

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Sexagesima

February 7, 2021

Text: Luke 8:4–15

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

The parable of the sower explains a great deal about why we do the things we do in the Church. It's quite reasonable to say that Luke's gospel, from which the parable is taken, is best understood in light of this parable. It's a singularly important teaching about the nature of the Church, how Jesus builds and extends His kingdom here on earth, and of our ultimate source of comfort and strength. Let's look at the details of this great parable.

The first thing we need to notice is that the parable is about Jesus. He's the sower. And it's His word that He sows into our hearts and minds. To be sure, Jesus preached His Word not only during the 3.5 years of His earthly ministry. But this parable also teaches us that Jesus remains the preacher of the Church through the ministry He established. Pastors are called by Christ through the Church to preach and teach, but it's really Jesus who plants the seed of His Word into peoples' hearts. In Luke 10:16, Jesus said, "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me." Jesus is the great Sower of God's Word; He continues to preach through the preaching ministry of His Church. That is an encouraging and comforting promise.

The next thing to notice is how Jesus goes about preaching His Word. He casts the seed of His Word onto various types of soil; 4 are mentioned in detail. It's best to think of these as 4 types of hearing the preached Word of God. The parable provides insight into why some hear and believe, and why some don't.

First century Jewish farmers sowed their fields by broadcasting the seed by hand. But 1<sup>st</sup> century farmers weren't wasteful or reckless. They knew certain types of soil were better than others. This is one of the big surprises in Jesus' parable. The Sower in the parable – Jesus, seems to go out of His way to sow the seeds of God's kingdom into every conceivable kind of ground, into every nook and cranny. And this He does rather indiscriminately; He casts seed onto soil that any conscientious farmer, ancient or modern, wouldn't consider.

Broadcasting the seed of God's Word in such an indiscriminate way isn't very efficient. Three of the 4 types of soil mentioned in today's parable are worthless. Our tendency is to define specific goals and adopt practices that will maximize the opportunities to reach those goals. That's all fine and good for the work-a-day world. But not in the kingdom of God. In the Church, grace and abundance are the parameters of operation, not efficiency. This too is truly good news!

Jesus plants the seed of God's kingdom everywhere. He preaches to religious people, to ordinary folks, to rich and poor, sinners and saints alike. Every nation, language, tribe, and people is how the Bible describes the extent of God's Word. Everyone is invited to hear and receive God's Word. The result in such a free sharing of God's Word is that many, maybe even most, will not receive it gladly. To put it bluntly, that's not our concern, that is, making people accept and believe God's Word. That is the work of the Holy Spirit who creates saving faith in Jesus in the hearts and minds of people through the preached Word. Our task is to preach God's Word to everyone in all its beauty, truth, and power. The results...well, that's up to God alone.

Jesus is the great sower of God's Word. He sows the precious Word of His kingdom freely to all people. His Church is to reflect His zeal to share His message of repentance, love, and grace with joy, abundance, and the hope of salvation unto eternal life. These are the first things we learn from this parable. And yet, the parable describes 4 types of soil into which the seed of God's kingdom is planted. The 4 soils represent 4 types of hearing God's Word. Understanding the different types of hearing will help us understand why some believe and why some don't.

The first type of hearing God's Word is represented by the seed sown along the path (vs. 5). This person hears God's Word but doesn't understand it. Jesus rather graphically says the devil, represented by the birds of the air, snatches the seed away. You see this kind of hearing of God's Word exemplified in King Agrippa in Acts 26. During the apostle Paul's trip to Rome, King Agrippa asks Paul to speak about his situation. Paul preaches about Jesus and about his (Paul's) conversion to Christianity. Agrippa responds by saying, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (Acts 26:28, KJV). The devil took away the seed that Paul planted in Agrippa's heart.

The second type of hearing is represented by the seed that falls on the rocky ground (vs. 6). This person hears and believes the good news of Christ's kingdom. But when things get tough, whether from the constant struggle against sin and temptation or the rejection they experience because of Jesus, their faith dries up. This type of hearing is

exemplified in John Mark. He joined Paul and Barnabus on their first missionary journey. But according to Acts 13:13, he left the mission work right when things were their hardest and most difficult. Later on, when Barnabus wanted to take Mark on the second mission journey, Paul objected. The dissention between Paul and Barnabus became so great that they went their separate ways (Acts 15). In Mark's case, we rejoice in the fact that he did repent and hear God's Word. Eventually, he and Paul reconciled (II Tim. 4:11). And Mark gave us the gospel that bears his name.

The third type of hearing is represented by the seed falling on ground infested with thorns. The seed initially takes root and begins to grow. But the weeds of worldly cares and the desire for earthly riches suffocates the good seed of God's kingdom. This type of hearing is exemplified in Demas, the companion of the apostle Paul. Tragically, Paul writes this about Demas in II Timothy 4:10, "For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica."

The fourth type of hearing is represented by the seed falling on good ground. This person hears, understands, and believes the Word of Christ's kingdom. According to Jesus in vs. 15, the seed is planted in a good and honest heart and bears much fruit with patience. What type of fruit is produced isn't said. Fruitfulness in God's kingdom is a broad category consisting of faith in Jesus and every kind of good work.

From the parable, we learn that Jesus sows the seed of God's Word to all people. Thus, the Church shares God's Word to anyone and everyone. We know some will hear and believe. Some will not. The hindrances to a fruitful hearing are lack of understanding, a lack of strength during times of trial and temptation to endure, and the choking influences of worldly concerns. But for those who hear, believe, and remain steadfast in patience and trust, God's Word produces fruit abundantly.

