsible people for not acting as though they were my slaves. I would avenge myself on them by bursting into tears. This, I have learned, is what babies are like, so far as I have been able to observe them. Jesus, of course, bids us to abandon any notion that there might be something good or holy in our hearts apart or separate from Him. And it's when you recognize the innate barrenness of your own heart that you begin thirst for the living water Jesus gives. Like St. Paul you lament the fact that you aren't what you would like to be, and what God says you ought to be. You find yourself in that desperate situation where you cry out with parched lips: O wretched man that I am. Who will save me from this body of death?

And it's from there, that place of deep desperation, that Jesus calls you to come to Him and satisfy your thirsting soul. Through His living, powerful Word, our Lord takes hold of you and causes you to gaze upon His beauty, holiness, and perfection. And this He does because all these things are yours through the faith He has given you in Himself. Every lament that makes you wonder anew who will set you free from this body of death, is met with a resounding confession of faith: I thank God, who has given me the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. There is therefore now no condemnation, Paul tells us, for those who are in Christ Jesus. And rest assured, dear Christian, that after having been washed and cleansed in the water of holy baptism, you are indeed in Christ Jesus! This is the Gospel

that brought your dry, barren bones to life, the Word that worked death and resurrection in your heart and is surpassed by no other, because it gives life and salvation to all who are wasting away in the throes of an unquenchable spiritual thirst. Even Ezekiel, living some 800 years before the birth of Jesus, knew that only God could give life to dry, dead bones. And God assured Ezekiel, saying: I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it.

God put His Spirit in you, and He has given you life. And even now, in a miraculous fashion, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God is literally creating in you a change of heart. Now, with God's Spirit living within you, creating faith, a faith nurtured by Word and Sacrament, rivers of living water have begun to flow from your heart. Now, there is hope where formerly there was only despair. Now there is order instead of chaos, meaning and purpose instead of futility, forgiveness and grace instead of fearful condemnation and wrath, and yes, even a new intent, a new will, and a desire to be what God created you to be. Perhaps St. Augustine revealed that new will best in a little prayer he wrote following his own conversion.

You Lord, St. Augustine wrote, You have become my Hope, my Comfort, my Strength, and my All! In You my soul rejoices. The darkness vanished from before my eyes, and I beheld You, the Sun of Righteousness. When I loved darkness, I knew You not, but wandered on from night to night. But You led me out of that blindness. You took me by the hand and called me to Yourself, and now I can thank You, for Your mighty voice which has penetrated my inmost heart. As Jesus says, he who believes in Me, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. May it always be so in your life, for His name's sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Now, there is hope where formerly there was only despair. Now there is order instead of chaos, meaning and purpose instead of futility, forgiveness and grace instead of fearful condemnation and wrath.

Our Coronation Day

Luke 24:44-53

The Ascension of Our Lord

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

For three full years, the disciples had been with Jesus. They had walked with Him to many places, and talked with Him on countless occasions. He had become more than their Teacher and Master. He was also a very dear Friend, yes, even their Brother. More importantly, they knew that He was their God, their Lord, and their Savior. His triumphant resurrection had been the final action in His plan to save mankind, and they had just spent 40 glorious days with their Savior following His rising from the dead.

No doubt they were looking forward to many, many more days together with Jesus, but after He led them out to the mountain at the village of Bethany, He left them. With holy hands raised in blessing, Jesus was lifted up into Heaven. The disciples would not be spending more time with Him after all. And what was their reaction to all this? As the Holy Spirit tells us through St. Luke, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Jesus had left them, and yet they rejoiced. Their Lord was no longer with them, yet they were not filled with grave sorrow but great joy. Here is why. These disciples of Jesus recognized what the Ascension of their Lord meant for Him. They knew that it meant the return of the Son of God to His Father, that this was the restoration of the Heavenly King to His Heavenly Throne. The Day of His Ascension was the day of His Coronation, the day upon which the Man who once wore a crown of thorns would be crowned with a golden crown as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This was truly a hooray for Jesus at the moment. And that is why His disciples rejoiced.

Like good students, the disciples were overjoyed that their Teacher and Master was receiving such a reward for all His work. Like good servants, they were pleased that their Master was receiving such praise for all He had done. Like good friends, they were delighted that their Friend was being crowned with such great glory. Like good brothers, they were filled with joy over their Brother's joy. Hence they left the place of Christ's Ascension not filled and consumed with sadness for themselves, but with

great joy over and for their Savior, their Lord, and their God and also with great joy over and for themselves, because these disciples of Jesus recognized what the Ascension of Jesus meant for them and for us.

They knew by faith that the Ascension meant the return of the Son of Man back to God and more importantly the return of all mankind back to God. Through the eyes of faith, these disciples understood that the return of the Son of God back into His eternal home meant that Jesus had accomplished all things necessary for us poor sinners to enter into eternal life with God. To be sure, they also knew that all this was being done for them, because they were unable to do it for themselves. They knew there was nothing good in them that would have caused Jesus to do any of this, just as you must also know that there is nothing good in you that would cause Jesus to look favorably upon you, for we are all sinful and unclean as the Scriptures everywhere attest. Among us there is not even one who does good, no not one. We have all, like sheep, gone astray, following our own sinful desires and lusts, and except for Jesus, we would have to receive all we deserve: God's wrath, hot displeasure and an eternity in the fires of hell.

Jesus alone and certainly not a one of us is He who lived the life of perfect obedience to God's commands, the life of perfect obedience that we who are disobedient could never have done. Jesus took into His own body the sins of us all and suffered the death and hell we sinners deserve. God descended from Heaven to become True Man, to live your life for you, and to die your death for you. And now this filled-with-your-sin sinless God-Man has risen from the dead, and been raised back into Heaven, all for you. Now God, His Father and yours, no longer has to look upon your disobedience and turn you away from Heaven's Gate. Rather, God now looks upon Christ's obedience and counts it as your own. God looks upon Christ's payment for sin and has added it to your account. God the Father looks at everything His Eternal Son has done and now considers you to be His child.

In Christ God adopted you to be His very own in holy baptism, cleansing you from all your sin and declaring to you the same words He spoke at Jesus' baptism: You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. As a token of your baptism, God has given you the gift of saving faith, which in turn allows you to believe that He is your true Father and Jesus your true Brother. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God has enabled you to trust that the Word He speaks about your sin and its forgiveness is true, that even though your sins are many, great and grievous, your Heavenly Father is still able to say to you: I forgive you all your sins. Go in peace and sin no more. And in that same faith, you come to this Table, kneel in God's presence, and receive Christ's very own body and blood into your mouth and body for the forgiveness of your sins and the strengthening of your faith in Him as Savior and Lord.

By that same faith we Christians now live every hour of our lives, trusting in our Father's mercy at every turn. So when your last hour arrives,

dear Christian, even though it will be in the midst of sin, for there has never been, nor will there never be a moment in this life in which any of us is without sin, for we are all sinners through and through, it will not be a time for sadness, but yet another time for rejoicing over the Ascension of Jesus. For on the Last Day the faithful shall ascend bodily to rejoin their souls, to be with Him who is our

Teacher, our Master, our Friend, our Brother, our God, our Lord, and our Savior. And there He Himself will welcome us home. Like good students made to be good by the wisdom He provides for us through His Holy Word, we will be made happy by the reward our Teacher gives us. Like good servants made to be good by the power He provides through His Holy Spirit, we will be pleased by the praise our Master gives. Like good

There we will be with the disciples of old, filled with great joy, continually praising and blessing God for all His goodness toward us.

friends made to be good by the same love that He has given us, we will be delighted by the glory that we will be able share with our Friend Jesus. Like good brothers declared to be good because of all that our Brother Jesus has done for us, we will be filled with joy because of our Brother's joy over us.

we will be with the disciples of old, filled with great joy, continually praising and blessing God for all His goodness toward us, in His living for us, dying for us, rising for us, and ascending for us, and yes, for bringing to us such a glorious ascension of our own. May it always be so for His name's sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

That Day, like the day of our Lord's Ascension, will be our Coronation Day, that day upon which we who now wear the crown of suffering here in this sin-sick, fallen world, will be crowned with the golden crown of everlasting life earned for us by our Savior. And there we shall remain forevermore, in the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Eternal City in which God and His people dwell. There

Do You Believe in the Resurrection of the Body?

The resurrection of our Lord

Job 19:25-26

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God. (Job 19:25–26, Version)

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!

After the body of Jesus was taken down off the cross on Friday, there was not enough time to anoint the body with the appropriate burial spices. They had to get his body into the tomb before the Sabbath began. On Saturday they rested. So, on Sunday, the first day of the week, several women wanted to anoint the body of Jesus. So, they got everything together and headed toward the tomb early in the morning. As they were walking toward the tomb they were wondering who would roll away the stone for them. When they arrived at the tomb they noticed that the stone had already been rolled away.

The tomb is empty. Where is the body of Jesus? The angel said to the women, "Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen." Jesus defeated death and is alive and He is going into Galilee; there they will see Him.

Do the women believe the angel's word or not? They have no evidence. They don't see Jesus, yet. Are they to believe that Jesus has risen from the dead or not?

Christ is announced as risen, but Christ is not yet seen. The angel proclaimed the resurrection, and the women heard the message, and they believed in it before they saw the risen Christ. God arranged for the

women to hear the message first, and then they had the chance to see Jesus in Galilee.

Sometimes God even challenges us to simply believe in Him by faith. It's not so much "seeing" that makes people believe. Many people won't believe in Christianity because they don't see any evidence of it being a real and authentic religion. Instead, it's the "hearing" of the Gospel that produces faith. Romans 10:17 says that "faith comes by hearing the word of God." Jesus once said, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:28). Jesus also says that "my sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow Me and I give them eternal life" (John 10:27-28).

Do you believe that Christ rose from the dead? Do you believe that the very same body that was crucified is the very same body that came back to life again? In a recent survey, 75 percent of Americans claimed to believe that Christ rose from the dead.

However, 25 percent believe otherwise. Some claim that the tomb was empty because Jesus' body had been devoured by wild dogs. Others claim that Jesus' body rotted away in the tomb and that the resurrection story was made up by the disciples in order to put a happy ending to a sad story. Others claim that Jesus only appeared to be dead, thanks to a slow-acting poison administered to him on the cross while later he revived. Others claim that Jesus never rose bodily but that He only rose in our hearts.

If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then preaching is useless, our faith is in vain, and all preachers are false witnesses of God. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then the resurrection is myth, a legend and a fraud. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then we need to find another religion, soon. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then we may as well play soccer on Sunday, read the newspaper, sleep in, eat, drink, and be happy, for tomorrow you die and that's the end of it all. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then Easter will only be about bunnies, colored eggs, and springtime flowers.

But worst of all, if Christ has not been raised from the dead, we are still in our sins with no Savior to rescue us. It would be up to us to atone for your own sin. It would be up to us to balance the books, to fix our own problems. Since we are all children of Adam, then it's a matter of time before we receive the wages of sin — cancer, a stroke, a blood clot, a stray bullet, a drunk driver, or a strange virus.

But the Good News is that Christ is risen. The tomb is empty. Death is swallowed up forever. Sins are washed away. The devil is defeated. A new creation is dawned.

Jesus was put to death for our sins, but on Easter He rose to life for our justification. Jesus suffered God's wrath against sin, but on Easter, God frees us from His wrath and has declared us forgiven. The resurrection of our Lord means that the sacrifice on Good Friday was sufficient and pleasing to the Father. Since sin was paid for, life and salvation must

appear. Since darkness has been defeated, the light of Christ must shine. Jesus most naturally had to rise. Because Jesus rose, we, too, will live. Because Jesus rose, we need not fear death.

Our ears hear this Gospel, and faith is naturally created and nurtured. By faith we believe that Christ rose from the dead even though we haven't seen Him. We believe in the resurrection of Jesus apart from any physical evidence. Why? Because the Scriptures say so. Eye witnesses have recorded the resurrection of our Lord in Scriptures. Faith takes God at His word and believes what is not seen.

I'm sure that everyone here believes that Christ rose from the dead, but do you believe in the resurrection of the body? I ask this, because the two go hand in hand. I mentioned earlier that, in a recent survey, 75 percent of Americans said they believe that Jesus rose from the dead, but only 35 percent believe in the resurrection of the body on the last day.

Some members of the Corinthian church denied the bodily resurrection on the last day. They asked, "How are the dead raised up" (1 Corinthians 15:35). They wanted to know how a decomposed body could possibly rise again. They thought that the goal was to be free from the body and to attain to the spiritual. They thought that the spirit would never be joined to the body, because the body is evil. Unfortunately, this false teaching is popular today. Many people see the body as unimportant and that all that counts is the inner spirit. Many Christians think that the goal is for the soul to go to heaven and that the body is pretty much out of the picture.

Paul saw this as a serious heresy. Paul says, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either" (1 Corinthians 15:13). Paul sees the physical resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the body on the last day as going hand in hand.

Jesus once said, "Because I live, you too shall live" (John 14:19). Jesus also said, "A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear His voice and come out" (John 5:28-29). First Thessalonians 4:16 says that on the last day "the dead in Christ will rise first."

The English word *cemetery* comes from the Greek word meaning "a sleeping place." All the bodies in the cemetery are "sleeping," because someday, they will awaken. The soul will be rejoined to the body, and they will come alive again, some to eternal life and some to eternal damnation.

In the Gospel of Luke, we learn that Jairus' daughter died. But Jesus said that she is sleeping. Jesus later gave her life again. In the Gospel of

Paul sees the physical resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the body on the last day as going hand in hand.

John, we learn that Lazarus died, but Jesus told his disciples that Lazarus is sleeping. Jesus later gave Lazarus life again.

All those in the cemetery will be raised. It's a mystery, but on the last day, we will be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, our body in the coffin will be raised imperishable and immortal. Just as a seed that dies and is sown in the ground bears no resemblance to the plant that will one day emerge, so also, our resurrected body will bear no resemblance to that which was buried. Again, it's a mystery, but God will give us a new body on the last day. Our body that will some day be buried in the ground will be transformed into a glorified body. Our current body suffers from aging, sickness, sin, and death. It is a perishable

On this glorious
Easter morn,
we are free —
free from the
sting of death
on account of
Christ who died
and who is alive
forevermore.

body. But on the last day, it will be given a new life. We will wear, so to speak, a new outfit that is incorruptible and immortal.

Job believed in the resurrection of the body. He said, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25–26). Notice that, according to Job, His Redeemer lives and that Job will some day see His Redeemer with his own eyes.

Yes, our Redeemer lives. He conquered death and is alive forevermore. The physical resurrection of Christ and the bodily resurrection of the dead go hand in hand. We cannot have one without the other.

So the comfort of today is that, because Christ lives, we too shall live. Because Christ rose from the dead, we too will rise from the dead. But while we remain here on earth, our bodies are

important to our Lord. He created us and He sustains us. He gives us our daily bread. He supplies us with food, drink, clothing and all other earthly blessings. But He also cares about our soul. We were washed in the waters of Holy Baptism. We have been declared forgiven on account of Christ. Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

On this glorious Easter morn, we are free — free from the sting of death on account of Christ who died and who is alive forevermore. This is a day of triumph and victory. This is the day in which Jesus who was crucified has risen from the dead. This is the day the Lord has made. On this day and every Sunday, we will rejoice and be glad in the Good News of our Lord's resurrection.

Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He has given you victory over death. Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for His mercy endures forever. Amen.

Build Your House on the Rock

Text: Matthew 7: 24 - 29

24 "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: **25** "and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. **26** "But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: **27** "and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall." **28** And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, **29** for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

In 1174 the Italian architect Bonnano Pisano began work on what would become his most famous project: A separately standing bell tower for the cathedral of the city of Pisa. The tower was to be eight stories and 185 feet tall.

There was just one "little" problem: builders quickly discovered that the soil was much softer than they had anticipated (the soil consisted of sand, shells and clay) and the foundation was far too shallow to adequately hold the structure — it was only five feet deep! And sure enough, before long the whole structure had begun to tilt . . . and it continued to tilt . . . until finally the architect and the builders realized that nothing could be done to make the Leaning Tower of Pisa straight again.

It took 176 years to build the Tower of Pisa, and during that time many things were done to try and compensate for the tilt. The foundation was shored up. The upper levels were even built at an angle to try to make the top of the tower look straight. Nothing worked.

The tower has stood for more than 800 years, but it leans 18 feet away from where it should be. One day, experts say, it will fall. All because it wasn't built on the right foundation.

In our text Jesus was talking about foundations. In His illustration, He uses the picture of building a house on the foundation of rock or sand to refer to what we are building our lives upon. Jesus' words in our text are the conclusion to His Sermon on the Mount, which takes up three whole chapters of the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 5, 6 and 7). So when Jesus

refers to “these sayings of Mine” (verse 24) in the first verse of our text, He is referring to His entire sermon.

We can even make the broader application to all of Jesus’ words. He says in verses 24 and 25 of our text, “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock” (verses 24-25).

Who is a “wise man,” Jesus asks? The one who “hears these sayings of Mine and does them” (verse 24)! It is important, yes, essential that we hear the Word of God. Paul says in Romans, “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). But do we always remember how important doing the Word of God is? The Apostle James reminds us, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22). If we only come to church or Bible class to hear God’s Word, but don’t apply it to our lives, then the words of Christ really don’t do us any good, do they?

If we read of Jesus’ many promises to hear our prayers, but we never take the time to come to Him in prayer with our needs, or we simply don’t pray in faith, what good is it for us to hear this?

Now, I’m not just talking about the Law here — the “do’s and don’ts” of God’s commandments — and neither is Jesus. Think of the promises of Jesus, even the Gospel message itself. If we read or hear all the promises Christ gives us in His Word of His presence and His protection, but never trust Him or turn to Him and His Word when danger or difficulty come, what good is it for us to hear this?

If we read of Jesus’ many great and expansive promises to hear and answer our prayers in the best possible way imaginable, but we never take the time to come to Him in prayer with our needs and wants, with our worries and cares, or we simply don’t pray in faith or believe that God

will answer our prayers as He has promised, what good is it for us to hear this? The same, of course, can be said about God’s Law.

If we hear God tell us “Do not steal,” “Do not commit adultery,” “Honor your father and mother,” but decide that we know better and simply refuse to do what God tells us, what good is it for us to hear God’s Law?

James reminds us that if we hear and do what God says, we will be blessed, “but he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:25).

If Jesus’ words are simply heard, but not believed and then applied to our life, God’s Word essentially becomes worthless to us. It goes in one

ear and out the other. Jesus says that this is like building our lives — our “house” — on the sand, “but everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall” (verses 26-27).

Notice, such a slight difference — one hears and does; the other hears and does not — and yet the result is the very opposite. If we neglect, reject, or just plain forget about God’s Word and His promises in Christ, no matter how good the “house” of our life looks on the outside, it will be torn down when the storms of life come crashing down upon us. And when the ultimate storm of life comes — our death, or the end of all things at Judgment Day — those who have not made Christ and His work of salvation the foundation of their faith and life will “fall” eternally in hell. As Jesus says, “And great was its fall” (verse 27). This will be the end result of anyone who puts their faith, hope, and trust into someone or something other than Jesus and His Word.

The Leaning tower of Pisa was and is a beautiful structure, but one day it is going to fall because it was not built on a solid foundation. How many of our lives, after years and years of trying to build them, will look beautiful on the outside, but because they are not built on the foundation of Jesus and His word, in the end, when tested, will fall.

There has been a great amount of work and money put into trying to get the Leaning Tower back to being straight. As the tower demonstrates, if the foundation is neglected, it is hard to fix it. If only the foundation had been given more attention, think of all the time and money that could have been saved. Think about your own life, how much smoother would it have been if you had fully trusted in Jesus and built your life on the foundation of God’s Word?

Every area of our lives that we do not build upon the rock of God’s Word will fall. If we try to build a marriage in the sand of our own selfish desires, it will fall. If we try to raise our children on the sands of human opinion we will fail. If we build our future on the sands of financial wealth and security we will fall and great will be the fall. On what foundation have you built the house of your life?

