

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Judica (Fifth Sunday in Lent)

April 3, 2022

Text: John 8:42–59

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

Last Sunday, I pointed out that the Fourth Sunday in Lent is somewhat of a respite during our long, six-week Lenten journey. The Scripture readings from previous three weeks revealed the intense, spiritual struggle that Christians face in this world. The battle is life-long and its easy to grow weary. But the Lord provides the refreshment and renewal we all need at throughout our life. When Jesus fed the crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children, He was teaching us that He is our bread of life. Whoever eats and drinks His flesh and blood, that is, whoever has faith in Him shall never hunger and thirst. He is the bread of life and the fountain of eternal youth. Last week was a much-needed respite.

But the battle continues. We see it again from the gospel text from John 8. Jesus is having to defend Himself yet again, who He is, what He came to do, and so forth. As we will see, the debate is starting to get ugly. The Pharisees simply will not listen to Jesus. And their murderous intentions are starting to show.

Because of this intensity of struggle and close proximity of Holy Week, the Church has historically used this Sunday, the Fifth Sunday in Lent, as the beginning of two weeks of greater focus upon Christ and His redemptive work. Lent V is the beginning of Passiontide, 14 days of purposeful reflection and devotion centered around that one great truth, Jesus, the Son of God suffered and died to save sinners. This is why the Gloria Patri has been removed from the liturgy. In some churches, all altar crosses and statues of Jesus are veiled. These are liturgical reminders that help us see the depth of what Christ did for us, to help us see better the height and depth of God's love for us in Christ. May these two weeks be filled with reverent devotion to Jesus and courageous joy born from the hope we have in our crucified and resurrected Savior.

To John 8 ... Our Lord's enemies, the Pharisees, scribes, and the religious establishment, are calling Jesus a liar and a fraud. Their accusations begin with at a personal attack on His manhood. John 8:41, "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God." In vs. 48, the Jews make their attack even more vicious, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?". You were born in sin and you teach ungodly doctrines, declare the Jews. But we know the truth. You cannot claim God as your Father like we can.

Jesus counters their lie with the truth, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me" (vs. 42). Jesus speaks the truth about His origins. He came from God the Father. Don't forget the original accusation: You, Jesus were born of sexual immorality. Not so, says Jesus. My origins are from the God the Father Almighty. I am eternally begotten of My heavenly Father. And because He is My Father, He sent Me, His Son, to do His will. Consequently, anyone who loves God the Father must, of divine necessity, love Me, says Jesus. Anyone who loves Me, must of divine necessity love My heavenly Father, who sent Me as His gift to the world. For I came from God and He sent Me.

All this back and forth debate between Jesus and the Jews really comes down to this: Do you believe Jesus to be the eternal Son of the Father sent by the Father into this world to save the world from the lies and deceptions of Satan? In the apostolic Church, this was the litmus test for whether or not a teacher or a congregation was being faithful to the Holy Scriptures (I John 4:1–3):

¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.
²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

The "spirit of the antichrist" reveals itself in any teaching, in any form of religious devotion, in any teacher who denies, downplays, or overlooks that Jesus is God's eternal Son, sent by the Father to accomplish perfectly His will

for saving the world. When Jesus claimed to be the great “I am” and that His followers would never see death, the Jews picked up stones to kill Him (vs. 58–59).

The Jews of Jesus’ day did not receive nor understand our Lord’s teaching. Our Lord Himself told them (and us) why, “Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires...But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me...Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God” (vs. 43–47). They could not hear God’s Word for they believed Satan’s lie that Jesus wasn’t God’s Son. “The lie” told them that Man who claims to be God can’t possibly be a Savior. Our Lord asks them to convict Him of any sin or any false teaching. But they cannot. Our Lord speaks the truth. And we must hear His true teaching and cherish it as our priceless treasure.

(Misinformation prevalent today but always present since Garden of Eden.)

We who confess the name of Christ and have God’s baptismal name splashed upon us must always approach God’s Word and Sacraments with prayerful humility and joyous thanksgiving. Satan wishes to take God’s Word and Sacraments away from us because he wants to take Jesus from us. Let me expose some of Satan’s lies about God’s Word and Sacraments.

We hear, in many and various ways, that preaching only about Christ and Him crucified and resurrected according to God’s Law and God’s Gospel is passé, out dated relics from previous generations. “The lie” says we moderns need “practical” sermons about family, finances, relationship, politics, positive self-identify, and so forth. “The lie” says we have such a radical Gospel that we can move past Jesus and all that stuff about living pious and godly lives in repentance and faith. All that talk about contrition and repentance from sin and dead works, atonement, suffering, the shedding of blood for forgiveness, etc. is tiresome and negative. Don’t believe such lies for a moment.