The apostle Paul, in Titus 2:14 described Christians as being zealous for good works. The parable itself doesn't describe what the good works are. But the larger context of God's Word provides us with ample instruction on how we Christians are to live as believers. It's really pretty simple. Honesty, love and fidelity to one's family, friends, neighbors, and community. Prayer and attention to God's Word. We Christians purposefully avoid every form of ungodliness and worldly passions so that we may live godly, peaceful, and self-controlled lives of integrity. We speak and live the truth which we hear from God's Word.

Speaking and hearing God's Word is what we do as Christian believers. This fundamental truth cannot be overemphasized. The composer of Psalm 44, used in today's introit, wrote, "O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us what deeds you preformed in their days, in the days of old..." (vs. 1). Fathers retold the events from God's Word to their families. The saving faith of one generation was passed on to the next generation by telling and hearing God's Word. Fathers and mother, grandfathers and grandmothers, tell your children the deeds of old recorded in God's Word. Tell them of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and the children of Israel, of Elijah and the prophets, of John the Baptist and the apostles, of Mary Magdalene, Aquila and Priscilla. Tell them of God's great deeds. Not just the exciting events of deliverance (crossing the Red Sea, defeating giants like Goliath, and so forth). But also God's work of judgment and discipline (the Babylonian captivity, the destruction of Jerusalem, our Lord's discipline given to the 7 church of Asia Minor from the Book of Revelation, etc.).

We speak and live the truth of God's Word because we hear God's Word told to us by fathers and mothers, aunts and uncles, siblings, etc. By pastors and teachers. And we speak God's Word with the conviction and comfort that it's really Jesus sowing the seeds of His Word in our hearts and minds. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, He will bring for the fruit of faith, salvation, and good works in our lives.

Praise be to Christ who speaks His saving word. May He bring forth much fruit in our lives here, in our country, and throughout the world to the glory of His holy name...

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Quinquagesima

February 14, 2021

Text: Luke 18:31–43

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

Not much is actually known about St. Valentine, the saint commemorated on this day every year. Though the commemorations have become largely secular and commercial, it is good for us to pause a few moments and consider this 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian martyr. What we know for certain is that Valentine was a Christian, most likely a bishop, who refused to deny Christ and died a martyr's death confessing faith in his Savior. Legends, which may reflect some historic truth, say that Valentine presided over the weddings of Christians when such marriages were forbidden by the Emperor. Others say he healed various persons including the blind daughter of the jailer who was responsible for Valentine. On the day of his execution, he left a note saying, "Your Valentine." Thus, he became associated with love and marriage. What's important for us today is that he provides a touchpoint with both the Epistle reading from I Corinthians 13 and the gospel text from Luke 18.

I Corinthians 13 is the famous love chapter of the Bible; some might consider this an appropriate reading on Valentine's Day. In the past, this chapter was often read during weddings. That's not a bad practice but I Corinthians 13 describes the divine perfect love demonstrated by Christ Jesus for His bride, the Church, rather than the romantic love expressed between husbands and wives. The love husbands and wives share with each other, under God's grace and strengthened by Christ's Gospel, can and should grow so as to become more like the love described in I Corinthians 13. This divine, perfect love is described as being patient and kind (vs. 4); it doesn't keep a running total of offenses, Rather, it is quick to forgive and remains sure and steadfast through trial and prosperity. Kindness is a simple but powerful virtue that we Christians ought to cultivate by the grace of the Spirit. According to vs. 5–6, this kind of love refuses to envy or boast or to become arrogant or rude. It simply refuses to seek its own way, boasting about itself or seeking the applause of others. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, the apostle Paul beautifully described love as rejoicing with the truth, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping for all things, enduring all things, and finally, as love never ending (vs. 6b–8a). Such is the love that God has for you and me and all of His dear saints.

St. Valentine gave witness to God's perfect love for him and the world when he refused to deny Jesus. Jesus is the perfection of love. Not the sentimental, paper thin love that is so often celebrated in our culture. But the true, enduring love that sacrificially gives without boasting or arrogance. The Lord Jesus told His disciples on the night of His betrayal that no man has greater love than to lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13). Valentine laid down his life for the love of his life, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Valentine's martyrdom was an expression of divine love, a I Corinthians 13 type of love. But even this expression of love was small compared with the absolute perfection of love shown for every man, woman, and child in the crucifixion of Jesus, God's Son. When we could not show any true form of love to God nor for one another, God loved us unto death and back to life again. The apostle Paul wrote that God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Christ Jesus suffered and died to save us because He loves us. His love for us is patient and kind; He is not resentful or boastful. His love rejoices with the truth. His love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Christ's love for you will never end. This is what St. Valentine's martyrdom celebrates. Divine, perfect love found in Christ Jesus.

Whatever you husbands and wives do to show each other love and affection today, do so in Christ's name and in celebration of His perfect love. And together, nurture your love for one another so that it may all the more brightly reflect Christ's perfect love.

St. Valentine's martyrdom does have a deep connection to I Corinthians 13. But his death also illustrates the gospel text from Luke 18, at least on two accounts. First, Luke 18:31–34 records our Lord's third Passion prediction. This is the third and last time the Lord Jesus tells His disciples about the events that will take place in Jerusalem. In fulfillment of God the Father's will recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures, Jesus must be betrayed, handed over to the Gentiles, mocked, shamefully treated, and crucified unto death, and finally, rise from the dead on the third day. These are the events that demonstrate God's love for the world. Valentine, and all the martyrs of the Christian Church, lived and died confessing their love and devotion to Jesus because of what He did in Jerusalem during that original Holy Week.