You young people in our congregation may not be thinking much about the end of your life, or about some of the big decisions and responsibilities you have in front of you down the road, but you can save yourself a whole lot of heartache and trouble in life if you start building your lives on Christ and His Word. Start building daily on the foundation of God’s Word before the

If we reject God’s Word and His promises, no matter how good the “house” of our life looks on the outside, it will be torn down when the storms of life come crashing down upon us.

“house” of your life starts to lean too far in the wrong directions, before the walls start to crack, the roof starts to cave in and your life becomes a mess.

For those of us who are older, it is never too late for “foundation repair”! We who live here in Texas know what this is all about. The foundation repair business in Texas is huge. Because of the intense heat in the summers and especially in the “dry” heat areas near Dallas, many houses’ and buildings’ foundations crack and shift. It is an expensive repair, and one that takes a lot of heavy-duty machinery and work to accomplish, but it is necessary for the safety and stability of the home.

The same is true of the “foundation repair” of our lives. Yes, it can be hard work. Yes, it can take a lot of time and energy, but it’s worth it! And remember, Jesus Himself will supply us with the “heavy duty” equipment! It starts with REPENTANCE, literally, a turning — a turning from our sins to Jesus.

This turning, the changing of our hearts, is not our job. That is the work of the Holy Spirit through His Word. He is the one who led us to put our trust in Christ, our foundation for salvation, in the first place. Through His Word, He can change our attitudes, our priorities, even our very lives. In fact, He already has when He raised us from spiritual death to life when He brought us to faith in Jesus.

Notice in our text, Jesus says nothing about the “house” itself, how big or how beautiful, or even how well built it is. The focus is on the foundation, the Rock. That Rock is Jesus, our God, our Savior, our Stronghold. The Bible calls Him “the Rock of our Salvation” (Deuteronomy 18:15; Isaiah 17:10). He is the one who provides us with the “blueprints” and the “building materials” and even the ability to “build” the spiritual “house” of our lives through His Word. If we depended on our own ability to “do” God’s Word, that would be building on a foundation of “sand” as well. With Him, we can “do all things” (Philippians 4:13), but without Him, Jesus reminds us “you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

In the end, we will stand on the Last Day, not because of how well we built our “house,” but because our hope for salvation was founded entirely and completely on the Rock. The house in Jesus’ illustration stands because of the Rock! Jesus is the only foundation that is able to weather the storms of guilt — the waves of shame — the winds of temptation that come crashing on our shores every day, and in the “great” storm of our last day, or even the “Last Day” of Judgment.

When the hard times come, we have a Rock-solid, firm foundation in Christ and His Word. He will not let us down. His promises never fail. His grace never fails. We can throw ourselves completely on Him. His cross guarantees forgiveness for our failures, His promises comfort our hearts, and the victory of His empty tomb drives away our fear. We can cling to Him and build our lives on Him, and in death we can rest in Him.

On what foundation have you built your house? May we always be able to say confidently the familiar words of one of our favorite hymns, “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

From Darkness to Light The Conversion of St. Paul

Acts 9:1-22

Paul was converted from unbelief to faith, from darkness to light, and from death to life. This was a miracle brought about by the Holy Spirit. Even Paul himself gives God all credit and glory.

Unfortunately, some within Christianity have a different view of conversion. They think that an unbeliever is able to create faith on his own. Therefore, they will say, “I accepted Jesus” or “I made a decision to follow Christ” or “I came to Him.” But this was not the case with Paul.

We will learn today that conversion from unbelief to faith, from darkness to light, and from death to life is a miracle brought about by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit did it by means of the Gospel. Martin Luther was right when he said: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, sanctified me and kept me in the true faith.”

Therefore, with St. Paul, we give God all credit and glory for working saving faith within us.

At this point, as we focus today on the conversion of St. Paul, let me start from the beginning. Paul was born of the tribe of Benjamin. He was circumcised on the eighth day and was given the name Saul — named after the first king of Israel. Even though he was born in the Roman city of Tarsus, he was sent to Jerusalem for the best possible religious education. He studied under the master teacher named Gamaliel. Saul was thoroughly trained in the Mosaic law. His desire was to study and obey the commandments and to follow the covenant regulations. We are not told, but most likely, Saul heard about Jesus and, perhaps, even saw Him.

After the day of Pentecost, the church grew rapidly. Saul was part of a movement that sought to stop the spread of Christianity by means of persecution. He thought he was doing God’s will in persecuting the church. Imagine, he honestly thought that those who believed in Jesus were in the wrong.

The first time we are introduced to Saul in the Scriptures is at the stoning of Stephen.

Saul guarded the clothes of the murderers and consented to Stephen's death. Before Stephen died, he prayed, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" — the very same thing our Lord said from the cross.

Saul continued to zealously persecute the church. He went to the high priest and asked for permission to persecute the Christians in Damascus. As Saul came near the town, a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and Jesus said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Notice that, when the church is persecuted, Jesus is ultimately persecuted for the two are one. Saul said, "Who are you, Lord?" Jesus affirmed that it is He whom Saul is persecuting — the One who died on Good Friday and who rose on Easter Sunday.

Well, Saul was blinded. For three days, he could not see, and neither did he eat or drink anything. I'm sure this was a time for Saul to pray, repent, and think about what Jesus said.

When the church is persecuted, Jesus is ultimately persecuted for the two are one.

Meanwhile, Jesus told Ananias to go and lay hands on Saul. Jesus goes on to say that Saul is chosen for a special purpose. Jesus wants Saul to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles and kings and to the children of Israel. But in the process, he will suffer much.

Ananias was a little reluctant to go, because he knew that Saul persecuted Christians. Nevertheless, he listened to what Jesus said. Ananias laid hands on Saul, and he prayed.

Immediately, Saul regained his sight and was filled with the Holy Spirit. He rose and was baptized. Notice that saving faith in Christ, sight, the Holy Spirit, and baptism are all connected together.

Paul was once physically blind. He did not have the capacity on his own to change his condition. But God restored his sight. Now, Paul can physically see, and he sees Jesus with the eyes of faith. So also, we were spiritually blind. We did not have the capacity to find Christ on our own. By the way, Jesus is never portrayed as being lost, and that we are supposed to find Him. We are the ones lost, and Jesus is portrayed as the Shepherd who finds His lost sheep. Again, the spiritually blind lack the ability to see Christ with the eyes of faith. And so, a miracle happened to us. The Word was connected to water and was placed on us in Baptism, and now, we see Jesus as our Savior. The Gospel entered our ears, and we now believe that Christ died for us and rose again.

Paul was once living in darkness, but now he is in the light. Christ is His light and His salvation. So also, we were living in darkness, but now we reside in the kingdom of light. A miracle took place. We were brought into the light of Christ through the waters of Holy Baptism. The Gospel entered our ears, and we now believe that Christ is our light and our salvation.

Paul was once dead to sin, but now he is made alive in Christ. He ad-

mits, in his letter to Timothy, that he is the chief of sinners, but now he is forgiven. He also says, in the book of Romans, that the good he should be doing, he fails to do. This is Paul as a Christian speaking. Yet, in repentance and faith, he received the forgiveness of sins. Stephen's prayer — "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" — was answered. On account of the atonement of Christ, Paul was forgiven for this sin of murder and for all other sins.

St. Paul says, in the book of Ephesians, that we were once spiritually dead in our transgressions and sins. Just as Lazarus could not put life into himself, so we could not generate faith within ourselves. We could not make ourselves alive in Christ. St. Paul says in Romans 6 that in Holy Baptism we died, and we were given life. We were once dead to sin, but now, we are made alive in Christ. Christ's resurrection is our resurrection. Because He lives, we too shall live.

Paul once lived by the law. He once boasted in the righteousness of the law. But after his conversion, he counts all of this as rubbish and, now, boasts in the righteousness of Christ. His life is now defined by the Gospel. We are to live according to God's Word.

God's law is good. But we do not earn God's favor through the law. Instead, according to the law, we fall short of the glory of God. The law shows us our sin. In other words, the law does not define who we are. Rather, we are defined by the Gospel. Who are we?

We are a baptized lamb of God, redeemed with the blood of Christ. We receive God's mercy, and this same mercy flows through us into others. The fruit of the Holy Spirit within us, as St. Paul says, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and much more. We are free, in Christ, to love and serve our neighbor.

Paul once persecuted Christians. He was an archenemy to those who followed Christ. But God turned the heart of Paul, and he became a Christian and an apostle. Jesus said to Ananias, "For I will show [Paul] how many things he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:15–16). Paul did suffer much for the sake of the Gospel. As a Christian, he was treated poorly by his own Jewish people. He was persecuted by civil rulers. He once wrote, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:28). Eventually, he died a martyr's death in Rome.

Paul was one of the greatest missionaries of Christianity. He wrote 13 letters to various churches and to individuals. All of these letters are includ-

Christ is risen.
Death is
swallowed up
forever. Sins
are washed
away. The devil
is defeated. A
new creation is
dawned.

ed in the New Testament. St. Paul conducted three missionary journeys. He planted churches, trained future pastors, and preached the Gospel. He once wrote to the church in Corinth: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). What beautiful Gospel. We thank God for His work in and through Paul.

Christ died on the cross as a payment for our sins. He was buried, and He was raised on the third day. (It’s interesting to note that on the third day, Paul received his sight and was baptized.) Today is the day of the resurrection. Today, Christ is among us with His body and blood for the forgiveness of all our sin.

During our journey to heaven, we too will suffer for the sake of Christ. We are called to pick up our crosses and to follow Him. May God give us the strength to persevere and to faithfully confess Christ. The church is beset by enemies all around her and even within her. She is attacked and persecuted, like a boat tossed to and fro. But we are reminded that the gates of hell shall never prevail against the church. The Gospel will never be silenced. The Church will never fall.

We recognize that God turned the heart of Paul, who once persecuted the Church. So also, God turned our hearts to faith in Christ. If a miracle took place in the conversion of St. Paul, then a miracle also took place when we were baptized. The Holy Spirit has called us by the Gospel, sanctified us, and keeps us in the true faith.

St. Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Therefore, God converted us from unbelief to faith, from darkness to light, and from death to life. To Him be all the glory.

We also recognize that Paul’s preaching caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world. May this same Gospel come into our ears and into our mouths. May the light of the Gospel continue to shine throughout the world, so that many are brought to saving faith in Christ.

We ask this day that our Almighty God would grant us ever to rejoice in the saving light of His Gospel and that we may follow the example of the apostle Paul in spreading it to the ends of the earth.

To that end, may God bless us with His precious Gospel. May we help and aid the church in spreading the Gospel to those who do not yet know Him and may we always give God praise and thanksgiving for his good gifts. Amen.

Dressing for the Occasion

Matthew 22:1-14

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 22:1-14 (ESV): And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast. But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.

The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find. And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Have you ever had someone extend to you what you knew was a worthless invitation? Has anyone ever said something to you like: If you are ever in London, stop by my place and I will show you the town! or, If you are ever in Hawaii look me up and you can stay at my house. Even though the person extending such an invitation might be perfectly sincere, there’s no guarantee you will ever be in London to take advantage of the first offer, or that when you arrive in Hawaii to take advantage of the second with luggage hanging off both shoulders and no hotel reservations in your pocket, that the person will be home, the house will be available, or that they ever seriously had any intention of putting you up in the first place. People often extend offers like this believing no one will ever try to take advantage of them.

In contrast to invitations of this kind, today's Gospel text speaks of One who did, in fact, make a very generous offer to all, an offer He's not only fully prepared to make good on, but indeed hopes everyone will take advantage of. The One who makes this offer is our gracious, giver-God. The offer is an invitation to attend the wedding feast of His Son, and there to receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. And God hasn't simply extended this invitation once, rather He's been extending it throughout the history of the world. It came first to Adam and Eve in the Garden. It was extended to God's people throughout the time of the Old Testament, then to you and me. And God will continue offering it to sinners as long as this world remains.

The first time God invited you to this wedding feast was at the baptismal font, where He clothed you in the perfect righteousness of Christ, as

The offer is an invitation to attend the wedding feast of His Son, and there to receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

St. Paul testifies in Galatians 3:27: For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Every time you come forward to receive the Feast of our Lord's true body and blood in the Holy Supper, God is again renewing His invitation. When you read or hear God's Word, when you sing hymns or participate in the Liturgy of the Divine Service, on those occasions when you hear someone confess the Christian faith to you, or you have opportunity to confess the truths of the Christian faith to someone else, God is there actively working to extend His invitation to all in the hope that many will take it. And so it goes, over and over again.

Now in this morning's parable there are some things we dare not overlook. The first thing I want you to notice is the Person of the King and the invitation He extends. I don't know about you, but if in tomorrow's mail I found a personalized, engraved invitation to attend a royal wedding, and if attached to that invitation were airline tickets to the capital of a beautiful country, hotel reservations, a rental car, and a promise that when I arrived clothing suitable for the occasion would be there waiting, I strongly suspect I'd accept that invitation. So here in this text we find a gracious King inviting a large number of guests to attend a lavish wedding celebration in honor of His Son. It was to be a grand, glorious occasion, and the Host was concerned that things be done properly and in good order. And while this whole scenario might seem rather far-fetched to our way of thinking, it was quite appropriate in the culture of this time that the person sending out such an invitation would provide his guests with appropriate clothing to wear while in attendance at the wedding.

I also want you to notice that this wasn't some last minute invitation, but instead an announcement that the party was ready to begin and that the guests should start arriving. The actual invitation had already previ-

ously been sent out. The guests had each returned their RSVPs. The king had every right to expect them to show up. Have you ever thrown a party and no one came? I've actually had that happen. It's pretty disheartening. And that's precisely what happened here. Those who had been invited sent all kinds of lame excuses as to why they now couldn't make the banquet. Some who know why made light of the announcement. Some had chores they'd forgotten about. Others discovered pressing business needing their attention. Some even killed the messengers who had done nothing more than bring the Good News of the party's commencement. Can you imagine this King's rage and anger when He saw this?

The King was so furious He sent out His armies to kill the people and burn their cities down. Then He sent messengers out to invite everyone to come and join him in the celebration of His Son's marriage. He sent them far and wide to invite all, and so they did. They invited the poor, the rich, the weak, the strong, the famous, the not-so-famous, the good, and the bad. No one was excluded. No one was left out. All who received an invitation were expected to be there. And the king, as we noted before, was standing ready to provide appropriate attire for the occasion to all who arrived at his door for the feast. All they had to do was show up, pick up their clothing, go inside, and enjoy the hospitality of the King.

That sounds pretty simple, maybe too simple. That certainly doesn't sound like any party I've ever attended. To be sure, there have been parties I didn't attend precisely because I knew I didn't have the right kind of clothing. And there have also been occasions when I attended a party and found myself quite out of place not simply because I was inappropriately dressed, but because everyone else knew it as well. Curiously, however, what we read here is that there was a particular man in attendance at this feast who wasn't wearing his wedding garment. It was the King who spotted him. And because the man was speechless and had no excuse, the King had His servants bind him hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Since this is a Parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, it's important for us to know that its focus isn't parties and party-goers. Rather its intent is to teach us about the Church, the forgiveness of sins, heaven, and all the other blessings God deigns to give us in Christ. This, then, is the Parable's true meaning. The King, of course, is God. The Son is Jesus. The actual wedding is the eternal union of the Bridegroom, Christ, and His Bride, the Church. And the celebration consists of all the events leading up to the wedding. Now, all of that is elementary, and most of it will become fairly clear once you analyze it a bit more closely. But, what about the man who wasn't

The King sent messengers out to invite everyone to come and join him in the celebration of His Son's marriage.

dressed properly and was thrown into the eternal torment of that place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, otherwise known as hell?

Does the picture become clearer once you understand that the wedding banquet is a description of the Church, and not eternal life? Consider how, through the ages, God's been sending people an invitation to attend the wedding feast of His Son. That invitation was sent by the prophets, and they, like those in our text, were treated spitefully, ridiculed, and many times even killed. So, God sent His armies out against these people in hopes of bringing them back. He took them into captivity, and they suffered grievously for their disdain of God and His ways. Yet, even when the time came for the wedding feast to begin, as the Virgin conceived and bore the Savior of the human race, there were many who still refused to come. Yet, God continued, and continues, to send out His invitation.

The wedding feast began on Mount Calvary when the Bridegroom gave up His own life and blood to purify His Bride. From that moment on, people, bad and good, have been receiving the invitation to come into the Church, to enjoy the Wedding Feast of the Bridegroom's very own body and blood, to be joined forever with Him in eternity as His holy, spotless Bride. And many, at least superficially, as indicated by the man without the wedding garment, have received this invitation and come into the Church. Now at most weddings, the bride is one who is usually dressed in fine attire. But in the case of this wedding, the attire of all the guests appears to be just as important, in fact, crucial. Yet isn't it interesting how only the king was able to see this man who wasn't properly dressed. And, what was the all important wedding garment he wasn't wearing? It was quite simply trust in the promises of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Can you see anyone here in this Church who isn't wearing their wedding garment? Of course not. But does God know who they are? He most certainly does. And what does this text say will happen to those who steadfastly refuse to wear their wedding garment, even though they may have accepted the invitation to attend the wedding feast? What will be the fate of those who hope to participate in the actual wedding, while scorning the attire of the Bride, the wedding garment of trust in the promises of Christ? This text is quite clear and unambiguous. They will be cast into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So you see, my beloved brothers and sisters, this parable teaches that there's no way for you nor I to discern those who refuse to wear the wedding garment, that's God's right and ability alone. But, you can see yourself, whether or not you're wearing that wedding garment of faith in the only Savior of sinners. And seeing that wedding garment of trust tells you that you've not only been invited, but chosen. So rejoice and be glad when you come into the King's House to participate once again in the marriage feast of His only begotten Son. Rejoice and be glad that God has graciously given you the wedding garment of His own Son's righteousness to wear, rather than the filthy rags of your sin. Wear that garment with pride. And

as you wear it, also look forward with great expectation to that wonderful Day when, with all the other wedding guests who are wearing that very same wedding garment, you too will join the Bridegroom at His Altar, where you will be united with Him forever in the heavenly realms of God's kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Loving God

Matthew 22:34-46

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 22:34-46 (ESV): But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he? They said to him, The son of David. He said to them, How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son? And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Like most children, when you and I were little, our lives revolved around questions. We wanted to know why the sky was blue, why we couldn't fly like birds or swim like fish, why centipedes had so many legs, why the sun came out during the day and the moon at night, and the list goes on and on. As you grow older you discover the whys and wherefores to some of your questions, but new ones soon enough emerge. The questions take on a new level of complexity. You are no longer happy with simple answers. You want to delve deeper into the inner workings of life. You want to know why bad things happen to some more than others, why certain evil people never seem to get their due, and why everyone doesn't like you when you are so likeable.

To be sure, living in this world as we do begs all manner of questions. Consider the things that are a priority in your life. What matters most to you? Is it how much responsibility you have? Is it the status of your vocation? Is it the amount of respect people give you? Is it how much money you make? Is it your relationship with family and friends? Is it what you think the future holds? Just what is it that makes you tick? What enables

you to get up out of bed every morning or makes you want to pull the covers up over your head and stay there for the rest of the day? All of us, to one degree or another, spend a portion of every day answering these kinds of questions or else prioritizing, planning, ordering and organizing our lives.

As you read through the Gospel accounts of the life of our Lord, one can't help but notice that this task of asking questions isn't anything new. Indeed, the people of Jesus' day had many of the same questions you have, although often most of the questions reported in Holy Scripture are a bit more spiritual. But here in this morning's Gospel, some Jews came to Jesus wanting to know which was the great Commandment. Now before you consider the real import of this question, you have to know that the Jews had laws governing just about everything. They had an exhaustive list spelling out what they were allowed to eat, the kind of clothing they could wear, how they were to treat strangers, and how far they could walk on the Sabbath without working. They had laws regulating every aspect of daily life and they were very good at keeping track of how well both they and everyone else were doing!