Dear saints, constantly pray to the Lord for ears and hearts that desire to hear the truth of Holy Scripture preached and taught in all of its truth and purity. Pray for sermons, hymns, liturgies, Bible studies, devotional materials, etc. that give us

Jesus as Lord, Savior, and Redeemer. And we must constantly pray for the grace and strength of the Holy Spirit to live according to the truth of God's Word. We must have our Lord's grace lest we believe and live "the lie."

Similarly, the devil would take away our Lord's blessed sacraments: baptism, holy absolution, and the Lord's Supper. The great "lie" that Satan wishes to deceive us with regarding the Sacraments is that they are not gifts of God whereby He gives to us the truth, love, and salvation of His Son, Jesus. "The lie" says Holy Baptism is merely your testimony of obedience to Jesus. "The lie" says pastors and other Christians cannot say that sins are actually forgiven when we say, "I forgive you." "The lie" says the Lord's Supper is only your work of remembering Jesus' death; Christ does not actually give us His body and blood nor does the Christian actually receive real forgiveness when he receives Holy Communion. In short, the sacraments are all about you and your meritorious works rather than Christ saving us through His love and atoning sacrifice. All such thoughts are Satan's lie.

Do not allow lies to take you away from the preaching of Christ crucified and resurrected for your sins. And be not deceived into thinking the sacraments aren't important for your salvation. Baptism is necessary for salvation. By divine command, the Church must preach God's holy absolution. And the Lord's Supper is a divine, mysterious communion in Christ's body and blood for life, grace, forgiveness, and salvation. Christ gives us His body and blood to receive often in His name. It must not be left undone lest Satan's lie find a home in our hearts and minds. **(Problem of self-deception.)**

All true Christian devotion at home, work, and church flows out of who Jesus is and what He did for us. In other words, our 24/7 life in this world and our eternal life in the world to come, are built and formed upon the truth that Jesus is God the Father's Son come in the flesh to save us from deception, death, and judgment by dying and rising again.

Jesus prays that His righteous cause would be judged and vindicated by His heavenly Father. Our Lord's cause is the truth, the truth that all who believe Him will never see death (vs. 51). The two weeks before Easter is time devoted

to this great, joyous truth. Death is defeated. The truth will always prevail. For Christ Himself is life and truth. And He gives Himself to us freely and completely. May this Passiontide be filled with wonder, awe, and steadfast love and devotion for our God and Lord ...

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

April 6, 2022

Text: I Corinthians 11:23–34; Christian Questions with their Answers

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

There are any number of things the Church does in her public, congregational worship that creates some level of confusion for people. Both members and non-members, but especially the non-members visiting from other denominations and church traditions. The use of candles. Pastors who wear weird looking clothes with strange names like: albs, cassock and surplice, chasubles, stoles, pectoral crosses, and so forth. And then you have some very strange names thrown about like narthex, nave, vestibules, Lent, Advent, Holy Week, Maundy Thursday. And for the past few years I’ve been using those strange, Latin names for the certain Sundays, names like Gaudete, Reminiscere, and my favorite, Quasimodo Geniti! It’s all so strange, at least, to people who weren’t raised around more traditional, liturgical worship services.

But I think the most misunderstood and maybe even the most disliked Church practice has got to be closed communion. We know the practical result of this practices. Some people, even some Christians, are asked not to receive the Lord’s Supper. I understand very well the implications of this practice. First, from personal experience. Vickie and I weren’t raised in the Lutheran Church. In all the church services I ever attended before going to Mount Hope Lutheran Church in Casper, Wyoming, I was invited to receive the Lord’s Supper. I have no memories of being asked not to participate. Until Mount Hope. Secondly, I also know what this means pastorally. In the two congregations I serve as their called pastor, I have had to look people in the eye and ask them not to come to the Lord’s Table; some of which I had every confidence that they are brothers and sisters in Christ. By the way, this includes my family on both sides, Vickie’s side and mine. Over the years, I’ve heard people’s concerns, received the angry responses of some. But mostly, the looks are of honest confusion.

They simply don't understand why they, as believing Christians, cannot receive the Lord's Supper.

And frankly, there is nothing I can tell them in the few minutes before the beginning of a worship service that will answer all questions and alleviate all confusion. And I might even say, that a single 15–18-minute sermon on a Wednesday evening might not fully satisfy all questions and concerns. But this topic must be considered faithfully and clearly. For it is a practice founded upon faith and love: faithfulness and love for Jesus and love for one another. Closed communion, to put it bluntly, is not an option for our congregations. It's that important.

I need to set the record straight. Closed communion was the almost universal practice of the Church in all times and places until the last 100 years or so. It's still the dominant practice around the world to this day, observed by the majority of Roman Catholicism, the various Orthodox Communion, as well as the conservative Church bodies flowing out of the 16th century Reformation, including the Missouri Synod. I know at times we Lutherans feel a bit defensive over this practice. In light of the Church's 1,900 years of historic practice, we could just as easily ask the congregations and pastors who practice open communion to justify their actions biblically, historically, and pastorally. Why are you doing this when most Christians from the days of the apostles themselves until most recent times practice closed communion?