Their lives and their deaths were conformed to the life and death of Jesus. And the same is true for each Christian. For the baptism you received in God's Trinitarian name began and strengthens your participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Romans 6 and Titus 3 describe our intimate and personal connection to the Lord Jesus. Through baptismal waters combined with God's baptismal words, the Holy Spirit worked the death of Jesus in our life so that we now daily die to sin. And daily, the Holy Spirit is renewing in us the resurrection life of Christ so that the new man emerges to live before the Father in righteousness and newness of life. The Christian's life and the Christian's death are a continual witness to the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Those events are now our events. They describe us, define us. The body and blood of Jesus we receive in the Lord's Supper is the Savior's body and blood given and shed on the cross in love for the forgiveness of our sins. The holy food we eat, the holy words we hear, the inspired prayers we speak all find their source and substance in the love of Jesus demonstrated in His death and resurrection. Valentine died confessing faith that Jesus died to forgive his sins. Valentine refused to deny Jesus because he, that is, Valentine, had a greater hope in the resurrection of the just on the Last Day. Such is our hope and strength. Christ Jesus crucified for you and me and for all the world is our hope and our salvation, our glory and our salvation.

The second way that Valentine's martyrdom connects to Luke 18 is in vs. 35–43 about blind Bartimaeus. Luke doesn't give his name, but Mark's gospel does in Mark 10:46. Bartimaeus heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. In response, Bartimaeus cried out, "Jesus of Nazareth, have mercy on me!" (vs. 38). At some point, he had learned about Jesus. Maybe he had prayed that he would have a chance to meet Jesus. The Bible doesn't tell us these details. But Bartimaeus knows quite a bit about Jesus. He knows that Jesus is from Nazareth, that He is the Son of David, a Messianic title, and that Jesus has mercy upon the sick and afflicted. And finally, Bartimaeus knows that Jesus is His Lord. For when Jesus heard his cry for mercy and asked him what He would like Him to do, Bartimaeus said, "Lord, let me recover my sight" (vs. 41). Bartimaeus confessed that Jesus is his Lord with the words of his mouth and with faith that trusted He could heal his blindness.

To this day, that is the confession that all Christians make: "Jesus is Lord." That means that Jesus is Lord and Sovereign over every detail of our lives. He is the Master. At home, at work, during leisure, over money, time, talents, family, friends, and all human relationships. Over life and death. Jesus is Lord. Thus, when Valentine was commanded by the Romans to deny Jesus, he simply could not comply. Love for God and love for man means rejoicing in the truth. Jesus is the Lord who lived and died and rose again to save us from the fear of judgment and the torment of death. That divine truth directs all words, thoughts, and deeds. Jesus is Lord and cannot be denied. Not in life nor in death. Jesus is the Lord who saves us.

Dear saints of God, let those words be on your lips regularly and frequent. And by the grace of the Spirit, let those words guide and direct your life, your hope, and your love for God and man. Jesus is the Lord of mercy who redeems us from all sins, from a bad conscience, from fear of death, from worry over the things of this life or the life to come.

And finally, there is one last connection between Valentine and blind Bartimaeus of Luke 18. And it's this: when asked to be quiet about Jesus, both men refused. When Bartimaeus first heard about Jesus, he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Vs. 39 says, "And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'" Bartimaeus would not silence his faith in Jesus. Nor would Valentine. Both men, to differing degrees, were commanded to be silent about Jesus. Both refused. Both received answer to their prayers. Bartimaeus received his sight because what he believed in his heart he confessed with his mouth. Valentine received a crown of righteousness for confessing with his life and death that Jesus is Lord over Roman authority and over death itself.

Dear saints of God, there are many forces working to silence Christians in our time. Cultural, political, financial, even religious powers are saying that Christians need to be silent. Believe whatever you want but keep it to yourself. This, we cannot do. We must speak and confess in thought, word, and deed that Jesus is Lord. He is the living Lord one who died and rose from the dead. And love for Jesus compels us to speak, act, and live under His Lordship. Both Valentine and Bartimaeus provide us with encouragement and strength. Don't be silenced. Not on social media, not at the coffee shop, not at work, not a church, not in your conversation and life. Be wise and prudent. We don't go looking for trouble. But Jesus is Lord and will be honored as such. We are redeemed by His divine, perfect love. Our love for God and man grows richer and deeper because of His love.

The Lord Jesus sees our faith, hope, and love in Him. As His perfect love for us endures, so will our love for Him continue to grow and mature until the day of perfection. A blessed and joyous Valentine's day to you all. The love of Christ be with you all...

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars  
St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE (*quad-parish service*)  
Ash Wednesday  
February 17, 2021  
Text: Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

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

We Lutherans are bit uneasy with the idea of doing our works of righteousness in the open. There's good reason for concern. In tonight's gospel reading, the Lord Jesus warned against giving money to the poor, praying, and fasting before the watchful eyes of the public. In fact, whenever anyone does these things for the applause of man, Jesus says they have their reward. That is, the temporary recognition of man. But not the commendation of God the Father in heaven.

But I would have you notice that in spite of these warnings against “practicing our righteousness before other people”, the Lord Jesus does expect that we will do works of righteousness. The Lord speaks of it as a matter of fact, almost a self-evident assumption. His Church will practice righteousness in His name until the end of the age. In thought, word, and deed, Christians are called to practice the righteousness given to them as a gift from their heavenly Father through the gospel.

Today's liturgy reminded us that “From ancient times the season of Lent has been kept as a time of special devotion, self-denial, and humble repentance born of a faithful heart that dwells confidently on His Word and draws from it life and hope.” Practicing our righteousness is about life and hope centered in Jesus.