Now obviously we know God has a great deal of interest in the Law. After all, God is the Originator of the Law. He instructed our first parents how they were not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which stood in the midst of the Garden. He met with Moses on Mount Sinai and wrote His Law on two tablets of stone. And I dare say there are few people in the world today whether they have had any meaningful association with the Church or not, who aren't familiar with the content of God's Law in the form of the Ten Commandments. Are there any of them you aren't familiar with yourself?

You shall have no other gods.

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord, your God.

Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.

Honor your father and your mother.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not give false testimony

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. And,

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

That just about covers it, doesn't it? These Ten Commandments are the very same Law of God Moses received on Mount Sinai, and they represent the full extent of God's will for us while living here on this earth. The Jews who came to Jesus in this text certainly knew this as well, probably even better than you and I. Yet notice what they did. Seeking to trip up our Lord, which seems to have been one of their favorite pastimes, they came asking which of these Commandments was the greatest. And Jesus, summing up Commandments One through Three told them: You shall love the

Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. Then, summing up Commandments Four Through Ten, He continued, saying: And, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

What could be simpler? On these two Commandments hangs everything having to do with the Law and the Prophets. Everything you do, every word you speak, and every action you take, ultimately comes down to whether or not it conforms to one of these two tables of the Law. In simple terms, according to the Law, Jesus says you are to love the Lord your God with every fiber of your being and love everyone else as much as you love yourself. But that's the rub, isn't it, because like the Jews, you and I are all legalists by nature. We always want to narrow everything down to a few simple rules we think we can keep. We want everything laid out nice and

Jesus gives us
Himself
as an answer
to our fears

easy so nothing is left to chance. The problem, however, is that these commands from God are impossible to keep. The harder you try to keep them, the more likely you are to fail. Both Scripture and human experience testify this to be true. So, why are so many Churches today almost obsessed with the Law and the myth that we are able to keep it?

You've all heard of, or had some experience with, Churches that treat such things as smoking or drinking alcohol as if they were the unforgivable sin. To some, obesity has become a spiritual catastrophe, and you all know people who think there's no such thing as good entertainment and that's not because so much of what's out there actually does stink, but because they think the entertainment industry, by nature, is nothing more than a tool of the devil. Now I suppose in a manner of speaking some of this might be true today, for just about anything you have or do can be turned on its ear into sin. An innocent brownie can easily turn into gluttony. And spending time with family, which is a good thing, can keep you far away from Church and hearing the Gospel, which is a bad thing!

But know this, dear friends, our Lord Jesus will not be satisfied with this kind of constant running after nothing, as if you are defined only by your sin and how well you think you're able to control it. Notice what Jesus does with the Pharisees' endless questions about the keeping of the Law. He points them back to the Gospel. For example here in this text He follows up His answer to their question by asking them an even more important one. What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He? Jesus doesn't want either the Pharisees or you to spend every waking moment living in fear over your failures and sins, as true and as grievous as they may be. So instead He gives you Himself as an answer to your fears.

This question Jesus asked the Pharisees about whose Son He is really brings you to a new understanding of what Jesus means when he says that all the Law and the Prophets hang upon these two commands. For in His answer to the Pharisees' question, Jesus showed them that He not only is

the Son of David, but also the only begotten Son of God, the only One who ever could, and ever has, lived a life without sin, the only One who has ever kept the Law perfectly in every way, the way God intended it to be kept. He is the One who was born of the Virgin Mary, our Brother and Savior who alone knows your every weakness, fear, fault, and failure. Having lived life in human flesh, He knows firsthand that the harder you try the more likely you are to fail. He knows because He's been where you are. In His own flesh He has taken on Himself the suffering and pain you deserve for your failure. He knows all about it.

That's why here again in this text, our Lord Jesus comes to you with a message of freedom and hope. You must not allow the sins that often tend to shape and define you, hold you bound to the grave! Jesus has come into your flesh to bear your sin, be your Savior, and free you from the shackles of fear and death. He has come to say to you: Do not be afraid. I've kept the Law in your place! Today God looks at you through the perfect righteousness of His Son and says: Well done, good and faithful servant! Humanly speaking, this may not make any sense at all, yet in view of God's mercy, through the work of His Son, it makes a lot of sense. It makes sense because Christ is both Giver and Gift. So don't believe the lie of Satan, who wants to chain you to your sins, for Christ has already taken every one of them into His own flesh and blood and paid the ransom price. Your sins have become His and you can no longer have them. In their place Christ has given you that peace which passes all understanding, the peace of knowing that in Him all things are now ready. The Law has been kept, the promise is yours, and everlasting life is now your reward. Believe it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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and death.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

True Freedom

John 8:31-36

Festival of the Reformation

John 8:31-36 (ESV): So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. They answered him, We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, You will become free? Jesus answered them, Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. When you hear the word *freedom* what picture comes to mind, especially when you consider the fact that in this land we live in freedom is allegedly of paramount importance, the driving force, if you will, behind everything we do or say as a nation and people. Freedom is something everyone supposedly wants. The pursuit of freedom was responsible for our constitutional form of government and our rights as citizens, not to mention the style of living many enjoy. But freedom has some very unpleasant side effects, including an increase in criminal activity, because criminals also have certain freedoms that presumably can't be taken away, as well as a society burdened down with both the excesses of the rich and the desperation of the poor.

Freedom is a very difficult animal to describe and define. And the reason this is so is because no one really knows what freedom is. Far too many think they have the freedom to do whatever they please because they aren't responsible to anyone other than themselves. They have precious little concern as to how their actions will impact others. And that's especially important for us this morning as we note with alarm how divisions, upheavals and turmoil are becoming almost an everyday occurrence in our Churches because some feel their freedom ought to be part of our belief and practice, or put more simply, they think that in the Church everyone should be free to believe and do whatever they want, and that no one, not even God, can take that freedom away!

But this kind of thinking couldn't be any further from the truth. For while freedom is an important part of our national heritage, Christian free-

dom is nothing like the freedom we enjoy as American citizens. Freedom for the Christian isn't based on individual rights, but on God's insistence that you live your life according to His directing. However, as sinners we are always trying to free ourselves from this Divine obligation, rationalizing our behavior by labeling God unjust, for setting such high standards, insisting the Bible has been grossly misunderstood (because after all, as many would argue, even in the Church, it was written by fallible men prone to error), or perhaps by even denying God's existence and influence altogether in the hope that He'll just leave us alone and let us do whatever we please!

In this morning's Gospel, however, Jesus says that if you abide in His Word and only when you abide in His Word you'll be His disciple, you'll know the Truth, and the Truth will make you free. But how can that be? If a disciple is defined as one who follows the teachings of another, how can it be that committing one's self to the point of discipleship will bring about any kind of freedom? Wouldn't such a discipleship more likely bring about bondage? Obviously, the freedom about which Jesus speaks is a freedom totally foreign to every other kind of freedom. It's founded solely on the Word of God, a Word, that when believed, leads one to a knowledge of the Truth, which then brings about this freedom.

The people to whom Jesus was speaking in this text were very much like the people with whom Luther struggled during the Reformation, very much like a large percentage of the religious establishment today. They falsely believed that their religious heritage, their denomination, if you will, was more important than their religion. They boasted over the fact that they were related by blood to Abraham and obligated to no man. They considered themselves free from the necessity of listening to Jesus, or the obligation of hearing anything new. They didn't understand true freedom any better than the people at the time of the Reformation or the people of our day. Their religious heritage made them feel that they were already free, that is, until Jesus began to expose them to the real truth about themselves.

Anyone who commits a sin, even the smallest of sins, has made himself a slave to sin, says Jesus, and unlike a son, the slave does not live in his master's house forever. The slave might live there as long as he's employed, but one day he'll be booted out of the house like the slave he is, while the son will always live there. Now, while this way of thinking might seem confusing to us, to the people who heard Jesus speak these words, the matter was crystal clear. In this life they might be able to stay within the boundaries of the Temple, within the confines of the religious establishment, or as

Freedom for the Christian isn't based on individual rights, but on God's insistence that you live your life according to His directing.

we might view it today, within the membership of the Church, but, without a correct understanding of freedom and Truth, they would have no part of that Church in the life to come. In order to ensure an eternal place in God's house, what they needed, and indeed, what we all need, is a saving relationship with the only begotten Son of God as Savior.

It's only through such a relationship with the Son and His Word that you can know the Truth and the gift of true freedom. In the words of Jesus, If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. So then, why does the Church still have so many rules and regulations if, as Christians, we're supposedly free from all these things? I would maintain that this problem has arisen precisely because our idea of what it means to be free is all wet. It isn't that the Son hasn't made you free from the threats and demands

Almost everyone saw God as a cruel Taskmaster holding them bondage to the demand that they live a life they were incapable of living.

of the Law. It isn't that through the shed blood of Jesus you haven't received forgiveness and eternal life. It's that you've misunderstood what all this means. When Jesus says you are free, or when St. Paul says you are under no longer under obligation to the Law, that doesn't mean you have a license to live however you please, or that you are to have no regard for the rights and needs of others.

It means that when your trust is stayed in Jesus, when you believe He lived the perfect life for you, that He suffered, died and rose from the dead for you, then you are no longer under the condemnation of the Law. You are free from the threat of eternal punishment that the Law holds over you. But, you are not free from the Law. Rather, as a redeemed, forgiven, sanctified child

of God, you're now free to keep the Law without having to worry about whether or not you've kept it perfectly. That's what the Lutheran Reformation was all about. The Church of Luther's day held the Law over people's heads so that they'd do what its leaders wanted. The threat of punishment was used to bring about change within the Church or perhaps more accurately to bring about compliance among the people with the demands of the Church's leadership.

Reading through the Gospels and discovering what true freedom meant, Luther was compelled both by conscience and the Word of God to demand reformation. He saw many poor sinners besides himself crushed under the weight of Law as they vainly tried to live a life of perfect righteousness. Almost everyone saw God as a cruel Taskmaster holding them bondage to the demand that they live a life they were incapable of living. They were living as slaves even though in Christ God had made them free. Hence God used Martin Luther to bring about the Reformation so that those living in bondage could finally experience that freedom.

And today the call of the Reformation still lingers among us. We can no longer afford to live in the past or rest on the fact that because we're Lutherans we're under bondage to no one. The Reformation must be an ongoing process because there are still people who need to be set free today, and sometimes you and I are ones who need that freedom. We need to be freed from our misunderstanding of freedom. We need to turn once more to the pages of Holy Scripture, hear God's voice, and believe His Word as it comes to us here in this place through water, words, bread and wine. Only then can God maintain in you the only freedom worth having.

The Church of Luther's day, as I mentioned before, saw God as a Slave Driver whose demands were too great. But the Gospel, which for far too long had been buried, brought about a new understanding of freedom. And with that new understanding, the Church began to grow and has continued to grow almost right up until our own day. But today the situation is vastly different. Today the Church in most places, including here, I'm afraid is either stagnant or going backward. Why? Because we've lost sight of what true freedom is.

Today freedom means having no obligations, not having to go to Church, not having to support the ministry of the Church when you're not there, not having to study God's Word, not having to serve on boards or committees, not having to help when called upon, not having to care for, or even love one another, not having to put the best construction on the words and actions of others. All of us to one degree or another erroneously believe we're free from such obligations and need only worry about ourselves.

So the time for Reformation is always here, because Jesus says that if you sin, you are a slave to sin, and a slave will not live in his master's house forever. But, if you listen to and place your trust in the Word of the Son of God, the Truth will be revealed to you, and Christ will make you truly free. He won't make you free from having to go to Church, He'll make you free to attend. He won't free you from the necessity of supporting the Church, He'll free you to want to do it. He'll free you to want to study God's Word, free you to want to serve Him in His Church, free you to help when you're called upon, free you to love one another as He first loved us, free you to cheerfully live up to your obligations, and free you to worry about someone other than yourself. Through the power of the Holy Spirit working in the Word, the Son has now once again been revealed to you. See Him in this Word. Listen to Him as calls you to freedom. Heed that Word so that God can set you free from your bondage to sin and death. Cling to His cross and live forever in His freedom, a freedom that not only sets you free from sin, but also makes you free both to serve Him and your neighbor. May God make it so in your life for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

Matthew 5:1-12

Festival of All Saints

Matthew 5:1-12 (ESV): Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, God has given us an amazing revelation in these words: Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race set before us, looking unto

Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. Here the inspired writer of this letter holds the saints up before us as a living demonstration of the strengthening power of Christ as we run the race unto eternal life. Celebrating All Saints Day, then, is not only appropriate, but also in keeping with God's Word. As those who belong to the One, Holy, Christian, Apostolic Church, we dare never forget our fellow Christians, whether living or dead.

Sadly, however, we must confess that the Saints of God haven't always been honored the way Holy Scripture honors them. All Saints Day is not a day on which we pray to the faithful departed for help and aid, and neither should we pray for them, since the Lord has already granted them eternal life, salvation and every spiritual blessing. And finally we must not

place our trust in the Saints, but in Christ as Savior. So, how should we commemorate the faithful departed? If it weren't for all the abuses of this practice over the years, that question could be answered quite simply. For although Scripture teaches that we ought not pray to the Saints, we should look to their faithful example for encouragement. All Saints Day, then, is a time when we should rightly rejoice in the fellowship God has given us, with them, in Christ.

Our Lutheran Confessions spell out the honor that is right and proper to be given to the saints. First they say we should give thanks to God for showing us an example of His mercy in the lives of the faithful departed, an example that reveals His will to save both them and us. We are to recognize how God has given them to be both our teachers, as well as our brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore we first give praise to God for granting such gifts to His people, and for enabling them to use these gifts faithfully to God's glory. Next, the Confessions indicate that we ought to honor the Saints because our faith has been strengthened by their witness of repentance and forgiveness as in the case of St. Peter following his denial of Christ. Then, lastly, we are to honor the Saints by imitating their faith and life. It's this honor, for example, that we gave earlier in the Collect Prayer, that God would grant us so to follow His blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living as we continue our journey toward the heavenly rest that they already enjoy.

In all this it should go without saying that our focus is to be only upon Christ. For the saints are rightly honored only when we look upon them as living windows through whom the Light of Christ shines. As we honor them, therefore, we remember that their steadfast faith and good works are no product of their own, but clear evidence of the presence of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. The Beatitudes of Christ spelled out in this morning's Gospel aren't as many seem to think, a check list of how one might earn the blessings of God. Neither are they an instruction manual on how to live the Christian life as though the Kingdom of Heaven could be purchased or as if you could actually keep the Beatitudes as a subset of the Ten Commandments.

The Beatitudes are simply and plainly a description and picture of Christ. Is He not the One who, though infinitely rich, for our sakes became poor to obtain for us the Kingdom? Is He not the only One who is truly gentle, meek, and mild who, by His death, redeemed the whole world? Is He not the One who alone is merciful and is, in fact, Mercy itself? Is He not the Peacemaker who brought true, lasting peace between God and

Our focus is to be only upon Christ. For the saints are rightly honored only when we look upon them as living windows through whom the Light of Christ shines.

man, the only begotten Son of God, reviled and persecuted for the sake of righteousness so that He might earn for and then bestow upon us all the blessings of Heaven?

Yet the Beatitudes, though certainly an apt and accurate picture of Christ, also describe those whose life and hope is in Him. Throughout these Beatitudes our Lord Christ speaks in the plural thereby revealing that these blessings not only come from Him, but at the same time are given to His people. And perhaps the most wondrous realization of all is that these blessed words describe the life Christ lives in and through us. For we, too, like the saints before us, through the power of the Holy Spirit given in baptism, are likewise a living reflection of Christ so that others might also be blessed by our words and life.

The joyous life we have in Christ Jesus must also include His cross and suffering.

For the time being, however, we know that the joyous life we have in Christ Jesus must also include His cross and suffering, even as it did for those who have gone before us. But even in this we greatly rejoice, precisely because it's a portion of what Christ deigns to give us. As we struggle though this life under the cross on our pilgrimage to heaven, God wants us to draw comfort and strength from the witness and example of the faithful departed, those saints of old, as well as those who may have been near and dear to us here on earth, for not only are their lives a reflection of

the Christian faith, but even more importantly, their victory in Christ over death and the grave is a powerful witness to us as we struggle feebly on.

We find a biblical example of this very thing in those chapters of Hebrews with which I began this sermon. There the writer of this letter urges you and me to find in this great cloud of witnesses the courage to fix our eyes on Christ alone, whatever might come against us here in this world. Some of these saints were mocked and scourged, yes, and some even had chains and imprisonment. Some were stoned, sawn in two, tempted, or slain with the sword. Some wandered about in sheepskins, were destitute, afflicted, and tormented. And the world, as we well know, was hardly worthy of people such as these.

Yet, in spite of their many trials and hardships, they still managed to persevere in the promise of Christ, by whom, and through whom, both they and we are made perfect. Like the Letter to the Hebrews encourages us to do, we are now to recognize by faith the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. We are to see in them clear and unmistakable evidence of our Lord's faithfulness toward all mankind in Christ. That's what the Greek word for witness means. It's a legal term that speaks not so much of the person who stands up to give testimony before a court, but of the evidence they bring forward to back up the claims of one side or the other. And that's precisely what the saints who have gone before us provide. They are,

in a manner of speaking, exhibits of our Lord's gracious salvation, trustworthy evidence in the case for the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

But the really wonderful thing about all this is found in our understanding that we not only have their memory to serve as an example to us but also, as members of Christ's Body, we have communion with them as well, that is, a common unity with them in Christ, especially when we gather around the Altar of the Lord to participate in the great mystery of Christ's body and blood together with all who have entered into heaven before us. As such, then, the communion of saints that is given a great deal of lip service in our day isn't just so much pie in the sky, but is, rather, a banquet set before us in the here and now!

In St. John's Revelation, he provides a beautiful description of heaven and in his inspired words, God enables us to see the never-ending Liturgy of angels, archangels and all the company of heaven as they partake of the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb and His Glorious Bride, the Church. Certainly it's no coincidence that each week we sing of this heavenly reality in our Communion Liturgy. It's mere theological poetry we engage in when we join with all the saints and angels in singing the Holy, Holy, Holy. For here, in this place, the Lord of heaven and earth Himself, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, is truly present in the utter reality of His human flesh and blood. He is here to feed us and join us to Himself, not only in some sort of abstract spiritual sense, but in the reality of His sacrificial body and blood received into our mouths through bread and wine. Nothing else would be enough, since we too are flesh and blood, and His salvation is for us in both soul and body.

So Christ is present here with us and for us. And wherever Christ is, there also is the greatest glory and blessing of heaven itself. Indeed, we know that heaven would be void and bare if it were not for the presence of Christ. What joy it is to know, then, that Christ is here now in our midst, here already with us in His Word, in Confession and Absolution, in the Liturgy, the hymns, the prayers, the sermon, and most especially in the blessed Mystery of the Lord's Supper. He is here now bestowing on us that thing we need the most, the forgiveness of sins and life eternal. And because we know that those who have already departed in Christ are now with Him forever, we can likewise rejoice in their presence among us, as well.

Thus, it truly is good, right and salutary, that our Liturgy here on earth should blend with theirs in heaven as together we assemble around the Lamb upon His Throne, who feeds us with a gracious foretaste of that very same Feast that the saints now and will forever enjoy throughout eternity in His Kingdom. And in our grateful response, we sing with all the saints

Heaven would be void and bare if it were not for the presence of Christ.

that majestic hymn chanted forever in heaven: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come. Blessed forever is the Lamb of God. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. To Him alone be all glory, honor and praise, both now and forevermore. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Investing in the Kingdom

Matthew 25:14-30

Twenty Second Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 25:14-30 (ESV): For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more. His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more. His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours. But his master answered him, You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. For the past several months, we've traveled with our Lord as He made His way toward Jerusalem and Calvary's cross, where

He would die for the sin of the world. From the Mount of Transfiguration, where He resolutely set His face toward that goal, He healed the sick, cast out demons, and preached the Gospel, all of which was accomplished and made possible by the presence of the Kingdom of God in His very own flesh and blood. He revealed Himself as the long-promised Messiah come to redeem His people from their sins. But His Kingdom and Kingship weren't what people expected, for His glory and throne were to be found in His cross and Passion. His rule was not with a fist of iron, but with nail-scarred hands bearing the marks of our salvation. That's the Kingdom He brings to you by His real presence in the flesh. As King, Christ has welcomed infants and young children into His kingdom and blessed them by grace with His Spirit. He has healed lepers, raised the dead, and given the blind their sight.