So let's consider the doctrines of the Church that inform this practice. For there is no single passage of Scripture that says, "Thou shalt practice closed communion. Or, under these situations only these people shall commune, and so forth." The practice is born out of a faithful confession:

1) that the Lord Jesus Himself, the Son of God and Son of Mary, instituted this Supper;

2) that He gives us His true body and blood under the bread and wine. We see this in the Words of Institution.

The practice of closed communion also 3) includes knowing that He gave it to His people, to Christians and only Christians. For when Christ Jesus says,

“given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sin,” faith in Him and all that He does is required to believe these extraordinary words.

Next, 4) closed communion is based upon the confession that unity of doctrine and practice are requirements for admission to the Lord’s Table. I Corinthians 10:17 describes the unity of doctrine and practice, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” Unity of faith and doctrine is also described in I Corinthians 11:26, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” By eating and drinking the Lord’s Supper, you, the communicants are proclaiming the Lord’s death. Everything that is associated with the teachings of Scripture regarding our salvation is included in that phrase, “proclaiming the Lord death until He comes.” If we are to have a faithful, godly proclamation of Christ, we must be able to answer in unity the following types of question – this is by no means exhaustive: Who is God? What is man? Sin is man’s problem of disobedience to God. What is God’s answer to man’s sin? How does man come to know about His need for forgiveness and salvation? Who is Jesus? How is that His death is the answer to man’s sin? What is man’s role in his salvation? What is the nature of this salvation promised in Jesus? How is the Lord’s Supper related to the Lord’s death and resurrection in Jerusalem? To the Church’s mission and ministry? And finally, what is the relationship between the Lord’s Supper and the hope of our own resurrection on the Last Day and our inheritance in God’s kingdom.

Martin Luther wrote Section 4 of the Catechism entitled, “Christian Questions with Their Answers” to help with Christians knowing what must be believed to receive the Lord’s Supper worthily. And so that Christians could rightly examine themselves, as I Corinthians 11:28 requires. The examination comes in the form of knowing what the Bible teaches about those most important questions. Those who have never been taught the Christian faith in a sufficient manner ought to refrain from communing. Otherwise, they cannot rightly examine themselves and might partake of the Lord’s Supper to their judgment.

Finally, 5) there is a very loving, pastoral concern expressed in closed communion. For as we heard in the text from I Corinthians 11:27, 29 it is possible that people can receive Christ’s body and blood in an unworthy manner

and “will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord...For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement on himself.” Paul said that unworthy reception led to some in the Corinthian congregation to become “weak and will, and some have died” (vs. 30). To prevent this possibility, Christians must be able to judge themselves against the truth of God’s Word “so that even we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world” (vs. 31–32).

In summary, our practice of closed communion is based upon the biblical confession that 1) Jesus instituted it, 2) He gives us His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, 3) only Christians commune, 4) unity in doctrine and practice are non-negotiable requirements, and 5) we want everyone who communes to do so worthily lest they eat unto judgment and condemnation.

Closed communion ought to be considered from two perspectives, two sides of the same coin, if you will. We see this in the reading from I Corinthians 11:23–34). The first aspect is the positive side which is that we want as many people as possible to receive Holy Communion. Admission to the Lord’s Table is not made of some elitist club of the super saints. The words of institution, which we heard tonight in I Corinthians 11:23–25, teach us that Jesus gave His Supper to His disciples, to all of them. And because of what He promises to give, namely, the forgiveness of sins, we must know that this meal was intended for sinners who believe that through faith in Christ, they receive the forgiveness of sins unto eternal life. Our Lord’s command, “Do this (all of you) in remembrance of me” (vs. 24, 25). is a plural imperative, spoken to everyone. So I want you to know, that as your pastor, I want as many people as possible receiving the Lord’s Supper. I want them to receive the fullness of His life, grace, forgiveness, love, and joy. This is why the church has historically offered the Lord’s Supper to her members every Sunday and on other festival days that don’t always fall on Sunday like Christmas, Ascension, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and so forth. We want every baptized Christian communing! May God the Father grant us this growth in receiving Christ’s holy body and blood in faith and joy.

But the other aspect of closed communion must be considered, the negative side, seen in vs. 27–34. While we want as many Christians as possible receiving Holy Communion, we also want them to receive it according to its intended use, namely, for their spiritual benefit. Jesus gives His body and blood under the bread and wine with the promise that those who receive it rightly, in faith, will be forgiven of all their sins. But those who do not receive it rightly, receive it to their judgment.

So if you're wanting a short and simple reason why we practice closed communion, it's this. While we want as many Christians to receive Communion as possible, at the same time, we want them to receive it for their good as Jesus intended. Let me say that again. Closed communion is the practice of the Church that seeks to bring the Lord's Supper to as many Christians as possible while, at the same time, ensuring that every communicant receive it for their spiritual and eternal good.