But Jesus cautions us that we must practice our righteousness in a God pleasing way. The practice must be done only for God's eyes and for the benefit of others. No audiences please. News releases and press conferences have no place in the practice of our righteousness. God sees our righteousness. Our neighbor receives the benefit. And we practicing Christians sit in the background rejoicing that our neighbor was helped in their time of need while God receives all the praise.

The 40 days of Lent are an intensive time of training so that our life of righteousness throughout the rest of the year is more effective, more anonymous, and more glorious for our heavenly Father.

Jesus speaks of three disciplines we are to practice. They are giving to the needy, praying, and fasting. We begin with our giving. Tonight, I want to give a quick overview of these basic areas of Christian love and piety. In order to set the parameters clearly, everything we're considering falls under the two great commandments in the Bible: loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving your neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30–31). All that we do in life and faith is directed by love for God and love for man. The love described here is one of complete devotion to the other. Devotion to God and devotion to man. Though we cannot benefit God or improve His status, we love Him nonetheless with complete devotion. I John 4:19 teaches that we are able to love God and love man, because God first loved us. In our love for our fellow man, we do love them so that they are benefited and improved by our love. The entire Law of God is fulfilled in one word: love.

Jesus teaches us that our gifts to the poor are to be done with no fanfare, no public applause. Sound no trumpet says Jesus (vs. 2). Giving to the poor for the praise of man isn't an act of love but a deed of selfishness. The one giving to the needy for the applause of others is simply using the poor to satisfy his own thirst for attention and recognition. The needy are helped. But it isn't an act of righteousness before God. So we give in love for God's glory and our neighbor's need. The Scriptures teach us that the poor will always be among us. There is more than ample opportunity to show real, genuine love for our neighbor. And it may include more than money. Things like time, compassion, correction, and mercy of various kinds.

The second Christian devotion is prayer which is really an exercise and expression of faith, hope and love. True Biblical prayer is primarily characterized by an outward looking focus; faith in God and His Word; hope in the fulfillment of His promises for life in this world (including things for family, friends, neighbors, country, etc.) and the world to come (including the eternal life, a glorious inheritance in God's kingdom, the resurrection of the just on the Last Day), and love for both God and man. In other words, prayer is most concerned about God's glory and the benefit of people.

Jesus cautions us that our practice of prayer should be done anonymously for the benefit of our neighbor and for God's glory. This was, after all, the way Jesus lived out His life and it was the way He prayed. People certainly knew that Jesus prayed. It wasn't a big secret. But He never prayed in order to be seen and praised by the crowds. Rather, His life of prayer was born out of His perfect love for His Father and the Spirit, and His love for the people of this world. We have the absolute, steadfast

promise that God the Father sees and hears in secret but will reward us graciously (vs. 6).

Finally, Christ teaches us that we are people who practice the righteous discipline of fasting. Of the three expressions of Christian piety, fasting is the most underutilized and the least understood. Fasting reminds us that we do not live by bread alone but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Christians practice their righteousness by refraining from food, drink, and other forms of physical pleasure for the purpose of drawing closer to God, His Word, and helping provide the needs of others. Fasting teaches us to hunger and thirst for God's righteousness more than we hunger for our next meal! The food on our table is a gift of God. But it sustains us temporarily. The food that Jesus gives through His Word and Spirit is the food of eternal life. Jesus is the bread of life, the living bread, that whoever eat thereof shall never taste death.

Several years ago, our congregations adopted the practice of encouraging one another to give, pray, and fast with renewed emphasis during the season of Lent. In order to give concrete expression to this encouragement, our congregations offer midweek prayer services. Please consider attending them as you are able. Plus, adopt a devotional plan. Lenten devotions from Lutheran Hour Ministries are available on the back table. Or follow the reading schedule in our hymnal. There are many, many options. Thursdays have been designated as a congregational fasting day. An insert giving instruction on fasting is included in tonight's bulletin. As you're able, practicing fasting this Lenten season.

If there was ever a time that we should humble ourselves before God with prayer and fasting, it's now. Joel called upon God's ancient people to pray and fast in response to the locust plagues that devastated their country. And then there was the need for spiritual renewal. In our time, the effects of the pandemic, both the medical and non-medical aspects, continue with ugly vigor. Much of our country lost power the past few days. We witnessed many different forms of cultural upheaval last year and earlier this year. And the war against unborn life and true Biblical marriage continues in our land. In response to these kinds of events, Christians throughout the centuries have humbled themselves before God with prayer and fasting. This is our time to be the salt and light of the world. Whatever form of fasting you adopt, use that time for prayer and the study of God's Word. The money saved can be given away to people you know who need help or to any number of worthy charities. But remember the

parameters mentioned at the beginning: all of this is done out of love for God and love for man.

The secret to practicing your righteousness is the gospel promise the Lord Jesus died to forgive us all our sins and to set us free from the need to save ourselves. Because Jesus did everything to secure our eternal life, we are able to love our neighbor for the sake of our neighbor. The praise and recognition of men isn't needed. God the Father has showered upon you His eternal, divine love and favor through His Son Jesus. What more could we want or desire than to have the love and praise of God Himself. And that we have already by grace alone through Christ alone.