Christ's rule was not with a fist of iron, but with nail-scarred hands bearing the marks of our salvation.

This Kingdom Jesus also entrusted to the stewardship of His servants, to the twelve Apostles, first of all, but also to others who would follow in their footsteps. To these He gave His Kingly authority to heal the sick, cast out demons, preach the Gospel, forgive sins, and prepare the way for His coming in the flesh on the Last Day. But sadly, many for whom our Lord Christ and His servants came with healing and forgiveness have resented His authority and rejected His Kingdom, men such as the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees, men who should have been pointing people to Christ as the Fulfillment of all God's promises, but instead chose to petition Pilate to

put Him to death, saying: We do not want this Man to be our King!

So you see, today's Gospel isn't so much about your God-given possessions and talents, nor about your stewardship of these various gifts, but rather about the Kingdom of God in Christ Jesus, which He was about to receive on our behalf at the completion of His journey to the cross. Like every other parable, today's Gospel also speaks of Him, His kingdom, His servants, and His citizenry, of which you also belong by grace. This is a parable of Christ's Kingship achieved upon the cross, established in His Church, and faithfully administered by His servants through preaching and the Sacraments.

The Nobleman is Christ, who for us men and our salvation, came down from heaven, who journeyed from His Father's presence in glory to be crucified on a cross so that He might obtain a kingdom for Himself, but more importantly, for our benefit, so that He might share with us all the riches of His own Divine life and salvation. Even though this was already His by right as the Only Begotten Son of the Father, Christ willingly chose to become like us so that we might become like Him. He could have conquered His enemies by force and established His kingdom on earth. Ten thousand legions of angels and archangels would gladly have accomplished that feat if that had been His wish. But that also would have meant that you, I, and

everyone else would have been destroyed as well, for we are all sinful and unclean, and there is none righteous among us, no, not even one. Yet the fact remains that while we were still His enemies, Christ Jesus suffered and died to save us!

By His death rather than ours, our Lord established not an earthly kingdom, but a heavenly kingdom on earth, His one, holy, Christian, Apostolic Church. And over this Church He placed those who are to serve as He served, who are to administer His affairs by doing the business of His Church, first by extending God's forgiveness to sinners, and secondly by loving service to their neighbors in response to that love. So, considering that this is God's desire, what should it mean for you to know that God wants you to invest in His Kingdom? Most importantly, it means that the Crucified One must first be your King, and that you must also receive the ministry of His servants as they preach His cross and resurrection, baptize in His name, absolve you of your sins, and feed you with His very own body and blood. By humbling yourself in repentant faith to receive Christ Himself in these gifts of grace bestowed by those under whom God has made to be your shepherd, you're acknowledging God's authority and submitting to His rule of Grace. That's what it means to be a citizen in Christ's Kingdom receiving His gifts as you live by and under His forgiveness.

Having thus received Christ as King, and living under Him in the Kingdom of His Church, you are now to exercise the stewardship of the gifts and talents He's entrusted to your care: faith, hope, love, your various skills and abilities, your riches, and the vocation you've been given and all so that they might be used to the glory of God and the benefit of your neighbor. But how often, sad to say, do we shuck this yoke of service like the high priests, scribes, and Pharisees, and end up wanting nothing to do with this King and His rule? Do we not realize that when we think of Him as a harsh King and Ruler and don't want to live, love, and serve as He does that we're handing Him over again to be crucified? You see it's only by His divine grace and mercy that we aren't cast into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, but instead, called to faith by His Word and Spirit so that our life might be found in Him.

A Day of Judgment is coming for those who persist in their faithless rejection of Christ, a day when they will be sentenced to eternal death and damnation, and thus be given precisely what they asked for — to live apart from Christ and outside His Kingdom. If they persist in their ungodly desire that He not reign over them, they will finally be granted their wish. But you and I, we've been called by the Gospel, enlightened by the Spirit with the gift of faith, and united with Christ in His Church. We are citizens of His

A Day of Judgment is coming for those who persist in their faithless rejection of Christ.

Kingdom by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ Jesus alone. And along with that citizenship, whether God has called you to be a pastor, husband, father, wife, mother, son, daughter, worker or student, the Kingdom of God in Christ in each and every case is a loving rule of sacrificial service that endures the cross and its shame for the sake of others and which, above all, freely forgives the sins of others by the grace and mercy of Christ.

Thankfully, by this standard that we daily fail to uphold because we are such faithless, wicked servants, misusing and abusing the gifts of God to serve only ourselves and our own sinful, selfish ambitions, our dear Lord Jesus still remains perfectly faithful in every way. He continues, daily and richly, to serve us with His grace, mercy, and forgiveness and with His own Divine life and salvation. That's why, with the Psalmist, we are to praise the faithfulness of the Lord both day and night, for it's His work, not ours, that saves us! One day we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to be judged according to the deeds we've done or failed to do in the body. Yet, if we were to be judged for our own righteous deeds as the Prophet testifies, we would find all of them to be nothing more than filthy rags! But thanks be to God, He judges us solely on the merits of Christ, who alone is righteous and holy. His deeds are credited to our account, and we are judged holy because God has clothed us with Christ in holy baptism.

Here, dear friends, here is where you can clearly see how faithful God is, and how He doesn't deal with us as we deserve, for by His servants, He continues to cleanse and heal sinners by water and Word. He persists in absolving His children of their sins, and feeding the citizens of His Kingdom with His body and His blood. And in spite of our sinfulness, weakness, and failures, He is still able to love and serve our neighbor through our deeds and actions! Faith in Christ, which God works in us by the power of His Holy Spirit in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of His Sacraments, is a faith that can never be belittled, because it lays hold of and receives Christ and with Him all His gifts and benefits. And this same faith will live a life of loving service unto others even as Christ has loved us and as we each now live, love and serve others within our own proper vocation and place in life.

Thus, in His own way, by His own means, and according to His own good and gracious will, our King Jesus continues to love this world and still preserves it. And He has accomplished all this, not by the threat of eternal death, but by allowing Himself to be executed in our place. To this day He continues serving both us and our neighbor by and from His sacrificial death, so that in His resurrection and ascension, all repentant sinners might rise from the death they deserve by reason of their sins to live with Christ forever in His Kingdom, serving Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true! Amen.

And now that peace of God which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

The Sheep of His Hand

Matthew 25:31-46

Last Sunday of the Church Year

Matthew 25:31-46 (ESV): When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the King will answer them, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me. Then he will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Then they also will answer, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you? Then he will answer them, saying, Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Grace to you, and peace, from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning's Gospel sets before us a rather thorny subject, a subject most would rather ignore: Judgment Day. Here our Lord completely dispels the commonly held myth that no one will ever be sent to hell. Here we learn that a Day is coming when the Son of Man will return on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory to judge both the living and the dead. On that Day no argument, excuse, or stubborn refusal to believe will change the facts. For on that Day the Judge of all mankind will take His seat at the bench of Divine, eternal

justice, and the verdict will be handed down once and for all.

But there's one thing you must carefully avoid when reading this text, and that's seeing Christ's words as nothing more than a laundry list of things you must do if you are to have any hope of entering into heaven. Indeed, if you understand Christ's words in this way, you will ultimately have to admit that you are altogether lost and hopeless, just one more goat in what would otherwise be a worthless herd of goats! If you desire to stand before the Judge of all on the basis of your own merits, there can be no room for error, no allowance made for even a single slip-up. If you have ever failed to feed the hungry, welcome strangers, or visit the sick, then, says Jesus, you have not done these things to Him either, and you are lost.

The Law, you see, demands absolute perfection. That's why Christ's

Christ's
Kingdom
comes in a
cross
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words must be taken with deadly seriousness, because the consequences of failure means eternal death in the always-burning fires of hell. And those who think this is just a joke will find nothing to laugh about on that day. Thanks be to God that the Law's deadly condemnation isn't the entire story, as even the words of this text say. For this text isn't so much about you and what you are to do, but even more so about Christ and what He's

already done for us all. For although our old sinful Adam always wants to put us in the spotlight, if you ever hope to properly understand our Lord's words here in this text, you must first focus on Him and His Cross.

You should hear in these words not a description of what you are strive for, but rather what His life and love toward all of us is like. He is the One who not only visited us when we were sick and in prison, but by bearing our sins and infirmity, He healed the sickness of our sin and freed us from the jailhouse of our sinfulness. But perhaps the most significant thing you might note here is our Lord's reference to those who are on His right and on His left at the coming of His Kingdom, for there are two other places in the Gospels where these same descriptions are used. The first was when James and John came to Jesus with a request that in His kingdom one of them be allowed to sit, on His right, and the other on His left, to which Jesus responded, saying that they had no idea what they were asking — for His Kingdom would come in a cross and suffering. The other reference is in Luke's description of the crucifixion, where our Lord was hung on a cross between two thieves, one on His right; and the other, on His left.

So, what does this mean? It means that the separation of the sheep and goats has already taken place at the cross, and that our judgment hinges on what took place there in the sacrificial death of God's Only Begotten Son. It's from the cross that everyone must eventually hear one of two things: either the promise of Jesus to the thief who believed: Today you will be with Me in Paradise, or the judgment of the thief who mocked Him: condemnation and an endless separation from God in hell.

Now it's clear from the words of Scripture that you and I were not created for hell, but eternal life, and that heaven was prepared for us to enjoy. Hell was created first for Satan and those who followed him in their rebellion, and later for all who blindly refused to heed God's voice, choosing instead to follow the deceiver. Thus we should understand full well that our Lord has no desire that any should perish, but that all might come to repentance and a knowledge of salvation in the healing wounds of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. His heart breaks over every sinner who refuses to repent. Indeed, although Jesus has been sending workers out into the harvest field of this world to make disciples of all nations by the proclamation of His Word, calling sinners to repentance, clothing them in the garments of salvation, washing them in the blessed water of holy baptism, feeding them with His holy body, and quenching their desperate thirst with His cleansing blood and the promise that He would be with such as these even to the end of the age, still many steadfastly refuse to believe.

These are the goats, those who are eternally condemned for their stubborn refusal to find their life in Christ, who continue to reject the forgiveness, life and salvation He's earned for us all. These are they who have chosen to face the final Judgment on their own, even though no one has even come close to measuring up to God's standard. Apart from the cross and resurrection of Christ, these goats will have nothing to show for their labors, just as you have nothing of your own to bring before the Lord other than what He's given you in Christ. That knowledge is at the center of the Christian faith, the faith by which even the youngest infant has as his own the genuine good works of Christ as evidence of his standing before God at the Judgment.

That's why you must never think that the deeds described here in this text are the part you play, in your own salvation, for these are nothing more nor less than the gracious works of Christ Himself, the things He did in our place during His thirty-plus years here, works He has continued to do throughout the history of His Church in the lives of His Christian people. Now in Christ God has credited His works to your account so that you need not worry when the Judgment comes. For not only have the life and works of Christ already been added to your ledger, but even now Christ is working in and through you in ways you'll never see, to perform works of mercy for others, even for the least of these, His brethren.

By identifying Himself with those who are the least, the last, and the lost, our Lord reveals that His cross and crucifixion are for them, for us,

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and for all. To be sure, it was on the cross in particular where Jesus was hungry and thirsty as He went through His trial in preparation for His crucifixion. It was on that very same cross where He became a Stranger, was betrayed, and deserted by His closest friends, and forsaken by His own Father. There He hung naked before the entire world as His clothes were divided among His enemies. There He was sick, to the point of death, executed as a Prisoner at the hands His own. Thus, we see in Christ not only the desperate needs and wants of those around us, but also our own hopelessness without Jesus. And this is because He chose to take all those things upon Himself, to bear them in His body on the cross. By His sacrificial suffering and death, our sins have been forgiven, and the kingdom of heaven opened to us. That's why, when we care for and support others, we're actually participating in the life and work of Christ Himself.

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And it's precisely because of our Lord's life and work for us that we, as His sheep, are continually seeking to reflect Christ's love and mercy. We're not trying to make ourselves into sheep by doing deeds of kindness, in fact, quite the opposite. The good deeds we do are done precisely because we are the sheep of the Good Shepherd, and for no other reason. Did you notice that the sheep weren't even aware of the good deeds they had done, while the goats didn't realize they hadn't done them? The sheep because their good deeds

come so naturally didn't know they were doing them and asked: When did we do these things, Lord? But the goats, because they tried to do these works apart from Christ, cried out defiantly: When did we do these things? And that, you see, that's where the rubber meets the road for you, because everything you are and ultimately do revolves around, and finds its final meaning in Christ, even as St. Paul testifies, when he writes: Your work, produced by faith, your labor, prompted by love, and your endurance, inspired by hope, are all in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Regardless of who your neighbor might be, you live toward them the life Christ has already lived and died for us all. Receiving the clothing of His forgiveness and perfect righteousness, you then give that clothing to others. Nourished by the food and drink of Christ, you then feed and give drink to those around you who hunger and thirst, filling their bellies on the one hand, but also nourishing their soul and spirit with the Gospel of Christ on the other. Healed of your infirmities and delivered from the prison-house of sin, you attend to those who still yet suffer under such burdens, welcoming them with open arms as strangers who have yet to receive the adoption of sons, which is already ours in Christ Jesus.

The basic rule by which we live our lives then, is quite simply: We do unto others, as Christ has done for us. Christ is our Good Shepherd, and

as the Psalmist testifies, We are the people of His pasture, the sheep of His hand. We live our lives as sheep, because our Shepherd has bestowed on us His own righteousness, a perfect righteousness that boldly speaks for us before the Throne of God. His work has been credited to our account in the Book of Life, and it's that work which reverberates in the living of our lives. Seeing us as sheep who have gone astray, our gracious Good Shepherd went out of His way to find us, carry us home, shelter and protect us, feed us from the sacrifice of His cross, and nurture us for life in the Kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world. To Him alone be glory forever and ever. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Oh, That You Would Rend the Heavens

Isaiah 64:1-9

First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9 (ESV): Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence — as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil — to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him. You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways. Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities. But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The evidence of God's goodness and His presence had been rather thin in Israel during Isaiah's day. Israel's enemies to the north were having their way, and God had been making Himself scarce, so the people prayed: Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, come down to deliver us, free us, and save us. Yet God remained hidden, and Isaiah was troubled all the more. He wondered why God's chosen people had turned away from Him, and why Israel had rejected His Word. Isaiah's questions were logical enough. If faith is God's gift, and if God preserves us in it, then are unbelief and hardening of the heart also His doing? Why are some saved and others not? Why do some cling to their baptism, while others reject it? Why do some Catechumens embrace the Word and Sacra-

ments they have been taught while others turn away in unbelief?

Like Isaiah, all of us have lots of questions to ask God. Why do bad things happen to good people? That was a popular question a few years back, and still is today among those who have bad things happen to them. The moralistic answer is that while God is all loving, He isn't all powerful. He'd love to do something but can't. God doesn't want planes to crash and babies to die, but can't stop it. And, while it's nice to know God is love, if He doesn't have the power to act, He isn't much of a God, and there surely isn't much comfort in a powerless God, is there? But when you moralize about God that's what you get: A powerless God of love, or a loveless God of power.

Little children like to play the why game with their parents. Don't play in the street. Why? Because you might get hit. Why? Because a driver may not see you? Why? Because you are short. Why? Because you are a child. Why? Because I am your parent and I say so, and if you ask one more why question, you are not going out to play at all. OK. And like children, we all have why questions aplenty for God. But we need to learn with the prophet that the why question is out of bounds. We have to put a finger to our lips and be silent where God has not given us anything to say. It's not the place of the creature to question the Potter, the place of the redeemed to question the judgment of their Redeemer. To ask God why is to question His judgment, and to bring judgment upon ourselves. When you ask God to explain the unexplainable, you are accusing Him of bad judgment, lovelessness, and failure. You are laying a moral judgment on God and accusing Him of not behaving morally.

When you ask why questions of God you are dealing with the hidden God. And because this hidden God strikes fear among the nations and terror in the hearts of people, like the prophet, we too would like this hidden God to rend the heavens, come down, clean up our society, rid the world of evil, straighten out our sickness, and take away everything that threatens our lives and offends our sense of justice. But what would become of you if that happened? Would you be able to stand in His presence? What righteous works would you greet this hidden God with who causes even the mountains to shake — pious use of His name and endless devotion to His Word, honor, love, and obedience of parents, pastors, leaders, teachers, and bosses, all whom God has placed over you, care and concern for neighbor, his property, name and reputation? If God were to tear open the heavens and come down to wipe out sin and every evil, what would prevent him from wiping you out first?

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Isaiah rightly confessed: We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our so-called righteous deeds are like filthy rags before God. We are like leaves in the fall that wither as His breath blows us away. So you had better be careful when you ask all those why questions. Remember, Job didn't get an answer when he questioned why his life had been stricken with so much misfortune. And neither did Jesus get an answer when He cried out from the cross: My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me? And yet Holy Scriptures gives us the answer. The Father abandoned His Son who carried our sins to the cross, so He wouldn't have to abandon us.

And in that act God also answered Isaiah's plea. He tore the heavens open and came down, but not the way Isaiah envisioned it. He came down from heaven, was conceived by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and

Job didn't get an answer when he questioned why his life had been stricken with so much misfortune.

was made Man. He came down not as the God of power, but hidden in a manger and on a cross. He came down to be with us, to be one of us, and to be joined with us in our humanity. He came down as the God who is born, breathes, bleeds, sweats, and dies. He came down as the obedient Son of Mary, a Carpenter from Nazareth, the itinerant Preacher of Galilee, a beggar King on a borrowed donkey, and a crucified King hanging on Calvary's cross.

When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, Mark tells us that the heavens were torn open, the Spirit descended upon Him, and the voice of the Father testified that this was His beloved Son. And friends, you are to look for no other God than this One. To be sure, to look for God anywhere other than in the Man, Jesus, is to look for the hidden God who will not be found who, should He be found, would destroy you. When Jesus hung in desolation upon the cross, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The dividing wall between God and man had finally come down. Sinful man and his holy God were once again at peace, brought together in the God-man, Jesus Christ, reconciled in His death upon the cross. Man was again at peace with his Creator, the clay reconciled to the Potter in the perfect Vessel named Jesus.

Jesus lived the life of the Son perfectly, so that baptized into Him we may now call God our Father. He gladly did the righteous works the Law requires. He obediently accomplished the Father's will where we would and could not. He died our death. His clay was crushed in our place and raised from the dead for us. He now sits at the right hand of the Father, enthroned in heavenly majesty to lord His death and resurrection over all things on our behalf. The Father is delighted in His Son, and through His Son, He delights also in you as His children.

Today is the first of four Sundays in the season of Advent. *Advent* means "coming." It's not so much a countdown to the coming of Christmas as it is

a time to ponder on and prepare for the visible coming of Jesus in His glory on the Last Day. On that Day the heavens will be torn open once again, and the One we aren't able to see now will then be seen in glory. And when will that happen? Well, that's like the question, why? Don't ask. You don't need to know. For no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. And if even the Son doesn't know the day of His second Advent, how can we ever presume to know it?

We don't know when the heavens will be torn open that one, final time. It could happen in the evening, at midnight, dawn, or in the morning. But we do know Him who will be coming down. He's the same One who comes down to us here in the Liturgy of His Word and Supper. He will come down to bring us up, to raise up all the dead, and give eternal life to all who trust in Him. Until that Day we are to work and watch, leaving the why and when questions to our gracious Father in heaven. We will simply work at the tasks we have been given by God to do as parents, workers, parishioners, and citizens. We will watch and work with confidence, knowing that He who will rend the heavens and come down is the same One who has already rent the heavens and come down to save us, even our Savior, Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, and the power and the honor, forever and ever. Amen.

If even the Son doesn't know the day of His second Advent, how can we ever presume to know it?