The Lord Supper is part of our inheritance as His people. It was His solemn pledge and testament ratified with His own blood shed on Calvary's cross. We ought not be afraid to receive the Lord's Supper often. It is a gift of Christ's love and grace. But it is also holy, the true body and blood of the eternal Son of God. Like all things He gives, we receive them in joy and thanksgiving according to the manner in which He gives them. They are for our eternal good.

I have said this several times now. I want our congregations to be known as being filled with people who celebrate the Lord's Supper with great joy and thanksgiving. Come to the Lord's Table whenever it is offered in true Christian faith and participate through bread and wine in the body and blood of the Lord of glory who lives and reigns to all eternity for your glory and salvation

✠ 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

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion

April 10, 2022

Text: Philippians 2:5–11

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

Palm Sunday is a most remarkable day in the life of the Church, even as it was in the life of our Lord Jesus. That very first Palm Sunday marked the beginning to the most decisive event in human history: the death and resurrection of God's only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is no exaggeration. For the apostle Paul, in Philippians 2, declares that after Jesus humbled Himself unto death and rose from the dead, God the Father exalted Him "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." The death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God, is the decisive event drawing the attention of heaven and earth. Today, Palm Sunday, begins the countdown to our celebration of that decisive event: Good Friday and Easter.

Our annual commemoration of Palm Sunday is a day of extremes. Jesus enters Jerusalem to the shouts and acclamations of the Jewish crowds. "Hosanna, Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." A few short days later, another Jewish crowd continues to shout. But now the people cry out, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" Within a very short time, our Lord went from the joy and hope of God's people to the most despised and rejected of men.

Today's appointed epistle reading from Philippians 2:5–11 helps us understand these apparently conflicting events rightly. Palm Sunday and Holy Week beautifully describe our Lord's humility; Palm Sunday because Jesus entered Jerusalem in humility upon a borrowed donkey. The Passion reading from Matthew prepares us for Jesus' eventual suffering and death on Good Friday; Easter Sunday and the entire Easter season celebrates His glorious exaltation. Humble lowliness and divine exaltation. They are beautifully combined as we celebrate the most important event in human history.

Paul begins with a remarkable admonition for us Christians, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (vs. 5–7). By the grace of the Spirit, we live after the humility seen in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. This kind of life is good and praiseworthy in the sight of the God the Father almighty.

Notice something here...Paul doesn't say to act more humble as if this Christian virtue were a function of will power and discipline. We are called to live according to this spiritual gift already given to us in our baptism into Christ. “Have this mind among yourselves, *which is yours* in Christ Jesus” (vs. 5). This gift is already yours. But note the reference, Christ's humility.

Look at how Paul describes our Lord's humility in vs. 6. Jesus was in the form of God but did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. The word “grasped” carries the sense of holding onto something forcibly, violently. Jesus is equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit in every respect yet Jesus did not violently and selfishly cling to His divine equality. He did not reject His Father's will for Him to become man, to live as flesh and blood among this fallen, rebellious world. He humbled Himself to the will of His Father for the good of the universe and for the glory of His Father.

How different we human beings are. We grasp and strain for every bit of power and prestige. It's my way or else. And if I don't get my way, then I'll make it harder on everyone else. But that is not the way of Jesus nor is it to be our way as Christians. Remember, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...” Our Christian way is to follow and live according to the gift of humility given to us in Christ Jesus. The way of faith and virtue seeks God's glory and the good of our neighbor.

Christian humility is the virtue that allows a person to see him or herself as they truly are in relation to their fellow human beings, to this created world, and to God. With this cardinal virtue, we are able to see rightly that we are created by God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. We just didn't

spontaneously come into existence. The Father almighty created you and me. Every natural and spiritual gift we possess comes from His loving hand as pure gifts of grace. That knowledge allows you to think rightly of yourself and to live rightly with God and man. Pride is the opposite of humility. It says the world and those around me ought to conform to my way of thinking, living, and acting. Humility is the way of Christ; pride the way of Satan.

In vs. 6–7, the apostle Paul continues to describe how our Lord Jesus brought about the salvation of the world through humility, “though he (Jesus) was in the form of God, (he) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant...” To make Himself nothing means our Lord “emptied himself.” Jesus poured Himself out in loving obedience to His Father and in love to save us human beings. He set aside His glory when He was born of the Virgin Mary. As the God-man. He emptied Himself in love so that in humility, He might become the lowest servant. Vs. 8, “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

This is how far God will go to save you, how wide His embrace. He will come down from heavenly glory to make His dwelling among us. He will ride to His own death on a borrowed donkey. He will submit to injustice, to mockery, to beating. He will permit Himself to be crucified, all the while praying even for those who drove the nails into His body. This is the depth of God’s love, His commitment, His passion to make you His own, to free you from sin and death.