So go out in this Lenten season and practice your righteous acts of giving, praying, and fasting for the glory of God alone for the benefit of your neighbor alone.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Invocabit (First Sunday in Lent)

February 21, 2021

Text: Matthew 4:1–11

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

The last and final petition of the Lord's Prayer, "and deliver us from evil", refers both to evil in general, evil things, and the evil one. In the Bible, he is called Satan and the devil. It would be quite foolish on our part to ignore what the Bible says about the devil. C.F.W. Walther, the first president of the Missouri Synod, wrote this about the necessity of understanding the Biblical teaching on the devil.

The "doctrine of Satan is so interwoven in the whole of Christian doctrine that the entire structure would collapse if one denies the existence of that evil spirit. In one denies the existence of the devil, one must also deny the fall of man, original sin, the redemption, Christ, Baptism, yes, the entire Gospel; yes, then one must make a liar out of the prophets, apostles, and Christ Himself" (Walther, *Gospel Sermons*, V. 1, p. 158).

Satan is a fallen archangel. He was created by God in the beginning pure, holy, and powerful. But his pride became swollen and he rebelled against His God and creator. Satan is God's sworn enemy; he despises God's creative work especially mankind. It was the devil who was instrumental in Adam and Eve's original sin, as we heard from today's OT reading. We cannot understand the human condition or even our own life situation without knowing about the devil, his works and his ways.

Nor can we rightly understand the victory the Lord Jesus won for us if we forget about Satan. Today's gospel text from Matthew 4 retells the battle between Satan and Jesus. The Lord of life and the lord of death contended for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. But thanks be to God! Jesus remained faithful and true. He rebuked Satan at every turn. Jesus endured Satan's lies, his corruptions of Holy Scripture, his allurements, and was not deceived. Our Lord and Savior defeated Satan for us, dear saints of God. Christ's victory is our victory.

Vs. 1 declares that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The reason why Jesus must do this is hinted at in the word "wilderness." After

Israel's mighty deliverance from Egyptian bondage, God's redeemed people were led through the wilderness by a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. But Satan was also active, inciting Israel to rebellion with one temptation after another. As a result of Israel's rebellion, they wandered in the desert for forty years. At every turn Israel failed to believe God's promises. Those were years of failure and defeat.

Jesus, by contrast, is led by God's Spirit into a wilderness wandering to face the devil's temptations. Anointed with the Holy Spirit, Jesus represents God's people and the world as the very Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Led by the Spirit, Jesus did what Israel failed to do. He will "fear, love, and trust in God above all things" so that He can deliver us from the evil one.

Israel grumbled because of their food during those 40 years. Jesus, on the other hand, willingly fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. At the end of those days of fasting, Satan came to the Lord with a very appealing invitation: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (vs. 3). Jesus was starving. It's been forty days of wandering in the desert with no food. All that He has to do is say the word and rocks will become bread! What harm could there be in that? Should not God provide food for His beloved Son?

Satan's temptations often sound quite reasonable. Be aware dear saints, Satan will certainly use your fleshly appetites against you. His tactics are quite sophisticated and varied: the desire for food, rest, sex, health, pleasure, knowledge, security, family commitments, all good things of themselves. Satan will use them all against you to tempt you into every form of shame and vice.

God's beloved Son took upon Himself our flesh and blood in order to be our Savior. He will not use His divine power to save Himself from pain and suffering. He will wait as we must wait on the Father to give Him daily bread. So Jesus lives upon God's Word. Our Lord quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 as His rebuttal to Satan's temptation, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (vs. 4).

As we reflect back upon this past year, we would do well to consider that the Bible teaches us we need God's Word as much as daily bread. In truth, the need is greater for God's Word. I really don't like to pit our earthly bread, which the Small Catechism rightly defines as everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, against our heavenly food, which is Christ Himself, the bread of life. Both

are needed. Both are God's gifts for us. But this past year we have been forced into choosing one over the other. Have we not been told that the things that support the needs of the body are more important than the things that support the needs of both body and soul? We have endured almost 11 months of constant messaging that says the body is more important than the soul. You don't need to gather for sermons, hymns, corporate prayers, Scripture readings, and Sacraments. But this is simply a lie of the devil. The Lord Jesus, quoting the OT, teaches us rightly. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. We need daily bread to support body and soul. God the Father desires to give us both. As He has established the means by which we are fed and nourished physically, for which we are very thankful, so He has established the means by which He nourishes us spiritually in the ministry of the Church. Let us strengthen our resolve to remain faithful to receiving God's Word of life as a priority through the public ministry of His Church.

A second temptation is presented to our Lord. Taking Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple, Satan says, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command His angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone'" (vs. 6). Satan uses the Word of God, Psalm 91:11–12, as a means of tempting Jesus to win the world's love and devotion by performing a spectacular miracle. Just jump down from the Temple. God's Word does say the angels will protect you. Think of the fame and glory you'll receive Jesus. No suffering death, no blood and sweat; only glory and honor. And it's all based on the Bible!

Dear saints, we are warned by Holy Scripture that many false prophets and teachers will go out into the world to deceive. We are commanded to test them, to evaluate their doctrine, teaching, and life against the pure standard of God's Word (i.e., I Jn. 4:1–3). Not every preacher or author or devotional booklet quoting the Bible is true and faithful. Satan quotes God's Word in this second temptation.

Again Jesus answers from God's Word, Deuteronomy 6:16, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (vs. 7). Psalm 91 is about trusting God not testing Him. Jesus is our Savior not our showman. And the Bible is the story of redemption not a book of useful quotations available to justify whatever we want to do. Our obedience to God is to include the whole counsel of God from Holy Scripture.

Satan has one more temptation: worldly glory and power. Satan takes Jesus and shows him all the world's kingdoms. He says to Jesus, "All these I will give you, if you will

fall down and worship me” (vs. 9). Satan is, in effect, saying to Jesus, “You need not suffer and die in order to become King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Bend you knee to me. I am the prince of the power of the air. It can all be yours.”