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

In the Desert

Mark 1:1-8

Second Sunday in Advent

Mark 1:1-8 (ESV): The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. When you memorized the books of the Bible during your Sunday School days, you may remember that the fourth book of the Old Testament is called Numbers. Interestingly enough, although the Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew, the name of this book actually comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where it was called *Arithmoi*, that is, Numbers, and that because of the census records found in chapters 1 and 26. The Israelites, though, often called this book by its Hebrew name, *Bemidbar*, which means, literally, In the Desert.

Surely you remember how God brought His people Israel out of the bondage and slavery of Egypt through the desert, safely delivering them through the Red Sea, and providing them with daily bread in gifts of manna and quail. On one occasion He turned bitter water into sweet, and in a dry, barren place He caused water to flow from solid rock. God led His people every step of the way, going before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He brought them quickly to the land of Canaan, which He Himself had sworn in an oath to give to Abraham and to His descendants forever.

But when the Israelites arrived at the promised land they sent in scouts, and when those scouts returned, they soon lost faith. The Canaanites were too strong and too numerous, the scouts reported. The Israelites would never be able to defeat them. So rather than trusting in the Lord and cling-

ing to His promises, the people rebelled, saying: If only we had died in Egypt or in this desert! They complained: Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better to go back to Egypt? So God punished them for their unbelief. Instead of bringing them straight into the land of promise, He sentenced them to forty years of exile, *bemidbar*, in the desert. He told them: As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. But you, your bodies will fall in this desert. Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness.

So, the phrase *in the desert*, carries with it the echoes of God's wrath against His people, who carried a wrath visited upon them because of their sin and rebellion. Bemidbar carries the bitter memory of how God provided for His people in every way, and yet they responded by rejecting and refusing to trust Him. But bemidbar isn't merely just a reminder of some dark chapter in Israel's history, it's also a measure of the soul's condition. Israel wandered forty years in the wilderness because the people had turned their backs on God. They were a barren, desolate people because they didn't want God's thoughts to be their thoughts and God's ways to be their ways. Bemidbar is where man finds himself when He hears the Word and ignores it, when he refuses to take that Word to heart and repent of his sin. Bemidbar, figuratively speaking, is the condition of sin. It describes where you are when you willfully separate yourself from God and His love toward you in Christ.

Today's Gospel tells us how John came, baptizing in the desert and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He didn't carry out this work in the cities where the people were, but out in the desert. And the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. By going out into this dreary, abandoned, wind-dried place, the people were acting out with their bodies the condition of their souls, which were equally dreary, dried, shriveled and lifeless. But although John appeared preaching in the desert, he also had come to a spiritual wilderness of sorts, a wilderness brought into being by our sin. He came calling those who were wandering in the exile of their sins, and to those who felt upon their chests the weight of God's judgment. He came and still comes, preaching to sinners, to those who are in the desert of judgment and condemnation.

John came as God's agent. He was and is God's prophet, a gift sent from on high to prepare the way for God's coming salvation. It is written in Isaiah, the prophet, said John: I will send My messenger ahead of You, who

God provided for His people in every way, and yet they responded by rejecting and refusing to trust Him.

will prepare Your way, the voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him. And the preaching of John was fulfilled in the coming of Christ as Man upon the earth, for John was the last of the Old Testament prophets, and his greatest work was pointing his finger to Jesus and proclaiming with a loud voice: Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! Yet, as complete as John's work was at the first coming of Christ, there's another sense in which his preaching is yet unfulfilled, a sense in which John still prepares the way for the Coming One who will return for you on the last day. Therefore, understand this: John's preaching is as valuable for you today as it was for the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem who went out to him. Christ has most certainly already come to you. By His birth, life,

By Holy Communion Jesus allows you to anticipate that feast in heaven that never ends.

death and resurrection, He has gathered you up out of the desert of your sin and brought you into His Promised Land. In baptism He has given you a foretaste of heaven, and by Holy Communion He allows you to anticipate that feast in heaven that never ends.

But the Church must learn from Israel's history! For it was after God delivered them from bondage that they turned away! Israel abandoned God after He had given His Word of promise, after He had fed His people with the bread of heaven, poured out for them the living water of eternal life, and made His presence known to them in the pillar of cloud and fire. And so John still comes preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He still comes to prepare the way of the Lord, because our hearts are just as likely to grow cold as Israel. We have yet to fully leave the desert and arrive in the promised land. Hence we must still repent, mourn our sinful, fallen condition, and cry out to God for mercy and protection. Above all, we must continue believing that God is gracious, and will never leave nor forsake us. Yes, dear Christian, John's preaching is for your ears. He comes to the desert of your sins, as it were, and calls upon you to prepare the way for the coming of our Lord.

And this is the great hope and promise attached to John's words: After me will come One more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. The One for whom John prepares the way is Jesus, the Mighty God, of whom Isaiah spoke, who comes for you, not as a helpless Infant, but as the fully revealed, returning, conquering King. Yet He who is all-powerful became weak for your sake. No enemy could defeat Him, no man could humiliate Him, but Jesus allowed Himself to suffer all things for your sake. Now He has risen from the dead, ascended on high, and sits at the right hand of the throne of God. This Jesus shall come again, of this we are certain. And when He comes, He shall fulfill the work He began in you. He will finally and fully draw you up out of the des-

ert wilderness of your sin, and deliver you into your heavenly home, built by the blood of Christ.

Until then, realize how greatly God cares for and sustains you in the desert. For as God delivered Israel from the bondage of her enemies, so also has He delivered you. As He sustained Israel by heavenly food and miraculous water, so also has He sustained you. His Supper is now your manna from heaven. Baptism is now the water of life, provided by God to deliver you. And as the Lord went before His people in a pillar of cloud and fire, so likewise has Jesus promised to remain with you always, even to the very end of the age. Israel's sin years finally ended when God delivered them into the home for which they so deeply longed. And you also may trust in this same Word and promise of the Lord for you, dear Christian. God will deliver you from your sins, for so it shall it be, because God cannot lie, and He will bring it to pass for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Expect the Unexpected

John 1:6-8; 19-28

Third Sunday in Advent

John 1:6-8, 19-28 (ESV): There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who are you? He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Are you Elijah? He said, I am not. Are you the Prophet? And he answered, No. So they said to him, Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? He said, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said. (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet? John answered them, I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie. These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. As you look forward with anticipation to Christmas, which is now only a scant two weeks away for those of you who are counting, do you have any expectations about what that day will be like? Of course you do. Some of your expectations may be realistic, some unrealistic. Some of your expectations may be great, some not so great. But many of your expectations may well be the direct result of the influence of others and how many of the people of this world view the Christmas holiday. But we all have some false expectations. And because this is true, this is also that time of year when the number of depression-related illnesses is at its highest because people's great expectations aren't being met.

But don't be too hard on yourself. Unfulfilled great expectations have always been part of the human experience. In fact, in our Gospel text this morning we just read about some of the great expectations held by the people of John's day. Did you notice how some of those who were talking with John had the expectation that John himself might have been the Christ, even though in verse 8 he had made it crystal clear that he wasn't? Did you also notice how some had the expectation he might be Elijah or another

prophet come back from the dead? Even after John stated plainly that his only mission was to proclaim the arrival of the Messiah, they continued questioning him, asking why, if he wasn't any of these, did he continue to baptize? They obviously had false expectations concerning the role and work of the Messiah.

But, is it any different in our own day? If you were to go down to the Plaza this afternoon and ask people two questions, first, What is the purpose of the Christmas holidays, and second, What is the purpose of the birth and life of Jesus Christ, you'd probably end up with all kinds of different answers. Why? It certainly couldn't be that the message concerning Christ and Christmas hasn't been proclaimed clearly. Indeed, you'd have to have lived under a rock all your life to have missed hearing about the history of Christmas and the One whose birth Christmas celebrates.

The only logical explanation is that we are all more comfortable making up our own version of reality when we don't like truth. Perhaps an example might be appropriate here. Is it not a universal truth that no one is perfect? I've never run across anyone who didn't agree with that assertion. However, does everyone mean the same thing by agreeing with that statement? Of course not! On one end of the scale you'll find those who think this little flaw in our nature is due to the fact that we haven't yet reached our full potential in the evolutionary process. Others are of the opinion that even though no one is perfect, it doesn't matter anyway so long as you do your best. Then there's God's Word, which sees this as part and parcel of our sinful nature, the very thing that separates us from God. And finally, there are those who fall into a deep depression over this because they think by trying harder they ought to be able to overcome this universal human shortcoming.

Even as Christians, I'm sure every one of us could find something in each of these opinions to agree with. But what actually is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Of course I would expect you to say that the biblical explanation is the only possible answer. But why doesn't everyone, including us, understand this if it's so obvious? I suspect it's probably for the same reason that those who actually came into contact with Jesus during His earthly ministry refused to believe in Him, and the same reason many today still refuse to believe in Him. You have heard all the excuses. Maybe you have even used some of them.

I just can't believe in a God who could create an imperfect world! I just can't understand how God could hold someone accountable for their imperfections. My God wouldn't be so cruel as to send His Son to be crucified for the sins of others! My God loves everyone, and all He wants is that we each just do our best. I could go on, but what's basically wrong with each

We are all more comfortable making up our own version of reality when we don't like truth.

of these statements is that they have their origin in the minds of people who have made up their own expectations of God, who He ought to be, and how He ought to behave. And each of them have absolutely no foundation in reality! They're all based upon what we, according to our own fallen human nature, might expect God be to do. But friends, with God you need to expect the unexpected!

However, since it's beyond human reason to expect the unexpected from God, many still refuse to believe even when confronted with irrefutable evidence. After all, while it's unquestionably beyond reason to expect that in a world of darkness we should be able to see any light, yet, that's exactly what the Scriptures record. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus Christ is described as the Light of God's grace shining forth in the total darkness of this sin-filled world. He is the Light that shines in the darkness of our sin-hardened hearts. But because this is beyond human reason, many refuse to see this Light even when it's shining it's brightest.

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Is it not beyond human reason to believe that 2,000 years ago a Child who had no human father was born to a young virgin maiden in the city of Bethlehem, and that this Child was the very Son of God? Yet that's exactly what happened. Is it reasonable to believe God could love you so much that He'd go to such great lengths to save you from your sin by sending this Child into the world to suffer and die on a cross for you? Of course, but is that not exactly how the Scriptures

report it? And is that not in keeping with the idea that with God you should expect the unexpected?

When John came into this world, people expected the expected. They looked for God to work among them according to their own expectations. They looked for Him to rule with power and might, in ways they could see with their eyes and touch with their hands. But it was not to be. Instead of the expected, God did the unexpected. He allowed His only Begotten Son to be born of a virgin. He sent Him into this hate-filled world to be crucified by sinful men so that sinful men could live forever. He proclaimed His Son's coming not with the fanfare trumpets of angel legions, but by the mouth of a man who lived as a hermit in the desert, wore clothing made of camel's hair, and ate locusts and wild honey as a steady diet.

And each year at Christmas, in the same unexpected way, God reminds you that with Him you should expect the unexpected. Were you to approach God with the expectation that He act as you might expect Him to act, He would have to smite you for your sin and cast you into the depths of hell. Unexpectedly though, God doesn't do that. Instead He graciously calls you to be His own and to live under Him in His kingdom forever through

the merits of the Virgin's Son. He invites you to call Him Father and to be a member of His family. He declares you to be sinless even though you are filled with sin. Dear Christian, God has called you to expect the unexpected, and to receive it with great joy. In Christ Jesus our Lord, God has done the unexpected in your life. And for the sake of His Son, He will continue in it even until that Last Great Day when He unexpectedly comes to take you home to be with Him, to live forever in heaven. May it always be so, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

His Kingdom Will Never End

Luke 1:26-38

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:26-38 (ESV): In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you! But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I am a virgin? And the angel answered her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy — the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God. And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Over the past few years our world has undergone a number of rather amazing transformations. For instance, the face of the Middle East has changed with the invasion of Iraq and the replacement of Saddam Hussein. The leadership of a number of Arab nations has switched hands from one despot to another. And it wasn't all that long ago that the world watched in disbelief as the Soviet Union collapsed, the Berlin Wall was torn down, and a series of independent states emerged. World history is full of such events, where one government collapses and another emerges from the ashes. What we learn from this is that the governments of this world often come and go at what seems to be looking back on the process, an almost chaotic rate.

But now comes Gabriel, an angel sent from God, a messenger from the unseen realms of glory. He comes to a humble virgin maiden by the name of Mary, who lives in a remote village bearing the name, Nazareth. This angelic messenger was sent to inform Mary that soon she would bear and give birth to a Child, a Son, and that this Child would be none other than the Son of the Most High, the very Son of God! Gabriel declared to Mary that her Son's kingdom, unlike the kingdoms of this world, would never end! The kingdom of this One who would come from heaven to assume a place in His own creation would never cease. This Son of God would reign forever, Supreme Ruler over all creation.

In contrast to the kingdoms of this world, God's Son, the Crown Prince of Heaven, didn't have His beginning here. He came instead from heaven above, where He reigns forever with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The foundation of His rule, therefore, is based squarely on the fact that He Himself is none other than the one, holy, eternal God, David's heir according to His human nature, yet pre-existent from eternity, God over all, the One who is forever to be praised. He is the Word which was with God, in God, and was God, not only from the beginning, but before anything else even came into existence. Unlike the kingdoms of this world, the kingdom of Jesus is the eternal kingdom of the everlasting Godhead!

Yet even within Iraq, Afghanistan, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, where some of the more memorable oppressive earthly regimes have fallen in recent years, even there Christians somehow managed to stand firm in their faith. While Christ may have officially been rejected in those lands, and hundreds of Churches may have been forced against their will to shut their doors, still the rulers of those governments were never able to push the Lord Jesus out of the hearts and minds of His people. God's kingdom still reigned despite every effort to depose Him. And when that oppressive government was finally overthrown, God's people once again flocked home to the Church.

This happened because of those fearless Christians who continued to confess their faith even though Christianity had been officially outlawed and because they weren't afraid to tell others about the Savior even when their own lives were at stake. And the Word of God and its proclamation continues to gather the elect into God's kingdom even though earthly governments in many places have made it illegal to speak the name of Jesus. Still, in spite of all the laws of men attempting to abolish Christianity, there are still people willing to become residents of that forbidden kingdom willing to risk imprisonment and torture because they understand that they are citizens of heaven! These are a powerful witness to the truth

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of Revelation 11, where we read these words: The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and forever.

Forever and forever! He shall reign forever and forever! The sounds from the grand refrain of the Hallelujah Chorus and the finale from Handel's Messiah ring loudly in our ears with this blessed truth! Forever glorious in His Kingdom, Christ now reigns forever among His people! The Prophets were given a small glimpse of that glory, and they expressed what God had revealed to them in the images of their own day. Listen again to their voices so that your eyes might also be opened to see anew the glorious kingdom of our Lord, His kingdom which will be a golden age of plenty, where friendship between God and man marks the end of what once had been hostility, where there will be no pain nor suffering, death will be swallowed up forever, every tear will be wiped from our eyes, and everlasting peace will prevail.

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What a grand, glorious privilege to be counted as a member of that kingdom. Our King, Jesus Christ, doesn't draft you to be part of that kingdom, rather, He kindly invites you with His grace. Through His mercy, the door of that kingdom has now been opened to the likes of you and me! There isn't a thing you could have done to merit a place in this kingdom, and yet, by grace, our Lord has chosen to give it to you through rebirth and new life! The Apostle Paul drives this

point home when he writes, regarding baptism, that He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified freely by His grace, we might become heirs, having the hope of eternal life.

Beyond the angel's words announcing our Lord's birth, Mary could not have envisioned the future shape of her Son's kingdom, that one day Church spires would rise tall on the horizons of cities and villages the world over and that in those Churches millions upon millions of Christians would eventually gather to worship Her Son. Is it possible for you to fully comprehend what it will be like when we and all the saints who have gone on into heaven before us will be gathered around the throne of the Lamb, washed clean in the blood He shed on Calvary's cross? Yet, God's promise is that day we will be standing there in that place. In baptism you have already put off your old, sinful flesh and been clothed in the robes of Christ's perfect righteousness. And, in the Lord's Supper you truly receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. God's kingdom, you see, comes quietly, unobtrusively, and with little fanfare, almost silently,

through Word and Sacrament. Here it's a kingdom of grace. There it will be a kingdom of glory!

Consider how the people of Rome looked back to that time when Saturn had supposedly been her king, and how the Greeks looked back to that golden age when all the world had been young. Pagan religions, you see, are generally of the opinion that the annual cycle of the seasons of the year will be repeated endlessly with no forward progress ever taking place. And even in our own country we have a tendency to want everything to be just like it was in the good old days. But contrast these worldly views with the Gospel of our Lord Christ, which is always and ever forward-looking. The cross, the empty tomb, and the Ascension of our Lord — all events from the past — don't draw our attention backward, but rather forward and upward. For here in this world we do not have an enduring city, St. Paul reminds us, but we are looking for that city which is yet to come.

As God's people we seek that kingdom whose foundation is in Him who is from everlasting to everlasting. We seek that kingdom that comes to us through the baptismal font where our sin is washed away through the Scriptures, upon whose pages we find God's will for us in Christ revealed through the pulpit, from which the Gospel is preached into our ears and through the Medicine of Immortality — Christ's true body and blood — in which we receive orally in the Holy Supper the forgiveness of sins. We seek that kingdom that is invincible and victorious over every enemy, even the gates of hell, that kingdom which will never end!

As Christians, when we see what the Middle East has become in our own day, we might tend to be more than a little depressed by the fact that Islam has grown so strong in that part of the world where the Gospel used to predominate. In Damascus, for example, what was once the great Church of St. John the Baptist is now a Moslem mosque. Daily the heralds in that place call the Islamic faithful to prayer from the arches of that building, which at one time resounded with hymns of praise to our Lord Jesus Christ. And yet at least as recently as a few years ago on one side of that mosque, above the entrance to the ancient Church, these words are still carved in stone unobliterated thus far by the Muslims: Your kingdom, O Christ, is an everlasting kingdom! Even today those who would climb up to read these words in the midst of a land dominated by the false god, Allah, are still able find in them God's hope and encouragement for as the Scriptures clearly teach, the kingdom of our Lord Christ is an eternal kingdom, and of this kingdom there shall be no end. May God grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.

The Gifts: Worship of the Magi

Matthew 2:1-12

The Epiphany of Our Lord (Observed)

Matthew 2:1-12 (ESV): Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him. After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. During this season of Epiphany, it's almost too easy for us to focus on either the Magi themselves or the gifts they bring, rather than the One to whom their gifts were brought. And the reason why this is so is because not only are the Magi and their gifts unique, exotic and mysterious, but also because that's where we sinners in our fallenness naturally direct our attention. What I mean is that when we zero in on the Magi, the gifts they bring, the sacrifices they make to bring them, or the manner in which they

worship the newborn Infant Savior, then that elevates our offering, our stewardship, our sacrifice, and the way we worship Jesus.

But the gold, frankincense and myrrh aren't really at the heart and center of the Magi's visit, because our offering, our self-sacrifice and the way we worship should never be the heart and center of the Gospel message. What is central is what Our Lord does and who He is. That God chooses to assume human flesh, bear our sin and be our Savior, those things alone ought to elicit from us an offering and sacrifice, a glorious heartfelt worship that matches and exceeds anything the Magi may have brought to Jesus. And it's not just how we respond to Jesus' gift of Himself, because ultimately our response, offering and worship mean nothing and get us nowhere. To be sure, these things are nothing other than the life and love of Jesus lived out through us in a way that simply receives what He chooses to give.