In our Lord’s humility is where you see the infinite worth He gives to you. If ever you feel that your life is worthless, remember the self-emptying, the humbling, the obedience death of Jesus. One drop of His divine blood is infinitely precious. And He joyfully and willingly sheds all of it for you. That’s how much your life is worth to God. He gave His Son so save you. That’s also how much all the people you bump into every day are worth to God. For God so loves the world through the perfect, humble, obedient, and beloved Son.

Christ’s humility leads to exaltation. Continue with me at vs. 9–11, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every

name, 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.” The self-emptying of Jesus continued until the ransom price for the world’s salvation was paid. It is finished, Jesus cried out on the cross moments before His death. On Easter morning, the now exalted Jesus is risen from the dead. The name of the resurrected Jesus is now exalted.

But note even here. Jesus does not grasp this exaltation. It is given to Him by His heavenly Father. Even in exaltation, Jesus remains the humble Son of God. Consider our Lord’s service during Holy Communion. Jesus, now exalted and seated at the Father’s right hand in glory, comes to us in Communion and serves us with His body and blood for our life and salvation.

This is the way of thinking we are to have among ourselves which is ours in Christ Jesus. Through humility we rightly see ourselves as God’s beloved and redeemed people, possessing infinite worth. We also know we are called to love and serve the world as did Jesus. We look forward to a day of great exaltation when we will be raised incorruptible in both body and soul. On this side of eternity, we live like Jesus through faith and obedience by the power of the Spirit. On the resurrection of the Last Day, we shall be like the exalted Jesus for we shall see Him as He is. This is the mind of Christ given to each of us. We know who we are in Christ: a most beloved and blessed people. And we know the glorious future that awaits us: an eternal home in God’s new heavens and new earth.

A note to confirmands...Karsyn, Eddie, and Kaitlyn

This is the glory and joy of Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter, the most important event in heaven and earth. May our prayers, praises, and thanksgivings this week and all weeks be filled with the exalted name of Jesus...

✠ 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
Immanuel Lutheran Church – Burns, WY
Maundy Thursday
April 14, 2022
Text: John 13:1–15, 31b–35

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

“Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (vs. 1). If one must choose a single characteristic to describe Jesus, it would have to be love. The verse I just read describes at least two things about Jesus and His love.

The first thing comes from the phrase, “having loved his own who were in the world...” Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus loved His people consistently, faithfully, and perfectly. This includes Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed our Lord for 30 pieces of silver, the price of a common slave in those days. No amount of sin, betrayal, shame, or hatred can negate or overcome the love of the Lord. Jesus loves His own who are in the world with all their failures, sins, and weaknesses; He loves His own even when they seem to be so unlovable.

In this phrase, the apostle John is teaching us that Jesus’ love is divine and perfect. The most common way the Bible describes God’s love in the Bible is steadfast. “The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever” is the frequent refrain in the psalms. And the apostle Paul penned this prayer for the Ephesian Christians in Ephesians 3:17–19:

¹⁷ ... that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

That’s a prayer you can include in your own prayers. To know the love of Christ in all its beauty and fullness. May we all know and experience in the strength of

the Spirit the breadth, length, height, and depth – the totality – of God’s perfect love revealed in Christ Jesus.

The second thing we learn about Jesus’ love comes from the main sentence, “He loved them to the end.” Now the end here refers not only to the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, which is about to come to a glorious conclusion with His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension back to heaven 40 days after His resurrection. Nor does “the end” refer to the end of believers’ earthly lives. And it doesn’t refer exclusively to the end of time when He will come again in glory. All these are certainly included for there’s never a moment when Jesus withholds His love. These various “ends” (the end of Jesus’ ministry, the end of a believer’s earthly life, and the end of time) are all related to time, to some chronological point. Jesus’ love is never bound by time or circumstances. He loves His own in time and into eternity. What a glorious truth.

I know we Christians struggle with the hardships of life in this world and the constant spiritual warfare that rages day after day. During our darkest days, do we not ask, “How can God love such a wretch like me?” Or maybe we ask, “Does God still love me since I have failed in such and such a way?” The answer to all these spiritual trials and afflictions is “Jesus loves me to the end; His love for me and for all people is never dependent on the circumstances of life in this world.” His love endures. Thus Paul Gerhardt penned that great hymn (LSB 683, st. 1):

Jesus Thy Boundless love to me No thought can reach, no tongue declare;
Unite my thankful heart to Thee, And reign without a rival there!

Even this aspect of God’s perfect love doesn’t completely exhausts the Bible’s declaration that the Lord Jesus, having loved His own who were in the world, loved them to the end. Jesus loves His people unto and into their perfection, their fulfillment, their end. It’s His love that completes and fulfills us. St. Augustine wrote these famous words in his great work, *Confessions*:

Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we men, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you – we also carry our mortality

about with us, carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud. You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

We were created by God to have fellowship with Him. God's love complete, perfects, and brings to us to our ultimate end. Without Him, we are incomplete, restless as Augustine wrote. In the Small Catechism, Luther described this inherent human desire and need to experience God's love. It can only be found in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The result of our Lord's redemptive work is that I and all Christians "may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.." All Christian preaching, teaching, and living is oriented toward this end. "That I may be His own. That I may rest in God. That I may know Christ according to the breadth, length, height, and depth of His love. For only then, will we be complete. Only then, will I have reached my God-intended end. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."