The Devil is tempting Jesus to bypass the pain and suffering of the cross, the chosen means established by God the Father. Dear saints of God, flee from any teaching or any worship or any piety that ignores or sidesteps the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the only means of salvation and forgiveness. This includes any teaching that ignores repentance, daily prayer, faithful worship attendance, the regular use of the sacraments, etc. Or which ignores the daily discipline of hating and avoiding sin. Holy Scriptures admonishes us to flee from every form of evil, to chastise and discipline our sinful flesh through prayer, fasting, and repentance. We are to live by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus so that we may, day by day, walk before God the Father in righteousness and purity forever.

Jesus renounces Satan, “Be gone”! Quoting Deuteronomy 6:13 Jesus says, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (vs. 10). Satan’s defeat is sealed. God’s Son remains faithful. Three years later, Jesus will be faithful unto death for us and for our salvation.

Saints of God, we aren’t strong enough to withstand Satan’s temptations. We don’t have the power to do battle with the old evil foe. Jesus went to the wilderness to endure your temptations and fight this battle. You stand in the strength and victory of Christ alone. His victory over the devil’s temptations is your victory over daily temptations. Christ’s death is your death. His resurrection is your resurrection. It will not mean the end of temptations for you. But when faced with Satan’s temptations, you can confidently say, “I am baptized into Jesus. My sins are forgiven in Christ. Be gone, Satan. My Lord Jesus has defeated you.”

In Christ Jesus, you stand secure unto eternal glory and blessedness.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

Zion Lutheran Church – Grover, CO

Lent I–Midweek (members of St. John’s Kimball, Immanuel Burns, Grace Pine Bluffs present)

February 24, 2020

Text: Lord’s Prayer; SC III, Introduction & 1<sup>st</sup> Petition

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

Our Lenten discipline began last Wednesday when we heard the Lord Jesus teach us about the three acts of faith and piety we Christians will do until the end of time. Those pious disciplines are giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. This year’s Wednesday services will focus on prayer, especially the Lord’s Prayer. Just a quick word about giving to the poor and fasting. These too should mark our Christian life. Thursdays have been a day of fasting in our quad-parish the past few years. Or pick a different day. Fasting and giving away our material resources reminds us that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord (Matt. 4:4).

Before we consider the Lord’s Prayer in detail, we need to set out some basic parameters. The first thing we must know is that we are commended to pray. The Second Commandment, “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God” requires that we “praise (God’s) holy name and call upon it in every need...To call upon God’s name is nothing other than to pray. Prayer is just as strictly and seriously commanded as all other commandments: to have no other God, not to kill, not to steal, and so on” (LC III:5-6). Simply put, it is our duty to pray. We cannot and dare not neglect it lest sin take root in our life and choke out our most holy faith in Christ.

There are some common reasons, or rather excuses, that our sinful nature gives for not praying. One is “Who knows whether God heeds or will hear my prayer? If I do not pray, some else will.” (LC III: 6). We know that God hears our prayer because He has commanded us to pray. And though others are praying, God the Lord has commanded each of you, individually and personally, to pray. Your daily prayers cannot be delegated to someone else.

Another excuse is that “I am not holy or worthy enough. If I were as godly and holy as St. Peter or St. Paul, then I would pray.” (LC III:15). But we must set aside all such thinking because of God’s command to pray. To these kinds of excuses, we should simply say, “My prayer is as precious, holy, and pleasing to God as that of St. Paul or

of the most holy saints...I will gladly grant that Paul is personally more holy, but ... God does not consider prayer because of the person, but because of His Word and obedience to it. For I rest my prayer on the same commandment on which all the saints rest their prayer. Furthermore, I pray for the same thing that they all pray for and always have prayed. Besides, I have just as great a need of what I pray for as those great saints; no, even a greater one than they” (LC III:16).

God’s command is crystal clear. “So here prayer is not left to my will to do it or leave it undone, but it shall and must be offered at the risk of God’s wrath and displeasure” (LC III:9).

So God’s command is the first word of encouragement for we seek to live in obedience to our Lord and King. But there is another reason we pray, that is, because God has also promised that He hears and answers our prayers. In Psalm 50:15, God says, “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you.” And the Lord Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, says, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (Matt. 7:7–8). “Such promises certainly ought to encourage and kindle our hearts to pray with pleasure and delight. For He testifies with His own Word that our prayer is heartily pleasing to Him. Furthermore, it shall certainly be heard and granted, in order that we may not despise it or think lightly of it and pray based on chance” (LC III:20).

And yet, there is a third source of encouragement to pray. Christ Jesus Himself “arranges the words and form of prayer for us. He places them on our lips for how and what we should pray...and we may never doubt that such prayer is pleasing to Him and shall certainly be answered. This the Lord’s Prayer is a great advantage indeed over all other prayers that we might compose ourselves...Therefore, there is no nobler prayer to be found upon earth than the Lord’s Prayer. We pray it daily, because it has this excellent testimony, that God loves to hear it. We ought not to surrender this for all the riches of the world” (LC III:22-23).