That's the lesson of the Magi — that the focus must be taken off of them and directed toward Jesus alone. The Magi and their gifts remind us that our offering and worship are not a response to anything, but simply a reflection of what God is doing in and for us. The account of the Magi calls us away from our paltry contributions and our frenzied way of worship, back to the Gift of the Christ Child who is at work in us, not in what we do, but in who He is and what He gives and bestows by His Gospel in preaching and the Sacraments. Consider how Herod desired to worship Jesus, not by receiving from Him, not by exalting the gift He brings, not in the Liturgy of the Gospel, but in a way which he only thinks is good and right. Herod's selfish worship began when he heard the preaching of the Magi. However, instead of drawing him to Christ to receive His gifts, Herod's heart was hardened so that his faith rested not in the promise of the Gospel, but in what he saw as a threat to his own position and power. And that led not only to Herod's destruction but also to the needless, heartless massacre of many innocent children.

In contrast, the Magi weren't concerned at all with their worship or their gifts, but only with God's grace and kindness. And that grace and kindness of God appeared to them not as an idea, a sensational feeling, or a grand hope. Rather, it was manifested and arrived in human flesh, in the Person of the vulnerable poverty-wrapped Child as He lie in the arms of the Blessed Virgin. The grace and kindness of God, you see, isn't an attitude, but a Person. And it's not just any Person, but the very Son of God come down from heaven to become the sin that you and I are, and to be the Savior you and I could never hope to be.

So, the worship of the Magi wasn't only that they heard that Scriptural Word, but that they took it to heart and received it as the living, incarnate

Our offering and worship are not a response to anything, but simply a reflection of what God is doing in and for us.

Word it truly is. The Magi believed that the promise of God is both resident in the infant Christ, and also given through His flesh. And so they set out to find Him, not because they were curious, not because they needed to be convinced, and not even because they were willing to give up all they had for the sake of this Child. No, the Magi set out to make the long journey to Bethlehem, following the star in the East, so that they might worship God's epiphany, His appearance and arrival, His manifestation and en-fleshment in the Baby, Jesus, God and man in one Person.

And what was their worship? It may have appeared as though their worship was to give gifts, but in reality it was to receive. The Magi desired nothing more than to take in everything the Baby Jesus offers, everything the Baby Jesus is. Their faith is what led them to follow the star and not to

The sacrifice of God in Christ is lived through you as your God-pleasing worship.

be dissuaded. Their faith led them to receive this Child as He came for them, and for us all; in the flesh and blood of man. Oh, that our faith might lead us always in that same direction! Oh, that we would not be dazzled and drawn away by so many other intriguing, but quickly fading forms of worship! Oh, that we could also have the kind faith that's satisfied and gratified not with what pleases us, but simply with what Our Lord is pleased to give and plant within us without measure!

By the preaching of this same Gospel that the Magi heard, and by the leading of the same star and light of the Holy Spirit, you and I, we have been given this true, right-worshipping faith, a faith that heeds the shepherding of Our Lord and leads us away from our own sinful lusts and desires, our own self-pleasuring, and our own self-gratifying ways of worship. This is a faith that calls us to the Christ Child, that gathers us with the Magi, with saints and angels around wherever He chooses to be, that enlightens us so that we trust the promise more than the threat, that cradles us within His body, the Church, and unites us with Him in such a tight, close union that with His flesh and blood He makes a home, lives and dwells within us.

And with that faith comes the Life of Christ in you, a life that gifts you not with money or deeds, but with your whole life and being as a holy, lively and reasonable sacrifice to God. The sacrifice of God in Christ is now being reflected and lived through you as your God-pleasing worship, as the only proper response to the knowledge that in Christ everything in your life is a yes and amen to the gifts God desires to give you. That's the lesson of the Magi and the proper focus of today's Feast. May it always be so, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

The Power of Life in the Word

John 1:43-51

Second Sunday of Epiphany

John 1:43-51 (ESV): The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, Follow me. Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Nathanael said to him, Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Philip said to him, Come and see. Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit! Nathanael said to him, How do you know me? Jesus answered him, Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you. Nathanael answered him, Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel! Jesus answered him, Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these. And he said to him, Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Every day when you get out of bed, you normally go about your daily routine and live life pretty much like you have been doing for years. You watch the sun come up in the morning and set at the close of day. You notice more or less how all the things around us are living, breathing and changing. And I suspect most people believe that because they are part of this creation we see all around us that that's where life is to be found. Yet, sadly, that's not what real life is at all. Real life, according to Holy Scripture, and as God brought it about in the beginning is so much more. To be sure, before sin came into the world, life was certainly full of daily routines, sunrises and sunsets, but there was also perfect communion with God. Sin destroyed that, so that after the fall, the perfect fellowship our first parents enjoyed with God evaporated, because God cannot tolerate sin, and Adam and Eve were now sinners, no longer truly alive.

Paul writes in his letter to the Church at Rome that we are to consider ourselves dead to sin, for the wages of sin is death. And our Lord Jesus says

in Matthew 8: Follow Me, and, Let the dead bury their dead. The point is, that even though we walk, talk, eat, breathe, and believe we are alive, the reality is that we are sinners who daily break God's Law. We have no fellowship with God, so we are spiritually dead. In today's Gospel we just read how Jesus, desiring to go to Galilee, found Philip and said to him: Follow Me! Now we know that without God we are spiritually dead, and what do dead people do? They do nothing! They can't look for or find anything. They have no ability to reason or to think. So, on our own we could never find God, nor would we want to. We are adrift on a dark sea, unable to aid ourselves. Hence God must say to us: Follow Me! and then enable us to do it.

Consider what happened to Philip after Jesus found him. Being a believer, Philip first ran to find his friend Nathanael and said to him: We

God also desires
to use you
in spite of
the same
poverty of faith
we all share
with Philip.

have found Him of whom Moses and the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph! But Nathanael, an unbeliever who was spiritually dead, replied: Can anything good come out of Nazareth? You see, Nathanael exhibited the very same reaction most people have toward Jesus. Nathanael's mind was so clouded by sin, he simply couldn't believe what he had heard. Even Philip, an apostle, was hardly able grasp who Jesus was, and was often dumbfounded by His behavior. For instance, when Jesus was in the midst of the feeding of the 5,000, He turned to

Philip and asked him where they were going to buy bread for all those people, and Philip replied: Eight months wages wouldn't be buy enough for each one to have a bite! Philip saw the problem, but didn't grasp the Solution standing there before him in the Person of Jesus.

The next time we see Philip is in Jerusalem. It was Palm Sunday, and some God-fearing Greeks had asked him if he would bring them to Jesus. But Philip, having had no idea whether or not Greeks would be allowed to follow Jesus, didn't know what to do. So he took them to Andrew, so that Andrew could take them to Jesus. Then there was that time when all the disciples were with Jesus on the night He was betrayed. Philip said to Him: Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. How many times had Jesus displayed the Father's glory with miracles and signs, spoke the Father's words and used His authority over demons, wind, waves, sin, yes, even death itself? Yet in the midst of all that Philip still was unable to see who Jesus really was. Still, Jesus sought Philip and called him to be one of His disciples. What this teaches is that God doesn't have to have great people with great skills to accomplish His great work. God was even able to use Philip, who brought nothing to the table. And He also desires to use you in spite of the same poverty of faith we all share with Philip.

In the flood of baptism, God marked you to be His own, bestowed on you His Holy Spirit and created faith in your heart. When you hear or read

the Scriptures, God the Holy Spirit is at work uplifting and sustaining your faith. This isn't something you do for yourself, but what God is doing in and for you. The new life, faith, and salvation you possess is totally dependent on God, not you! And what does this mean? It means that God desires you to realize how great a gift He's given you in His Word, how without it you would be dead in your sin, cut off from God eternally. God's Word is how the Holy Spirit works faith in you, how you come to the knowledge that you are a sinner who daily transgresses God's Law, and yet, for Jesus' sake, are still considered righteous. God's Word leads you to recognize Jesus as your Savior from sin who freely bestows on you eternal life, raises you from the dead and makes you a child of God.

You remember, of course, the account of Lazarus, how Jesus raised him from the dead. Do you also remember how, when Jesus finally decided He would go to see Lazarus, that he had already been dead four days? What person in his sane mind would have asked for the tomb to be opened after so long a time. Yet that's what Jesus did, even after Martha had pointed out to Him that Lazarus' body would have a very unpleasant odor. But ignoring Martha's warning, Jesus offered up a prayer, gave orders for the tomb to be opened, then looked inside and shouted: Lazarus, come forth. And as John reports it: he who had been dead came out of the tomb.

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That, dear Christian, that is precisely what Jesus has done for you. He saw you rotting in a tomb of unbelief, and He called out to you, saying: Come forth! And you did! That's what God's Word does to all who call upon His name! And as we saw in this morning's Gospel, this is a gift God desires you to share with others. That's why Philip went to Nathanael, saying: Come and see! He wanted him to know that same peace and joy that had been given to him by Jesus. Well, how many of you are doing what Philip did, talking to your friends, loved ones and neighbors, telling them to come and see? Whether it be fear of rejection, fear of being called a holy roller, or a Bible thumper, or fear that others will think you're weird, most of us probably aren't inviting our friends to come and see.

But remember, Satan doesn't want anyone to know about Jesus. That's why he puts so many obstacles in your way, so that you won't want to share your faith with anyone. But know this, God's Word has already overcome Satan and his obstacles. God's Word gives you the strength to overcome your fears about what others might think so you can joyfully tell them about Jesus. And when you finally begin to grasp the truth that God has already overcome every obstacle in your way, then you'll be able to say to others with confidence: Come and see! Come and see what Jesus has done to save you. God's Word is what gives you the power and desire to do that. Yet let me ask you, how regular are you in your worship and prayer life?

How serious are you about engaging in a regular study of God's Word so it can have its way with you?

God has called you through His Living Word to inherit eternal life. But He wants more for you than that you just come to Church once a week for worship. He wants you to take the Word spoken into your ears here in this place and apply it to your life. He wants you to share that Word and its life-giving power with all those whom He places in your path. St. Paul writes: Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own, for you were bought at a price? That price was God's own Son, His suffering, death and resurrection, and God willingly paid that price so that you might be called back from the dead.

God wants you to share that Word and its life-giving power with all those whom He places in your path.

That's the Good News God desires you to hear, use and share daily. That Word has to have its way with you, so that you might be renewed with its life-giving power, and then share it with others. Paul was persecuted, and ultimately lost his life, because he refused to stop speaking about Jesus. Everywhere he went the devil gave him a hard time. He was beaten, threatened, and walked in danger every day. Yet he was still able to write in the first chapter of his letter to the Church at Rome: I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes. And like St. Paul, neither are you to be ashamed of the Gospel. Without it you would never have known Jesus.

You would never have been given the gift of eternal life and the forgiveness of sins. And that's precisely what God wants you to share with others, the life you have been given, the salvation and forgiveness of God, His peace, and His Kingdom, all of which are now yours. God has come to make you His own. He's marked you and given you His Name. He's made you one of His Holy Ones as an inheritance. And He's given you the privilege of sharing that inheritance with others, as well as the power to do it all to the praise and glory of His most holy name! May it always be so, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

A New Teaching With Authority

Mark 1:21-28

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

Mark 1:21-28 (ESV): And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God. But Jesus rebuked him, saying, Be silent, and come out of him! And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him. And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. As I observe our world, I can't help but notice how most of us aren't happy with the way things have been, but instead are always looking for something new. Whether it's dishwashing detergent, computers, home electronics or automobiles, everybody always wants the newest model, something different and better. And this is also true in matters of religion and faith. Everyone is madly searching for some new teaching to better serve them. In this morning's Gospel we just read how the people of Capernaum who heard Jesus teach saw it as a new teaching, unlike anything they had ever experienced, and it was different, powerful, delivered with authority. No one knew what to make of either it or the One teaching it.

Jesus and His disciples were in Capernaum on the Sabbath, where He entered the synagogue and taught. And His teaching along with His casting out of the evil spirit from the man who was possessed caused the people to ask: What is this new doctrine? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him. So, what was this new teaching? Well, last week's Gospel reported how Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, that the time had come, the kingdom of God was near, and that now was time for everyone to repent and believe the Gospel!

Now, you might be wondering what was so new about this teaching? How did it differ from the teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees? Well, the difference was threefold. First, Jesus focused on the coming kingdom of God. But the difference between the teaching of Jesus and the Pharisees was that Jesus taught that the kingdom comes about only by repentance and God-given faith and that this kingdom was drawing near in the person of the Christ. The Pharisees, on the other hand, taught that through their own efforts people were to draw near to the kingdom. Jesus did not teach what sorts of things people were required to do to belong to the kingdom, but that God was the One who did it all. The coming kingdom about which Jesus taught came only through saving faith and the mercy of Almighty God, and this was most certainly a new teaching far different from what anyone had been hearing from the teachers of the Law.

Jesus' teaching brought about healing and comfort to terrified consciences.

Jesus didn't spend time pouring over nonstop interpretations of the ins and outs of the Law. He didn't teach how many steps one could take on the Sabbath, or how much one's offering had to be before God was likely to be pleased with it. He didn't teach concerning the proper length and width of the tassels on one's prayer garments, the correct method for washing cooking utensils, nor the exact time when Sabbath and holy day

observances ought to begin. None of the minutia that the teachers of the Law incessantly labored over ever entered into the teaching of Jesus. Jesus taught rather that true righteousness comes only through faith, and that because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they must therefore be justified freely by His grace, even as the Apostle Paul also taught. Jesus taught that the time had come, that the kingdom was near, and that now was the time to repent and believe the Gospel!

The second way Jesus' teaching differed from the teachers of the Law was summed up by the fact that He taught with authority! His teaching was totally new to all those whose ears and hearts had formerly been pounded endlessly with the do's and don't of the Law until all hope had been lost. The teachers of the Law taught authoritatively all right, at least as far as they could derive it from the Law, for they knew the Law inside and out, and had determined every minute detail of what it forbade and allowed. Still, their teaching was powerless to do any good. It brought no improvement to people's lives or to the condition of their hearts.

In contrast, Jesus' teaching was new and refreshing. When people heard Him speak of repentance and faith, something actually happened. His teaching caused their hearts to be moved. It brought about healing and comfort to terrified consciences. That's not to say He soft-pedaled the Law. By no means! Jesus' teaching and preaching concerning the Law of God cut people to the heart. When He preached the Law He completely and totally crushed and killed the arrogant thinking of all who had previ-

ously and erroneously believed that they had been faithful in obeying and keeping all of it.

There wasn't a single person who heard Jesus preach the Law who didn't feel the full condemnation and wrath of God falling upon them as a sinner. Yet they also heard from Jesus' lips the blessed Good News that God's kingdom doesn't come through our own puny efforts at obeying the Law. Jesus taught that the mercy of God would be poured out on them in spite of their sinfulness, that it's God's will for sinners that they repent and believe in this One sent from heaven in human flesh to save all of us from our sins. This teaching brought results. It changed people's lives because it changed their hearts. Unlike the teachers of the Law, Jesus taught how properly to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. He directed hearts away from those things which were powerless to save so that they might truly repent and believe the Gospel.

The third way Jesus' teaching was different from that of the teachers of the Law was that His teaching had authority. The evil spirit that for years had possessed the man in the synagogue made this very clear when he cried out to Jesus, saying: Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!

So, when Jesus taught, He taught with an authority such as they had never seen nor heard before. It had long been lost by the teachers of the Law, who had forgotten the true Source of all authority. And in truth, that was one reason Jesus had come.

You see, it isn't enough to teach authoritatively from God's Word. Preaching *about* God's Word never helped or saved anyone. It's only the preaching of God's Word that saves, for it alone is the only source of true authority. Let me say that again. It isn't preaching *about* God's Word that helps or saves, but only when God's Word is preached. The preacher who preaches about God's Word will most likely try to dissect or decipher it so his audience will be better able to understand it. But the preacher who simply preaches God's Word proclaims the very power and authority of God, which alone is able to bring new life to fallen sinners, the Good News of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. On the one hand, then, the preacher who preaches about God's Word chops it up and puts it under the microscope to understand it better, while the preacher who simply preaches God's Word proclaims God's power to save, redeem and comfort broken hearts and condemned sinners.

For God's Word to be taught with genuine authority, one must first be mindful of to whom this authority belongs. That's why Holy Scripture is called the Word of God, because the authority of that Word belongs solely to Him. Hence he who preaches God's Word preaches with the power and

Jesus taught how properly to fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

authority of God. You can hear the authority of men anywhere, but it's only in the Church where you hear the authority of Almighty God being proclaimed for the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of your soul. The teaching of Jesus, then in His day as well as ours, will only be seen as a new teaching with authority when it's connected with the power of the Author and Giver of life, the Creator and Ruler of all things. When you come to hear the teaching of Jesus, and when it's rightly set forth before you, nothing can prevent the coming of the kingdom of God. When the demon-possessed man cried out to Jesus, He sternly ordered him to be quiet and come out. Only then did the evil spirit shake the man violently and came out.

When a little one is brought to the waters of Holy Baptism, the pastor speaks the name of God over that child and the Holy Spirit enters in. There's no longer any place left for the devil or his minions. And in the same way, when you come before the Lord, confess your sin and seek His forgiveness for the sake of His Son, the words I speak to you enter into your ears with the authority of Almighty God. When you hear me say: I, therefore, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, you know for certain that your sin has been forgiven, for those words are spoken with the authority of God, the authority of Jesus. So rest assured, dear children of God that as our dear father in the faith, Luther, teaches in the Small Catechism, all this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself. Compared to the ways of the world, this is a new teaching and with authority! May God be praised for it. And may you always be blessed by it. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

In the Church you hear the authority of Almighty God being proclaimed for the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of your soul.

The Healing Touch of Jesus

Mark 1:29-39

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

Mark 1:29-39 (ESV): And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, Everyone is looking for you. And he said to them, Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out. And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. If there is one thing most people agree on, it's that Jesus was a Man on the move. And while this characteristic is displayed in all the Gospels, it's especially evident here in Mark. In fact, as you read through this book you can't help noting how Jesus almost never has a moment to Himself. From the time of His baptism, Jesus was literally driven to carry out the work His Father had given Him. To that end He was constantly teaching, healing the sick, and casting out demons, so that everyone was seeking Him out. That's why it seems especially strange that this episode with Peter's mother-in-law is so often overlooked. After all, just about everyone knows the story of the wedding at Cana, how Jesus changed water into wine, how He raised Lazarus from the dead, and how He called for Zacchaeus to come out of his tree and become a follower. But few have much knowledge of this incident of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law.

Again, this is how the story goes. After Jesus had finished teaching in the synagogue, probably later that same evening, He traveled with His dis-

ciples to the house of Simon Peter, where his mother-in-law lay sick in bed with a fever. The whole incident is reported so matter-of-factly that all we know is that when Jesus arrived at Peter's house He was told of his mother-in-law's ailment and went to her side. Perhaps the fact that her illness was reported only as a fever is why it's given so little attention, for certainly Jesus must have had more important things to deal with than a simple little fever. There were demons needing to be cast out, dead bodies to raise to life, and a Gospel of salvation in urgent need of being preached. Why should our Lord Christ be bothered with such a trifling little fever?

Well, what I'd like to suggest is that this incident gives us some real insight into what our Lord's ministry to sinners is all about, for Jesus is much more than just a run-of-the-mill holy man. He's the Creator who loves His entire creation, the One who came into our world not to teach us, as some might assert, a better way of life, but as the Great Physician whose sole mission and purpose is to bring peace and healing to this broken, wounded world. What seems like a little fever to us, to Jesus is just one more sign of how cracked and crumbling our world has become. Our Lord didn't create man and woman to hurt and suffer, but so that they, as His own dear children, might serve Him and one another with gladness.

Satan would like nothing better than to convince you your life is hopeless.

So Jesus, in what must have been a very tender moment, went to the bedside of Peter's mother-in-law, took her hand, lifted her up, and the fever departed! Now this might appear to be nothing more than a relatively minor act, but lest the import of this moment be lost, consider what was actually taking place. Here at the bed of a simple, ordinary woman, the very Creator of Heaven and earth, the Giver of all good things, and the Lord of all creation, leaned over, took her hand, lifted her up out of her fever, and made her well and whole. But there's one more thing you should know, and that's that the Greek used here in this text is a word that denotes both healing and forgiving. In other words, to Jesus, there is no difference between the physical maladies of this world and the sin that afflicts us all.