Jesus demonstrated His perfect love for His people through His righteous life and in His suffering, death, and resurrection. The Lord Jesus reveals His love by seeking the perfect good for you and all His beloved people. His will to love to the very end, to consummation of your perfection, is made known to heaven and earth. The apostle John wrote, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." Life and love are united in the person and work of the Lord Jesus. The very things for which we were created – life with God and one another in love is made known and given through Him who is divine love in human flesh and blood. The Lord Jesus Christ.

While on this side of eternity, we experience His love through faith formed and nourished by the holy and precious Gospel. The most intimate expression and experience of His perfecting love is the Lord's Supper. Because of His love, He seeks our eternal good. We have heard this numerous times in this service. But there is another part of His perfecting love which we must consider. Because of His love for His people, He seeks to be united with them. To share life and love

together. Each and every one of you Christians can rightly and boldly say that Jesus is mine and I am His. To see me, is to see the love of God working in me. To see Jesus, is to see His love that embraces every Christian from every time, place, and locality. John's gospel (ch. 15) describes this unity between Christ and His people with the imagery of branches connected to a vine. Jesus is the vine that nourishes and unites the branches. The branches, i.e., Christians, live together in perfection together as they receive life and love from Christ Jesus, the branch. This unifying love we experience every time we receive the Lord's Supper. Maundy Thursday is the celebration of Christ's love that brings us to our intended perfection. He settles our restless hearts.

To be known as the people committed to the joyous celebration of the Lord's Supper, as we heard time and time again during our Lenten services, means that we are known as the people who know the love of Jesus in the most intimate and personal way possible. Christ in us and among us, preparing us for the perfection of life in His eternal kingdom. For Jesus, having loved His own who are in the world, He loves them unto the end.

✠ 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
Good Friday
April 15, 2022
Text: John's Passion (18:1–19:37)

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

“Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors...For I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life” (Psalm 31:11, 13). These are the words King David wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. While David may have been facing vexing and dangerous trials of body and soul, he was writing prophetically of his greatest Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He was surrounded by adversaries determined to destroy His innocent life. Terror on every side! Even His close neighbors, Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, the scribes and Pharisees, the Levites and priests, those who ought to have recognized Jesus as the long-awaited Savior and rejoiced in His coming, turned against him. Terror on every side!

But the Lord was not without comfort of the Father's steadfast love nor should we doubt His love for the Father. King David wrote, “Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was in a besieged city” (Psalm 31:21). Besieged by enemies, abandoned by friends, and surrounded by human shame, Jesus trusted in the steadfast love of His heavenly Father. We must never forget those words spoken by the Father at Jesus' baptism, some three years before our Lord's death, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well please” (Matt. 3:17). The Father's love for the Son and the Son's love for the Father enjoyed and shared in the perfect communion of the Holy Spirit never wavers. Not within the inter-Trinitarian fellowship of the Divine Persons nor with the divine love they bestow upon their beloved people.

As we give devout meditation to Jesus' suffering and death, are we not amazed all the more when we consider how brightly God's love shine against the dark backdrop of such human failure and shame? The passion reading from John's

gospel, chapters 18–19, is filled with human shame. And yet, God’s love remains true and steadfast. “The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever” (Psalm 107:1). Let us ponder with reverential awe the love of God demonstrated to the world when the Father’s Son died surrounded by the terror and shame of man’s sin.

The shame we are considering here is not the guilty feelings or shameful emotions we often experience when we have transgressed a rule or broken a law. Our attention is focused on the various kinds of disgraceful, ugly, petty, and evil actions and attitudes of sinful humanity. We see them aplenty in John 18-19. And they bring shame and disgrace upon our human race. And because of these shameful actions, we also feel shame. For they represent us, personally and collectively. We will consider some of the kinds of shame seen in this passion reading. But as we do so, we must remember the shining light of Christ’s love brilliantly illuminated against the backdrop of such darkness.

Shame of Betrayal

We begin with the shame of betrayal as seen in Judas. He was one of our Lord’s 12 disciples, called to be an apostle. He was entrusted with the money Jesus and His disciples had. But John 12 tells us that Judas stole some of that money because he was a thief. In that same chapter, Judas criticized Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, for anointing Jesus’ feet with an expensive ointment. He said, with hypocritical piety, “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” (Jn. 12:5). Judas wasn’t interested in Mary’s devout worship nor in our Lord’s ministry to save the world. He simply wanted the money. He ultimately betrayed Jesus in order to get more money, 30 pieces of silver. There’s the shame: the love of God and man, the holiest things in the universe treated as disposable and relatively cheap. Life, love, friendship, truth, betrayed for profit. Our betrayals may not lead to someone being arrested, suffering, or dying. Money may not exchange hands as it did with Judas. But do we not betray our friends and families with lies, hurtful words, unloving deeds, and broken promises? And betray our Lord who died to save us from such evil?