Dear saints of God, the command and promise of God to pray and the perfect prayer having been given to us by the divine Son of God Himself are sources of great encouragement and strength. For God Himself takes our prayers seriously. “All our shelter and protection rest in prayer alone. For we are far too weak to deal with the devil and all his power and followers who set themselves against us (i.e., we, the members of the Christian Church)...Therefore, we must consider and take up those

weapons with which Christians must be armed in order to stand against the devil [II Cor. 10:4; Eph. 6:11]” (LC III:30). When we call upon God’s name in prayer, the devices and schemes of the devil are thwarted. What else, do you think, “has stopped or quelled the counsels, purposes, murder, and riot of our enemies, by which the devil thought he would crush us (the Christian Church), together with the Gospel? It was the prayer of a few godly people standing in the middle like an iron wall for our side” (LC III:31). We have no greater privilege than to draw near with confidence to the throne of God’s grace in order to receive mercy and find grace in the time of need as Hebrews 4:16 teaches us.

And so we come to the very words of the Lord’s Prayer and the instruction from the Small Catechism. We begin with the Introduction, “Our Father who art in heaven.”

The Catechism question is “What does this mean?”

Answer: “With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father.”

The Lord’s Prayer is the prayer of God the Father’s family. We boldly and confidently approach His heavenly throne because He is our Father; we are His baptized children. The Father has adopted us through the saving work of His Son, the Lord Jesus. He poured out upon us the gift of the Holy Spirit when we received God’s Trinitarian name in baptism. It is true that God is our creator, our King, our Almighty Lord. But most fundamentally, God is our Father. Through the grace of the Spirit, we are born again into the household of faith. You are brothers and sisters in Christ because you all have the same heavenly Father. As He is Father from all eternity so shall we call upon as Father into the eternity of His kingdom. What a great privilege bestowed upon us by His love, grace, and mercy.

Now we consider the 1<sup>st</sup> Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Hallowed by thy name.”

The Catechism answer, “God’s name is certainly holy in itself, but we pray in this petition that it may be kept holy among us also.”

We must understand that God Himself and His name are holy in and of themselves. We do not make them holy as if we could make God something He already isn’t. Rather, it’s in our use of God’s name that can be unholy (LC III:37). “Now, here is a great need that we ought to be most concerned about. This name should have its

proper honor; it should be valued holy and grand as the greatest treasure and holy thing that we have. As godly children we should pray that God's name...may also be and remain holy with us upon earth and in all the world" (LC III:38).

The way God's is kept holy among us is answered in the Catechism.

"How is God's name kept holy?"

Answer: "God's name is kept holy when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we, as the children of God, also lead holy lives according to it. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven! But anyone who teaches or lives contrary to God's Word profanes the name of God among us. Protect us from this, heavenly Father."

Christians keep God's name holy through two means that must always be kept together; they are two sides of the same coin. They are 1) hearing and believing God's word taught purely and truly. And then 2) living according to it by the power of the Spirit. Through this petition, we are praying for the ministry of Christ's Church, for her pastors and teachers, and for all her members. In I Timothy 4:16, the apostle Paul encouraged the young pastor Timothy with these words, "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." Timothy's doctrine and life must be consistent with each other for his own sake and for the salvation of his hearers. To "hallow (God's name) means the same as to praise, magnify, and honor (it) both in word and deed" (LC III:46). Conversely, through this petition we "pray against whatever opposes and persecutes our Gospel and pure doctrine" (LC III:47). When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we know from God's Word that nothing is more dear to Him than ... that His Word is taught in its purity and is considered precious and dear" (LC III:48).

People of God, we have God's command to pray, the promise He will hear our prayers, as well as the perfect prayer, the Lord's Prayer, given by the Lord Jesus Himself. Our prayers ascend into heaven to the ears of our heavenly Father. And He is well please. May the Holy Spirit bless you richly as you pray for God's glory, for the growth of His kingdom, and the blessing of the people of this world.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Reminiscere (Second Sunday in Lent)

February 28, 2021

Text: Matthew 15:21–28

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

The Introit for today is taken from Psalm 25, a psalm of King David. Three times, David prays about God remembering. This first is a positive request, “Remember your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old” (vs. 6). The second is a negative request, by which I mean, David basically asks God to forget. “Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions” (vs. 7a). And then back to a positive request in 7b, a near restatement of vs. 6, “according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, Lord.” The teachings of the Holy Scripture are abundantly clear that the Lord God of heaven and earth is omniscient, all knowing. Why, then, does David ask God to remember or to forget? God knows all things. He hasn't forgotten about His mercy, His goodness, or His love. Nor can God simply forget something because we're embarrassed or ashamed of what we've done.

David is using the language of repentance and faith. This is the way God's people of all ages and times have always prayed. When facing trials and afflictions, God's people cry out in faith calling upon God to remember His love, mercy, and goodness so that they can receive it personally. It's but one way of asking God to act on their behalf to save. Remember your mercy in my life. Let your love have its way with me. Remember Your goodness so that I may participate in Your goodness for without You, O Lord, there is only evil. By contrast, believers have regularly and frequently called upon God to forget their sins, to remove them out of His sight. This is another way of asking for forgiveness. Forgiveness basically means releasing someone from the just and right penalty they deserve because of their evil deeds. Remember not my transgressions, Lord. Instead, remember Your mercy, love, and goodness. For they have been from of old. Such is the cry of true Christian faith and hope.

The Canaanite woman in today's gospel reading (Matt. 15:21–28) had such faith and hope in Jesus. This unnamed woman was a Christian coming to Jesus asking Him to remember His mercy from of old and to deliver her daughter from demon possession (vs. 22). It's hard to imagine this woman's situation. You parents and grandparents can certainly imagine her utter helplessness. Imagine your child being completely out

of control. The demon dominates every action, thought, and deed resulting in physical illness, spiritual torment, and emotional trauma. And there's nothing you can do or give. No medicines, no therapies, do professionals you can call. In the end, it's simply complete dependence on God and Him remember His mercies from of old.