In our frail, fractured world, sickness and disease can very often rip through a person so completely that it seems there's nothing left. If you have ever had, or if you know someone who has had a debilitating disease, a heart attack, or another serious ailment, you certainly know what I'm talking about. There's something terrifying about that kind of helplessness, because no matter how hard you might try, there are some things you just can't change. But physical ailments are but one sign of the sin-sickness behind it all, and it's this sin-sickness that afflicts us and makes us feel as if there's no hope. And Satan would like nothing better than to convince you your life is hopeless. In fact, he'll do just about anything to get you to wallow in your own despair. To be sure, it's Satan's greatest tool, because

despair eats away at you like a cancer and causes you to believe nothing good can ever come of your life. And if you listen to Satan's lie, he'll have won the battle and had his way with you.

Peter's mother-in-law could have easily fallen prey to the wiles of Satan, who would have loved to see her wallow in her illness. But Jesus put an end to that. He lifted Peter's mother-in-law up from her affliction and forgave her out of her sickness. And as He forgave her, He also forgives you. He takes your worn-out body and washes it anew in the water of Holy Baptism, a water of life that doesn't just get you wet, but bathes you in the Word of Christ and brings total cleansing. It's there where God makes you whole, fills you with His Spirit, cleanses you and heals you, even though death surrounds you on every side.

But there's one more thing I want you to notice. After Jesus took Peter's mother-in-law's hand, lifted her up, and cast out the fever, what happened next isn't what you would have expected. She began to wait on them! Or, as one translation reads: She rose up and began to serve them. Imagine! Here was this woman who had been terribly sick, perhaps even to the point of death, then Jesus walks in and heals her so she can get up, wait on tables and serve them by doing housework! Did Jesus heal her because He needed an extra servant?

If you look at it this way, you really drive a wedge between your life as a child of God and the vocation God has given to you. Jesus didn't save you so you could go out and sit on a hill to wait for His return, or so that you could wallow in your own sinful selfishness. No! He saved you and set you free so that you could once again be fully human. God didn't create us to sit around on clouds and play harps. In the beginning, in the Garden, after creating Adam and Eve, God sent them out to care for the earth, to work and subdue it.

Working, living, and doing, all of which constitute being human, are what God created man for. If you separate those things from your faith, you are separating God from the world and you are making the world a more meaningless place. That's a problem many Christians have today. They think God is out there somewhere, but they don't know where. They think He did His part so they could go to heaven one day, but that until that day arrives, they are on their own. Nothing could be further from the truth. God saved you not only for eternity, but also for the here and now! He freed you to be the human being He created you to be. He freed you to live your life, fulfill your vocation, and realize your calling here on this earth.

That's why what Peter's mother-in-law did after being healed isn't all that strange. She did what she was supposed to do — she served them. Her vocation was to take care of the house, and to make sure everyone in that

God freed you to live your life, fulfill your vocation, and realize your calling here on this earth.

house was well-fed and properly cared for. Hers was a wonderful, honorable estate. Hence Jesus came to her and healed her so that she might live in the vocation wherein God had placed her. And friends, that's how forgiveness and Jesus' healing works in your life. God comes to You through His Son, through His Word, through His washing, through His Supper, and through the ministry of His Church and it's there where He forgives you and heals you of your sin-sickness.

Now you are certainly free to take that knowledge, stuff it in the closet, and only bring it out for an hour or two on Sunday morning, when instead, that knowledge ought to be taking root in your life. Our Lord God created you to live your life in Christ, and that means always, not just on the occasional Sunday morning. God wants you to live your life to the fullest, to

God has set you free to live your life without fear or terror, because you have His promise that He will be with you always.

be who you are as a child of God, using the gifts and talents He's given you. God is the One who made you to be a father, mother, child, student, worker, boss, business owner, or whatever else you might be or do, and those are the things He wants you to do to His eternal praise and glory. God, having made you His child, has set you free to live your life without fear or terror, because you have His promise that He will be with you always.

That's why you come here to the Divine Service, to hear God's Word, to confess your sins, receive absolution, and partake of Christ's true body and blood in the Lord's Supper. You come to be forgiven, to be healed and renewed in both body and soul. And through all of this your life becomes inextricably bound together with the life of Christ, so that in the vocation God has given you, you can now joyfully serve both Him and your neighbor. Dear Christian, as He once did with Peter's mother-in-law, so now has God also entered into your presence, lifted you up, forgiven you, healed you, and made you whole. Now you are truly free to go out and live Your life, confident in the power of that Gospel into which you have been called. God has promised it to you and God will deliver it to you for the sake of His Son. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Another Mountain to Climb

Mark 9:2-9

The Transfiguration

Mark 9:2-9 (ESV): And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah. For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, This is my beloved Son; listen to him. And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. What happened long ago on the Mount of Transfiguration is startling, partly because of what actually happened there, and partly because those events stood in such sharp contrast to the way Jesus simply and humbly lived. While it's true that many who heard Jesus speak were moved to say that no one ever spoke like this Man, and while it's also true that many were astounded by His powerful miracles, He lived in great humility, walking amongst the people of this world as if He were a common, ordinary person. Indeed, if you had seen Jesus yourself, you probably wouldn't have given Him so much as a second glance. You wouldn't have seen the brilliance and glory that were rightfully His. But this text shows Him to be a very uncommon Man indeed, and in fact, much more than a man!

Now as often happens, most people don't always recognize the uncommon. You have all heard stories of the person who buys a priceless treasure at a garage sale for a pittance and ends up making a ton of money on it. In the same way, our Lord Jesus, who seemed to be little more than a common man in many respects, was shown on the day of His transfiguration to be far, far more than that. On that day He assumed the fire, brilliance, and glory that were rightly His alone. His appearance was changed

radically as an indescribable splendor washed over Him, and His clothing became dazzling white. Matthew reports that His face was like the sun, and Luke adds that His appearance was like a lightning flash.

Now even if you knew everything there was to know about physics and the scientific properties of light, I seriously doubt that you could even begin to explain what happened that day, for it was a heavenly mystery that simply cannot be bound by earthly forms. This wasn't an external glory placed upon Jesus, but a glory that belongs to Him as a part of His Divine Nature. St. John, one of only five people in the entire world to witness this awesome sight, must have been thinking of what he saw here when later he wrote in the book of Revelation: [The heavenly Jerusalem] doesn't need the sun or the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God gives it light and the Lamb is its lamp.

The Lord desires to reach out to all with the utmost love, grace and kindness.

Jesus, having taken with Him to this mountain the inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John, began to pray there as He often did. These three followers of Jesus, however, were tired and soon fell fast asleep. Like us, they were so much better at sleeping than praying. But as Jesus prayed, something amazing occurred, so that when the disciples awoke they saw the dazzling sight of God's glory, and wonder upon

wonders, they also saw Moses and Elijah standing there talking with Him. We know very little about their conversation except that they were talking about the most important event ever, for Jesus had yet one more mountain to climb, Mount Calvary, and the cross where He would die for the sin of the world. Although Calvary was hardly much more than a hill, no mountain climber's successful ascent to the peak of Mount Everest could ever match Jesus' accomplishment on that mound of dirt we call Calvary.

It's impossible to adequately explain what happened in the Transfiguration, but there's really no need to explain it. Martin Luther once said: The structure of God is an unsolvable mystery, but why should that concern us? What we need to know is His character. Is He good? And, is He good to me? Luther was stating a very important truth. If all you ever knew about Jesus was that one day on a mountain He was gloriously transfigured before witnesses, that knowledge wouldn't help you at all, for you would also need to know what this Jesus thinks about you!

Of course, throughout the Gospels, and throughout the entire Bible, there is abundant evidence that this glorious Lord desires to reach out to all with the utmost love, grace and kindness. Even in this brief text, Jesus said a very strange thing that shows the extent of His love for us. He said, Don't tell anyone about this until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. Why would this One who possessed such glory even have to talk about dying? You know why. It was because of those sleepy disciples, because of all the sinful people of this world who would never, ever come to the glory of

God unless He had died for them. God's Word teaches that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and if Christ hadn't died for all, yes, for each and every one of us, then this one brief moment when Jesus was Transfigured would have been all that the disciples, or anyone else, would ever have seen of God's glory. Had Jesus not died for all, then the only part of God's glory you would ever see would be on Judgment Day, when the Lord of Glory said to you: Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Peter didn't understand what was happening. He was frightened at the light of God's glory, but he felt he had to say something. Peter always needed to say something. But what he said indicated a desire to shortcut Calvary and stay right there where he thought he could continue to bask in God's glory. Surely you remember how once before, when Christ had spoken of going to Jerusalem to suffer, die and rise again, Peter had rejected the idea out of hand, and for his rejection received a severe rebuke. But Peter wasn't unique, for we human beings always want to take the easy way out. We'd rather avoid the pain and grab hold of the pleasure. It's a difficult lesson to learn that the cross always has to come before the crown. But Peter eventually learned this lesson, and you can learn it too. The book of Acts teaches that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. But if you only know that, and you don't know where to turn for help and strength, then the personal mountains you have to climb may overwhelm you before you come to God's promised rest secured for us all on Calvary's cross.

What you must learn from this event is that the same Christ who said, Come to Me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest, is the One who is truly able to give you rest from your burdens, troubles, and anxieties. He can do this not only because He wants to be good to you, but because as God incarnate, He also possesses both the glory and the power of the Almighty. When Jesus was Transfigured, a majestic voice from the Father proclaimed Him to be His own beloved Son. In other words, He wouldn't have had to go to His death. In fact in the Garden on the night He was betrayed, Jesus told Peter that He could have called down all the angels of heaven to help Him escape, and they would have come at His bidding. But Jesus didn't do it because of the great, cosmic task that lay before Him in rescuing mankind from sin, death and the devil. Jesus would do it alone, all alone, bitterly alone.

This aloneness was undoubtedly one of the reasons the Father sent Moses and Elijah to Him. You know how it is when you are carrying a great burden. It means a lot to be able to pour out your heart to someone who

Freedom for the Christian isn't based on individual rights, but on God's insistence that you live your life according to His directing.

really understands what you are going through. But Jesus had no one with whom He could talk. There was no one on the face of the earth who could have understood the terribleness of what He was about to undertake as He climbed Calvary's cross. Even His disciples, though they meant well, simply could not, nor would not, understand when He talked to them about His impending death. So the Father sent Moses and Elijah, who did understand. For, although Jesus certainly was, and still is, the Son of God, we know that He was also human. Hence it must have given Him immense comfort to be able to speak with Moses and Elijah about the journey He was about to take.

Now, of course, you will never have to face what Jesus faced. But there are lesser mountains for you to climb before you see and share in His glory. When God called you He didn't call you to live a life of indulgence and luxury, but a life of challenges as you take on the mountains that are always before you. But you don't have to do it alone, for our Lord's assurance is that He will always be with you, even to the end. There's no reason for you to feel like you have to go through life alone, or to agonize over any decision alone, because Jesus said, I am with you always. And that you can depend on always!

When you have gone with our Lord to just about every summit there is, there's still one more mountain yet to climb, the uphill struggle of death that all of us will one day face, unless the Lord returns before then. But the Lord is with you always, which means that He will be there with you even as you have to face our last enemy, death. Dear Christian, take comfort in the knowledge that He's already been there before you, that He knows the way up to that mountaintop very well, and that He also will bring you with Him to the glory waiting at its peak. What a day that will be for you, standing in the presence of our Lord and basking in the light of His glory, a glory that lights the eternal depths of paradise and can only be imagined but never experienced on this side of heaven, a glory that brings joy and peace to His people forevermore, that glory which is Christ's alone, a glory He shares with those who are His. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Jesus, the Enemy of God

Mark 1:12-15

First Sunday in Lent

Mark 1:9-15 (ESV): In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased. The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. It was only a scant few weeks ago, on the First Sunday after Epiphany, that we celebrated the Baptism of our Lord. We watched as He entered into the water of the Jordan, filled with the water of our sin, and washed up onto Himself all the filth we bring to the water. In so doing, Luther wrote, our Lord Jesus purified all baptismal water for us and our salvation. Now John's baptism was for repentance, but Jesus had nothing for which He had need of repenting. John's baptism was also for the forgiveness of sins, but Jesus personally had no need of forgiveness. The reason Jesus needed to be baptized was for your repentance and your forgiveness. Just as our Lord Christ was born for you, suffered for you and died for you, He also came to His baptism for you, for He had no need that would bring Him to this water, but you do.

So today's Gospel, albeit a few weeks late, now picks up right where the Gospel for the First Sunday after Epiphany left off. As soon as Jesus was baptized, the Spirit drove or cast Him out into the wilderness, and He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. Unlike the other Gospel writers, St. Mark uses a compelling, violent word to describe the Holy Spirit's action here. Saints Matthew and Luke both explain that Jesus was led by the Spirit, into the wilderness, and they did that for good reason. But Mark paints for us a decidedly different picture, and likewise with good reason. Using the words, *the Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness*, Mark shows us how Jesus has now become the enemy of God.

Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jor-

dan, and at once the Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness. Mark, interestingly enough, uses this very same word throughout his Gospel to describe how Jesus treated the demons. He drove them out. He forced them out. He banished them. The same word also describes what Jesus did to those who gathered to mourn the death of Jairus' daughter. They were all crying and wailing loudly, but their crying turned to laughter when Jesus said to them, The child is not dead but asleep. And in response to their jeering unbelief, Jesus drove them all out of the house. Still again, in the cleansing of the temple, Jesus performed the same action against the moneychangers as the Spirit did to Him in today's Gospel: Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there.

So here in this text Jesus is being treated by God the Holy Spirit as if He were nothing more than a demon, a mocker, or a belly-server Himself. Here what we see, unbelievable as it may seem, is the indivisible Trinity set against itself! Here we find the new and perfect Adam driven into the wilderness in exactly the same fashion as the first Adam was driven from the Garden with his wife, Eve. But the difference is that this Adam has no sin, except for the sin He took from you and me. In a manner of speaking, you might call this a divine, love-hate relationship. For there, into the wilderness, went Jesus, of whom God had repeatedly said: This is My Son, whom I love. But now the Jesus whom God loves has also now become His enemy, because Jesus in His baptism has shouldered the

sin-burden of God's enemies and willingly clothed Himself in everything God hates. Jesus has become the Sinner of sinners, and as Scripture teaches quite clearly, God hates sin.

I don't know about you, but I find this realization absolutely terrifying, that there is a sense in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit are set at odds against one another because of me and my sin. It reminds me of how, as a child, you might do something you weren't supposed to do and that action would then cause your parents to get into a fight with one another, all over something you had done! It's a poor analogy, to be sure, but it does illustrate in a small way what's happening here in this Gospel. Jesus, the sinless One, covered Himself in things that were detestable to God, and at once the Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness, to face our fears, our hunger, our weaknesses, and our temptations. He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And He was with the wild animals.

Of course at this point Jesus had not yet been fully abandoned. The worst would be yet to come. But this temptation in the wilderness by Satan was already taking the shape of a cross, for here we are given a sign and an omen of things yet to come. The divine abandonment that began here

in this Gospel for the First Sunday in Lent will finally culminate in the full abandonment of God on Good Friday, when Jesus will cry out in a loud voice, saying: My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Then even the angels who once had ministered to Him in the wilderness will also forsake Him on the cross as they turn their faces to await His resurrection. The wild animals He encountered in the wilderness temptation will be replaced by even more ferocious man killers, as His human accusers encircle Him, leer, jeer and taunt Him as He hangs upon the cross bearing your sin and mine. As King David prophesied in Psalm 22 concerning our Lord's crucifixion: Many bulls surround Me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle Me. Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against Me. Dogs have surrounded Me! Rescue Me from the mouth of the lions. Save Me from the horns of the wild oxen.

The stuff of Lent all begins here, dear Christian, when after Jesus' baptism, the Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness. It all begins here in Jesus' wilderness journey, so that the new life God began for you in your baptism might not be one of exile and abandonment. Jesus became God's enemy, in order that you might be called God's friend. In a great mystery, God somehow gets separated from God for this short season, in order that you may be reconciled to Him forever, and in being so reconciled, find in Christ your re-entry into the living, eternal Paradise God promised to all who trust in His Son. And you do trust in His Son, for you have been baptized into and put on Christ Jesus, God has placed His name on You and claimed you as His very own. Living in that baptismal flood, you can now rejoice in the salvation Jesus earned for us all, and rejoicing in that salvation, look forward with great joy to our Lord's Second Coming at the end of all things. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

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It Is Necessary?

Mark 8:31-38

Second Sunday in Lent

Mark 8:31-38 (ESV): And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man. And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. Undoubtedly, you have heard the old saying that necessity is the mother of invention, and humanly speaking, that's probably quite true. But necessity, in addition, is also the mother of something much greater. According to our Lord Jesus Christ Himself in this morning's Gospel, where He was teaching His disciples how the Son of Man would have to suffer many things, necessity also appears to be the mother of salvation! This little three-letter word in Greek that is often translated as *must* or *have to* carries with it a great deal of freight and meaning. It not only implies urgency and need, but insists that what's spoken of has no choice but to happen exactly the way God planned it and Scripture reports it.

But why was it was necessary that Jesus be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the Law? What necessity could there have been for Jesus to be killed and after three days to rise from the dead? To fully understand the answer to these questions is to finally grasp the import and beauty of the Lenten season, which is that time in the Church year when we wait for and anticipate the most horrific death ever known to man, the

death of the Only Begotten Son of the Father for your salvation and mine.

So, why was it necessary that these things happen? Well, to start with, it was necessary because this is what the prophets had anticipated by the special gift and power of the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament is replete with prophecies concerning Jesus' suffering and death, and all of them written long before His birth. Consider this well-known prophecy from Isaiah: Surely He has borne our grief and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. Again, from Isaiah's pen we read how many were appalled at Him because His appearance was disfigured beyond that of any man, and His form marred beyond human likeness.

And Isaiah wasn't the only prophet to foretell such things. Listen to King David's words from the 22nd Psalm, where he voices the words Jesus would speak from the cross, saying: My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? A band of evildoers has encompassed Me. They pierce My hands and feet. They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots. Likewise, Zechariah not only knew that the Good Shepherd would be struck down and the sheep scattered, but also that 30 pieces of silver would be the price paid to our Lord's betrayer, Judas. Recall, also, how even Abraham in last week's Old Testament lesson anticipated Jesus' sacrificial death when on Mount Moriah he said to his son Isaac: God will provide for Himself the Lamb for the burnt offering.

You see, according to the word of the prophets, it was necessary for Jesus to suffer and die. It was necessary that He faithfully fulfill and carry out every last word that had ever been written about Him, because God is no liar, and His Word cannot err. That which the Lord of Hosts says by the mouths of His prophets shall come to pass. Indeed, Jesus Himself indicated the very same thing when He said, the Scriptures must be fulfilled. But here we have to be careful not to stop short in our understanding, for the Scriptures say much more about Jesus than that He simply came to fulfill them. If the only necessity behind Jesus' suffering and death was the fulfillment of the Scriptures, then you have to wonder where Christ's love for us fits in. If our salvation for Jesus was no more than a legal obligation He owed to fulfill some ancient prophecy, if it was nothing more than a task He had promised the Father from eternity that He would carry out, and was then obligated to do, then where was His own desire to save us?

Remember, necessity, for Jesus, is more than the daughter of prophecy,

The Old Testament is replete with prophecies concerning Jesus' suffering and death, and all of them written long before His birth.

it is also the mother of salvation! In other words, it was on account of our great need for salvation that the Son of Man of necessity had to suffer many things. As you very well know, since the fall of our first parents in the Garden, the entire human race has been charting for itself a course of rebellion and destruction. It wasn't Jesus' guilt that caused Him to be handed over to the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law. It was your guilt, and it was mine. It was because of our sin and guilt that He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death, though He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth. It wasn't the transgressions of Jesus that demanded and claimed His life, it was yours and mine. He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities.