And yet, when Judas and his band of Jewish soldiers found Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, our Lord greeted Judas with words of love and

friendship (Matt. 26:50). Friend. Jesus' love draws us back to Himself. The apostle John wrote that whenever we sin, Jesus remains our advocate with the Father. John knew what he was writing. He betrayed Jesus in the Garden too. Christ would not abandon him. Nor will He abandon you. His love endures forever.

Shame of Fear

After our Lord told His disciples that one of them would betray Him, Peter boldly promised that even if everyone else fell away, he would not. (Matt. 26:33). When the time came for Peter to stand firm, he fell away because of fear. Initially, Peter stood firm in the Garden of Gethsemane, ready to fight with the soldiers coming for Jesus. But when our Lord commanded Peter to put away his sword, he abandoned Jesus, fearing for his own life. As did all the disciples. Later, Peter was confronted by three individuals asking about his relationship with Jesus. "I do not know the man....I am not His follower...I was never with that man." The rooster crowed as Jesus had said. Fear captivated this once bold man and made him a coward. And therein we see the shame.

Does not fear silence us when given the opportunity to say, "Yes, I know Jesus. I am His follower. And I am with Him always through faith." And yet, what does Jesus do when He sees His fearful disciples on that first Easter evening? "Fear not. Receive the Holy Spirit." By my love and with the strength of the Spirit, you will no longer be afraid (John 20). And Peter...our Lord restored him back to fellowship, but no longer a coward for he was transformed by the love of Jesus.

It's easy to succumb to fear. It's paralyzing in body, soul, and mind. Fear stops us from saying the right thing, doing the right things, and loving all the godly and beautiful things. Therein lies the disgrace. The good, the right, and the holy stand right before us. And we falter because of fear of others, of failure, of being dislike or rejected.

We Christians face our fears not in own strength but in the abundant courage of the Lord Jesus. His love is bringing us to our perfection and glory. Fear not, says Jesus. I stand with you and in you by the grace of the Spirit. Speak the truth

in love. Fulfill your good works even in the presence of others so that they may see them and glorify our heavenly Father. Confess Jesus as Lord and Savior before friend and foe alike. We face our fears with the cross before our eyes, the empty tomb invigorating our spirit, and the love of Christ the crucified emboldening our hearts.

Shame of injustice

The last shame I want us to consider – and what I have presented is by no means exhaustive – is the shame of injustice, both political and religious. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and tried on a few occasions to release Him. But when the Jews said, “You are no friend of Caesar if you let Jesus go” then Pilate committed the most shameful act of political injustice in human history. He sentenced the innocent Son of God to death by crucifixion. And do we not shake our heads knowing that guilty Barabbas goes free; the innocent Jesus suffers and dies.

The Jewish authorities also knew that Jesus had committed no sin. When Jesus challenged the Jews to “bear witness about the wrong” He had done, they could bring no evidence. He was innocent of all wrongdoing. But they sent Jesus to Pilate anyway and requested he (i.e., Pilate) put Jesus to death. They hypocritically (that’s another shame we won’t consider tonight) refused to go into Pilate’s headquarter lest they be defiled for entering the place of an unclean Gentile. But they had no qualms in sentencing an innocent man to death. A shameful miscarriage of justice.

Through these injustices, Jesus’ love for His people and His Father remained steadfast; He loved them to the end. He never once considered washing His hands of this whole sordid, unjust situation. Instead, He submitted to the Father’s ultimate authority who decreed the world’s salvation would be accomplished through Jesus’ death even as it was being sinfully and illegitimately orchestrated through Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate, and others. By shedding His blood, Jesus redeemed and sanctified all authority exercised in this earth so that we Christians honor and obey it as part of our Christian devotion to the Father, except when to do so would be to sin against God’s Word. Then we must obey God and not man.

Why consider these shameful human actions on a Good Friday evening? When the crucifixion of Jesus captures our attention. Too easily we segregate Jesus' redemptive suffering, death, and resurrection to the spiritual realities of forgiveness, heaven, and the world to come. We so easily forget all authority in heaven and on earth has been committed to the Lord Jesus by the will of God the Father. Jesus being the King of kings and Lord of lords is no mere poetic phrase. It is the absolute truth. Even as we also say that Jesus is the King of love, grace and mercy. The Lord Jesus wants us to know His steadfast love even in the realms of political, civic, ecclesiastical, and domestic authority.