This woman stands utterly alone in her trial. We don't know anything else about her situation. Was she married? Did she have other family members back home trying to care for her daughter? We don't know. But she comes to Jesus knowing and believing that He is the only hope and salvation for her daughter, yea, for herself.

But things don't really look all promising for her. The cards are stacked against her. She's a Canaanite, a descendant of the original peoples that the children of Israel tried to exterminate when they conquered the Promised Land under Joshua. There was bad blood between the Jews and the Canaanites. Jesus and His disciples were Jews. This woman a Canaanite. This might explain why our Lord's disciples begged Jesus to send her away in vs. 23.

But she comes to Jesus using the language of the Jewish OT Scriptures. She calls upon Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior promised in the Jewish Bible. Listen to her cry, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon" (vs. 22). This too is the language of Christian faith that trusts God in the midst of deep affliction. Though she is not from the biological lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, she calls upon the patriarchs' God in true faith. Though not of the household of King David, she places herself under David's promise. A Son of David shall rule and reign upon David's throne forever (II Sam. 7). Such faith in Israel's God and Lord, makes her a child of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Galatians 3:7 says, "Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham." By faith, not bloodline or lineage, she is child of God, a daughter of Abraham, and an heir of salvation. And she cries out for mercy.

In this regard, we stand with her. For we share a common faith in the same Lord and Savior using the same language of mercy. Week after week, we gather together in God's holy name calling upon Him to remember His love mercy, love, and goodness. Here is a believer calling upon her God in utter desperation. "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David." Jesus has power of demons. He defeated the devil when the devil tried to tempt Him in the wilderness. Jesus has cast out many demons before this situation. Not once has Jesus rejected anyone who has come to Him in faith and trust.

Until now. The Savior remains silent and unmoved. Vs. 23, “But he did not answer her a word.” The disciples begged Jesus to send her away because she was crying out after them. What I want you to notice is that she didn’t just ask once. She kept crying out, “Lord, have mercy.” She was persistent and determined. And it’s not entirely clear if the disciples are wanting Jesus to grant her request and send her away. Or, to simply get rid of her because she’s making a scene. I think Matthew wrote this ambiguously on purpose. This woman’s situation is desperate. Jesus is silent to her prayer. And the disciples’ response is not clear.

To all of this, Jesus responds, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (vs. 24). I didn’t come for you is the message. Your bloodlines do not go back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You are outside of the boundaries of my mercy. Even though it appears Jesus has finally, and irrevocably turned her away, she remained determined. According to vs. 25, she knelt before Jesus. She literally gets in front of Jesus and kneels before Him. This time, she simply says, “Lord, help me” (vs. 25). Even to this, Jesus seems cold and indifferent. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (vs. 26). Simply staggering! My gifts aren’t for you. It’s not proper to throw the steak dinner prepared for God’s children and throw it away to the pets, the little dogs.

Dear saints of God, this woman’s response is what we need to burn into our memory. Vs. 27, “Yes, Lord.” Stop there. That’s the language of faith and humility. Yes, Lord. No matter what you say, when you say it, how you say it how often you say it. Yes, Lord. Your Word is true. It cannot and will not be denied. Your Word is true even when it judges and condemns me. We are truly poor, miserable sinners that deserve temporal and eternal punishment. To this, we must say, “Yes, Lord.” Without qualification, self-justification, or even a hint of denial. This is the life of repentance without which there is no faith or salvation. Repentance is that most-precious gift that God works in our life when we see, by the clarity of His Word, that we have sinned and broken God’s Law. And we must turn away from such evil. No excuses. And that’s the really, really hard part. For we want to justify ourselves, to explain our actions in such a way so as not to appear as bad. And even at times we attempt to make our sinful thoughts and actions look righteous. Because of this and that circumstance, it’s ok for me to do this or that thing even though God’s Word forbids it. But we must abandon all such ideas and intentions. Poor, miserable sinner with no claims of righteousness. We all deserve temporal and eternal punishment.

But, God has more to say to us and about us. The woman's response guides us here too, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters' tables" (vs. 27). Yes, Lord, I am not one of the lost sheep of the house of Israel. That is true. But I depend, nonetheless, upon the mercy of my Master. Yes, Lord. You are my Master and I am your little dog and so is my daughter who is severely tormented by a demon. Yes, Lord. Give us what masters give to their insignificant pets, the crumbs from the table, and it will be more than enough. That's all the mercy my daughter and I need." This is the language of faith, dear saints of God. This is our language, our hope, and our confidence.

Notice how Jesus answers, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire" (vs. 28). The Lord Jesus saw and knew all along that she was a true child of the master's table. Though a Canaanite by natural lineage, she was a child of Abraham by faith, a true child of the Master. As the patriarch Jacob wrestled with God and prevailed (Gen. 32, OT text), so this Canaanite woman wrestled with God in repentance and faith and prevailed. He granted her prayer. Jesus did not forget His love, mercy, and goodness. Through this trial, He brought to light the purity and genuineness of her faith. The apostle Peter wrote words of encouragement and strength to Christians who were suffering for their Christian faith (I Peter 1:6–7):

<sup>6</sup>In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

This woman's faith was more precious than the purest gold. The same is true of your most holy faith in Jesus. He remembers His love, mercy, and goodness. We have a Lord and Savior who knows and loves us in the midst of our trials and afflictions as well as times of joy and prosperity. His Word is true. We respond with "Yes, Lord." This is the language of faith and love. "Remember your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old." "Yes, Lord. It's all true."

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.