But there are more considerations than these, because it's also true that

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the Son of Man, of necessity, had to suffer many things because of our own powerlessness and inability to do so ourselves. That's what Paul was talking about in today's Epistle, where he wrote: When we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly . . . [and] demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. God's love for us is demonstrated by the fact that God saw in our need a necessity for Him to do something radical to save us, even though there was nothing worth saving. James made that perfectly clear when he wrote that every human being who has ever born has come into this world thoroughly corrupt and an enemy of God. And in another place Paul deals our worthiness a deathblow when he writes: there is none righteous, no, not one . . . there is no one who does good.

Though in this life we may never fully understand why God found all this necessary to save us, this morning's Gospel isn't going to allow us to escape that glorious realization, that the Son of Man must of necessity suffer many things. First, because the Scriptures have to be fulfilled. Secondly, because of our need and helplessness in the mire of death and sin. But more importantly, because that's who God is! The necessity of Jesus' suffering and death lies within the nature and character of God Himself! He has no choice but to help and show mercy because He is merciful and forgiving even to those who rebel against Him. Ours is a compassionate God who will neither abandon nor destroy us.

The truth of the matter is that eternal destruction doesn't come to people simply because it is God's desire to destroy. On the contrary, destruction comes only to those who turn their backs on the mercy of God. To save is part and parcel of who God is, a component of His essential nature. Had He not chosen to show grace and mercy, or had He chosen not to suffer and die for your sake, He would have ceased to be God. The Son of Man must, of necessity, suffer many things, because that's Who God

is. The Son of Man must, of necessity, suffer many things, because that's how God operates in and of Himself apart from any other compulsion or motivation. The Son of Man must of necessity suffer many things because the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will He harbor His anger forever. He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him. As far as the East is from the West, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. May it always be so for you, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

No Trading Allowed!

John 2:13-22

Third Sunday of Lent

John 2:13-22 (ESV): The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade. His disciples remembered that it was written, Zeal for your house will consume me. So the Jews said to him, What sign do you show us for doing these things? Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said, It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days? But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Imagine that this afternoon you're going out to buy a new car, forgetting for a moment of course, that you can't buy a car in Missouri on Sunday. The first thing you have to do is walk into the showroom. Then you'll probably stroll around looking mildly disinterested while ignoring as much as possible the overtures of the salesperson. After all, you don't them want to think you're anxious to buy. Then, after playing your cards just right, you cautiously approach the salesperson and ask: What's the lowest price you'll take for that Lamborghini?

Well, that's the American way of doing business. That's free enterprise. When you go out to buy something, you're asking the merchant how much of your hard-earned labor they would be willing to take in trade for what you want to buy, since money represents work and effort. Anytime you buy or sell something, using money, labor, or goods, you're engaging in the art of trading. Trading is such a natural activity that you might sometimes get the impression it's possible to do some trading with God. For instance, when you do something good, stop doing something bad, or make a personal sacrifice for God, isn't it natural to think God may bless or help you? That's why so many religions teach that good works merit God's grace and favor, because

No Trading Allowed!

in our world, trading reigns supreme. Should it not then reign supreme in our relationship with God and His Church? Consider this morning's Gospel, where Jesus gives us the answer to this question in no uncertain terms. In fact, He's quite adamant. In His Church no trading is allowed!

That's a bitter pill to swallow, for by nature we always want to get the best deal we can under every circumstance. We want to give the minimum and receive the maximum. And you don't have to look too hard to see what I mean. When you go out to buy that new car, you're going to want to pay as little as possible. When you go shopping at the market, you compare prices, sizes, and look for things on sale. You use coupons when you have them, and remember to bring them. The more you save, the better off you are.

But what does that have to do with the Temple? Well, the Temple marketplace of Jesus' day had sprung up quite innocently as a convenience so that Jews visiting from out of town could purchase an acceptable sacrifice without having to bring it with them. But over the years the Temple had become a place of trade and barter, where it was common to ask: What's the minimum I can pay, what's the least I can give and still receive a blessing from God? And is that not also happening in the Church today? Haven't you ever wondered how little you could give toward worship, stewardship, the exercise of our Church's liturgical heritage, and your life of service to God, yet still receive the blessing He promises to those who belong to Him?

Most of the Jews of Christ's day looked upon the Temple, the work they and their ancestors had done to make it a reality, the money they had contributed to construct it, and the worship they had engaged in over the years there, and they were very proud of themselves and what they had accomplished. And are there not times in your life when you look at your own works the very same way? Hence Christ reminds us that when you wheel and deal in the affairs of God's house, it profanes it and makes it unholy. The Temple had become a stench in God's nostrils He could no longer stand. That's why Jesus cleansed the Temple, because God's house is a holy place, a place set apart for the work of God. The Divine Service is God's work for us, not our work for God. We shouldn't tinker with it as though we were negotiating with Him. We ought not treat the Church as if it were just another corporation to run.

And the same is true of the entire Christian life. See how Jesus responded here in this text toward those well-intentioned entrepreneurs who started out to make worship more convenient for travel-weary Jews but turned it into something else — a house of trade. And the idea of trading with God is simply ridiculous, for you and I have nothing of value to trade. Can the mightiest, worthiest, or costliest of your treasured earthly possessions make God any richer, stronger, or wiser? Is there anything you can do that

The Divine Service is God's work for us, not our work for God.

would make God more glorious? What could you and I, poor, miserable sinners that we are, ever give to God to make Him any better off?

There will always be those, of course, who will insist, against both better judgment and all available evidence, that they have something worth trading with God. Sadly, however, on Judgment Day they are going to be sorely disappointed. Those who think they can strike a trading bargain with God will not find His love and mercy, but rather, a wrathful Judge who will not only not bless them with heaven, but condemn them to an eternity in hell. The Temple merchants in our text had already rejected the claim of God's Son in favor of doing business as usual. And so likewise, just as Jesus cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem, a day is coming upon which God will cleanse His eternal Temple of all such traders.

The new and perfect Adam was driven into the wilderness in exactly the same fashion as the first Adam was driven from the Garden.

My dear friends, our God is a God who is zealous about mercy. In fact, this is the very reason Jesus cleansed the Temple. By His perfect life, suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has already freely opened God's house of prayer to all people. God's household finances are run solely by the accounting principle of free grace, not with dollars and cents. And, God's mercy will continue to drive Him doggedly in His pursuit of us. Through His holy Word and blessed Sacraments, God is always calling us to come to Him. And so we shall. God has given you His unmerited mercy in Christ Jesus. It was this mercy that brought Jesus down from heaven to the Temple, and it was what took Him to the cross to die for

your sin. The Temple of Christ's body was destroyed so that He could raise it up again to save us all from eternal destruction to fill us with God's resurrection power.

And God is continuing even now to give you that mercy in His Son, our Savior, who raised up the true Temple, His very own body, from the dead. Therefore, as you, the faithful, eat and drink His very body and blood here in the Lord's Supper, God is in His Temple mercifully saving His people. How good it is, that our Father has forbidden trading in His house, for there's nothing we can either do or avoid, no sacrifice we could ever give in trade, for God's favor and riches in Christ Jesus. So then, we give thanks to God each and every day, and especially this day, for sending His Son to be so zealous in showing mercy! We humble ourselves before God with confidence, because when it comes to mercy, God means business. In God's house the rule is always: No trading allowed. Only His mercy, freely given! Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Upon a Pole

John 3:14-21

Fourth Sunday in Lent

John 3:14-21 (ESV): And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. God's ways as we all know are mysterious, because our fallen reason simply cannot understand such things. The only way you can even begin to grasp them is when your heart is enlightened by the work of the Holy Spirit by means of God's Word. This all takes place so that you might come to God only by faith in His promises, not on the basis of your own reason or understanding. Yet in spite of this, we all still tend to place more stock in our own ability to reason things out rather than accepting them at face value. A case in point are the stories of the Old Testament, which are easy to view as nothing more than ancient history, and in some cases, myth or legend — interesting, to be sure, but so far removed from our modern times as to have very little value. Hence, many who live in this post-modern age are quick to dismiss out-of-hand the stories recorded there. But we who have been baptized into Christ realize that these accounts are, in truth, factual, historical, and belong to us as an inheritance from God.

In John 3:16 we have before us one of the most beloved of all Bible passages, words with which even many non-Christians are familiar: For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. But how many actually believe or understand this? And what about the verses that follow:

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned, but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. God the Father didn't send His Son into the world to condemn it, because ever since the fall, it was already under God's condemnation. The Son of God came into the world to save it from the curse of the fall into sin, and from our love of sinning.

John, quoting Jesus, writes in this morning's Gospel: And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. According to this text, our Lord Christ removed the condemnation that had fallen

The Son of God came into the world to save it from the curse of the fall into sin, and from our love of sinning.

upon Adam, Eve, and all their descendents in the very same way Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness. So, let's take a moment to consider what actually took place in that amazing, perhaps bizarre, event that the Holy Spirit recorded for us in the book of Numbers. Here the Holy Spirit paints for us a picture of the Church of God as she traveled in the Sinai wilderness on her Exodus to the Promised Land. As she traveled, Moses led God's people with a mighty outstretched arm and the power of God. On through the Red Sea and the desert they went, led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God fed them

with manna from heaven, quail and water. Yet, in spite of all this supernatural activity from the hand of Yahweh, Israel was growing increasingly impatient.

The people spoke out against God and Moses, saying: Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in this desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food! But their words were nothing but lies, for they claimed there was no bread, when the truth is every day God supplied them with bread enough to satisfy everyone's hunger. They complained there was no water to drink, yet God had supplied them with water aplenty. And they complained that the quail God sent them wasn't worth eating. They despised and detested God's gifts, and were ungrateful for everything He had given them.

So God's anger was rightly kindled against them, and He sent poisonous snakes to bite them, and many of them died. But after seeing the calamity they had brought upon themselves they repented, and in desperation cried out to Moses, saying: We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us. So Moses prayed for the people, and God gave him an answer to their prayers, an answer that no doubt sounds odd when judged by the worldly measure of reason and logic. Make a snake and put it up on a pole so that anyone who

is bitten can look at it and live. So Moses made a bronze snake, mounted it upon a pole, lifted it high above the heads of the people, and whoever had been bitten by a snake and looked upon that bronze serpent, believing God's promise, lived.

Can you imagine a dilemma like that? Moses told the people that if they wanted to be healed they were to look upon this bronze serpent lifted up on a pole. Yet, their suffering had come from serpents very much like this one. Does it make sense humanly speaking that an object that looks very much like the thing threatening to kill you is the very thing you must gaze upon to be healed? Would the people trust this promise given by Yahweh, that healing could only come by gazing upon this bronze serpent? Well, we know that those who trusted worldly reason over God's Word did, in fact, die, while those who trusted God's Word and looked in faith to the serpent lifted up the pole lived.

But as I've pointed out many times in the past, the history of the Old Testament is also your history. That's why, in this morning's Gospel, Jesus makes the connection between the lifting up of the bronze serpent by Moses with His own impending death on Calvary's cross, an event you must look upon in faith to be saved. Of course, none of this makes any sense to us, who measure victory in battle by looking at which side is able to overwhelm the other by means of earthly might and numbers. But the victory you have in Christ is measured quite differently. You come to Christ by faith, not on the basis of your ability to intellectually sum up a situation to see how you might benefit from it. In Acts 10 we read how Jesus went around Palestine doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with Him. In a manner of speaking He actually absorbed the sin, deformities and illnesses of those He healed unto Himself, so that He became deformed and disfigured. Isaiah says of Him: He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him. Like One from whom men hide their faces, He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.

So just as there is nothing cuddly or desirable about a snake, especially an image of that snake that had killed so many, neither is there anything cuddly or appealing about the image of Jesus hanging on a cross. It's ugly, brutal and gruesome. And just as the people cursed the snake because of what it had done to them, so likewise was our Lord Jesus cursed, mocked, and jeered by the crowds. But here's the important difference. Christ was also cursed by his Father, even as St. Paul testifies: Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a Curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. So, even as the snake was cursed by the people of Israel, Jesus was likewise also cursed by the people of His day and more importantly by His Father, for He bore the sins of all.

Those who trusted worldly reason over God's Word did, in fact, die.

As the snakes bit the people of Israel, they naturally ran away for protection. Jesus also was abandoned by his followers as they ran from Him in an effort to preserve their own lives. In the Garden of Gethsemane, they all fell asleep while Jesus poured out His heart to His Father. And when the Roman soldiers arrived, and Judas betrayed Him with a kiss, all the disciples deserted Him and fled. And today people are still being called to look upon that which they cursed and ran from — the snake lifted up above them on a pole, the Son of God crucified for sin upon the cross. This event defies all human reason and logic, and so many would like nothing more than to remove Jesus from that cross so as to make the Church more appealing to the masses.

But you, you have been baptized into Christ. You trust in the Word and promises of God that healing can only be found in that which defies logic and reason. And that's the beauty of the Christian faith. It has nothing to do with you, and everything to do with Christ. You, dear Christian, have come to the Crucified One, not because of your own reason or strength, but because you've been called by the Gospel, enlightened with His gifts and sanctified in the one true faith. You have come to Christ because the Father has drawn you, your salvation is certain, for if God is doing the work, you may also be sure that He will not fail in it. May it always be so for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

How Dare They?

Mark 10:35-45

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Mark 10:35-45 (ESV): And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. And he said to them, What do you want me to do for you? And they said to him, Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory. Jesus said to them, You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? And they said to him, We are able. And Jesus said to them, The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared. And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. What in the world were James and John up to when they came to Jesus and pleaded that He do for them whatever they asked? What gave them the right to demand such preferential treatment from our Lord? How dare they, you ask, as with the disciples we all join in pointing our wagging fingers at them. It's obvious that they had been overtaken by a good dose of covetousness, and they most certainly were violating the First, maybe the Second, Commandment. They definitely weren't loving God above all things, nor their neighbor or fellow disciples as themselves. Aren't you glad you and I haven't fallen into that sin?

Well, perhaps we also ought to be asking ourselves: How dare we? for this message of Jesus needs to be heard by more than just the Twelve, because James and John weren't all that different from us modern-day followers of Jesus! I mean most of us have put in our years of service to the Church. We've listened to lots of sermons — good and bad. We think we've learned something about how to judge doctrine. We are Lutherans,

after all! We may sing better or louder than others, play the organ, hand bells, or some other instrument, teach Sunday school, organize VBS, run the LWML, track down extra money through Thrivent to help others when they need it, clean bathrooms, balance the books, rake, mow, clip, chop, read, write, or study, did I leave anyone out — all which makes it fairly easy for us to confuse these things with being Jesus' disciples. And to compound this, we judge others, comparing them to ourselves.

Just as the men in My Fair Lady sang: Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man? we grumble to God, saying: Why can't Old So-and-So be a better Christian like me? Or else, catching someone else in the throes of self-righteous pride, we join in with the indignant disciples: Lord, why don't You put Old So-and-So in his place? To this behavior, the words

The Kingdom of Heaven is not where you go to be exalted, nor put others in their place.

of Jesus arrest our attention: You do not know what you are asking. The Kingdom of Heaven is not where you go to be exalted, nor put others in their place. And if you do this, Jesus reminds us, you don't know what you're asking. How dare we presume to do these things?

Jesus says that whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. So why don't we just put an end to all this self-exaltation, quit

our comparing, suck it up, and start serving one another full-time, and joyfully? Why, indeed! God made us so that He might serve and supply us with all our needs. Likewise, service to Him and one another is what we were created and commissioned to do, in the beginning. But Adam and Eve decided self-service was better than either serving or being served by God. So they dared to challenge His Word and plan, then complained about serpent, woman, and even about God Himself. They denied the special honor of their place in creation and sought honor for themselves. Yet those who would be truly great in the Kingdom are those who serve with the least thought of self. And here we are all in trouble, for there isn't a single one of us who would dare to give up ourselves to the extent Jesus speaks of here.

It's difficult enough to be a part-time servant in the Church. It's harder still to put family ahead of self in our day-to-day decisions. As we go out into the world, the degree of difficulty increases as Jesus clobbers us with His simple statement that, whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. As we ponder that Word and compare it to ourselves, we realize the opposite is closer to the truth — that we are least in the kingdom because we rarely, if ever, are the slave of anyone! How dare we even show up for Sunday worship, pray to our Father in Heaven, trust that He will answer us, or presume to have any good thing from Him?

We dare because Jesus dared. The cup of wrath He drank in His suffering and death was the punishment for us daring to put ourselves before

God and passing by our neighbor in need. We come boldly before God, claiming our inheritance as sons, because the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give His life as a ransom for many. As God, He dared to become man. As Creator, He dared to become a creature. As Immortal One, He dared to suffer death to take our sin and death away. He always looked to do His Father's bidding, always, and never dared step out on his own.

James along with the other disciples, save Judas, would one day see the fulfillment of Jesus' determination to drink the cup down to the last bitter drop. Our Lord Christ would be betrayed by one, denied by another, and abandoned by all, yes, even His Father. Yet even as He cried out: My God, why have You forsaken Me, He also prayed: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. When Jesus came into His ultimate glory, giving Himself on the cross as the sin-offering for all, it wasn't James and John who were on His right and left hand in His glory. Instead, it was a convicted felon who occupied that place of honor. Yet Christ promised His cup would also be the cup of His disciples, even as would be His baptism of abandonment and death. John would be sent into exile. James would be beheaded. And the other disciples would also taste of this cup as they went forth with Jesus' Word on their lips. Even to the present day, suffering for the Gospel is a mark of the One True Church.

Suffering for the Gospel is a mark of the One True Church.

Still, an even greater participation in Jesus' baptism belonged to them and to us. As St. Paul reminded the Roman Christians: Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. Our old, sinful nature, our pride, our daring to replace God and forget our neighbor, were also crucified with Christ on Calvary. He saved us, not by deeds of righteousness, which we have done, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which He poured out upon us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Jesus dared to be merciful to us poor sinners, even when He knew it would lead to His death. But now, because He has been raised from the dead by the Glory of the Father, we are privileged to participate in this newness of life, as we drink of that cup in the Holy Communion, and participate in the death of Christ for our sins. There we eat His crucified body and drink His crucified blood given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins, as we participate in the new covenant in His blood.

Have you noticed how, for the past few minutes, we haven't been looking at ourselves and others? The Word, you see, the Word is what leads us away from the poison of comparison and focuses our eyes rather on Him

who is Slave, who promises both eternal life and the very real possibility of pain and suffering here on earth. Yet through Christ's Word and blessed Sacrament, we have been strengthened so that we no longer rely upon ourselves. By the power of the Holy Spirit we surrender ourselves by recognizing His surrendering of Himself for us, that He is living in us as our Servant King, doing the good our Old Adam rebels against.

Because of all this, we dare to call God, Our Father, to come to Him asking for both eternal and temporal blessings, to live as God's beloved children who are willing to surrender ourselves for others, taking the chance that we'll be hurt, do without, or lose something in the process. This we do because we dare to believe that none of the things of this life really matter in the end, and that nothing, absolutely nothing, is more important than the forgiveness of sins and the eternal life we already possess. We dare live a Christian life because our Lord and Savior dared to live and die for us, to give us His perfect obedience and never-failing service.

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And when our service fails, our faith flickers, or our old sinful nature gains the upper hand, which it most certainly will, we also dare to return once again to our merciful, Giver-God, who has promised to receive and forgive sinners. It is He who dares to forget our past, blot out our sins, and remember them no more. Through His work on Calvary's bloody cross to save sinners, He dares invite us to be forgiven and to live with Him forever in heaven. And it's precisely for this

reason that we know it will always be so for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

About the author

Greetings in the Name of the Lord!

I am David Noe and I live in McKinney, Texas, just north of Dallas, Texas. My secular job is with the McKinney Independent School District, where I work in a special education class at one of the McKinney high schools.

My bachelor's degree is in history, and I love history. My master's degree is from a Lutheran seminary in Washington State. I am a sixth generation Texan, and I have ancestors that go back to Jamestown, Virginia. I am a member of several genealogy societies, as well.

My wife, Linda, also works for the McKinney school district, and works in the early childhood center (with 3-5 year olds). Our son, Michael, is 29, and works full-time at a local grocery store. We also have an 8-year-old foster daughter and a 4-year-old Border Collie mix.

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