The Lord Jesus' loves His people who are in the world, and He loves them to the end, to their ultimate and final perfection (John 13:1). Though surrounded by enemies and terrors on every side, Jesus' love remained true and steadfast. His love sanctifies your entire life, every area and realm in this world and in the world to come. Our perfection, our end, the reason for which we were created, comes in knowing the love of God in Christ Jesus. His blood redeemed us from the shame of betrayal, fear, injustice, or anything else. Redeemed so we may know Christ according to the breadth, length, height, and depth of His love. For only then, will we be complete. Blessed by the Lord and King who loves us to the end!

✠ 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 (dual parish w/Immanuel, Burns, WY)

Easter Vigil

April 16, 2022

Text: Zephaniah 3:12–20

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

“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!” (Zeph. 3:14). One of the things about love is that it rejoices in the beloved. Love isn't blind to the strengths and weaknesses of the beloved. It's able to transcend those limiting factors to see beyond into the mysterious depths of why the beloved is worthy of love. Parents rejoice in the first, tentative steps of their children. Or in the scribbled drawings handed to them with smiles of accomplishment. The parents rejoice not because the baby steps or the drawing have some special quality in themselves. The beloved child is worthy of their rejoicing. Love sees beyond those things to the child himself. He is the beloved. Rejoicing in the first steps or the pictures is good and proper because love seeks the good of the beloved and chooses to be united with him in his life.

The prophet Zephaniah calls the people of God to rejoice in the God of love and grace. For He is worthy of their love and their rejoicing. To be sure, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is worthy in Himself of our love and our rejoicing. God is supremely loveable for He is love, truth, life, and goodness.

We human beings were created to know and experience God's love. And as we love God we also love one another. Those two must always go together, love for God and love for man. Throughout the millennia men and women have asked the question of what it means to be human. What is it that makes people different from the animals? Various answers have been proposed and most have much merit that commend them for deeper consideration. But the truest answer must always direct us back to our created end: to know God the Holy Trinity through Christ according to the breadth, length, height, and depth of His love. For only then, will we be complete. Only then, will we have reached our God-

intended end. Settle for nothing else than that which completes and brings to perfection all that God intends for us. To love God, to be His own, to know Him in the perfection of His glorious presence.

Malice, sin, and evil separate us from that which we long to receive, the loving embrace of our God. While pleasures of sin may last for a season – and let's be honest with ourselves, there is pleasure in sin – such pleasure always ends in misery, sorrow, and death. Not so with God and His holy gifts. On Maundy Thursday, we heard the apostle John describe the Lord Jesus when he wrote, “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1). Christ's love is perfecting us, bringing us to our God-intended fulfillment.

This night, we gather in prayerful vigil as we anticipate the joyous celebration that when the women went to Christ's tomb early Easter Sunday morning, the Lord Jesus had already risen from the dead. Tonight we rejoice! For we know that at some point on this holy night, Jesus rose from the dead. We rejoice by hearing several accounts from God's Word which reveals His love for us in Christ: His creative love from Genesis 1 and 2, His redemptive love revealed in the Flood and the Passover from Genesis and Exodus, and His courage-giving love seen in the lives and rescue of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego recorded in Daniel. We sing and we rejoice by the Spirit through His Word in hymns, prayers, and praises.

And we see God's end-time love recorded in that lesser known OT prophet, Zephaniah. For what I did not tell you earlier is that Zephaniah called God's people to sing, shout, and rejoice in God even though the ominous threat of judgment loomed on the horizon. The Babylonian kingdom was coming. The nation of Judah would soon be destroyed. But why should God's people rejoice? God would remain faithful to His beloved people, “I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord, those who are left in Israel...For they shall graze and lie down, and none shall make them afraid” (Zeph. 3:12–13). Though surrounded by darkness, Christian believers rest in the name of the Lord without fear. For God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the object of our praise, now and forever.

But one last truth about God's end-time love seen in Zephaniah's prophecy...God Himself rejoices! "The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he (i.e., God) will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing" (Zeph. 3:17). The Lord sees past all the limiting factors of our lives, our sins and our failures. Through the holy life of Christ and by His precious blood and glorious resurrection from the dead, He has made us worthy of His love. And so He rejoices over us. The Father delights in your prayers. Your acts of love shown to Him and to one another. The Spirit rejoices to dwell in your hearts. And Christ Himself gladly prepares for us a place in the palaces of His eternal kingdom. Our restless hearts find their rest and their God-intended fulfilment in God's love revealed in Christ Jesus. Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! May tonight's prayers and praises be filled with great joy and as we rejoice in the perfecting love of God.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ 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

The Festival of the Resurrection

April 17, 2022

Text: Job 19:23–27; Mark 16:1–8

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

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Easter has long been the Church's time of great joy and rejoicing. We decorate our sanctuaries with Easter lilies, those trumpet-shaped flowers that seem to be shouting life is triumphant. This is the season for joy and victory! The six weeks of Lenten abstinence from singing and shouting alleluias to the Lord has finally come to an end. Our hymns and liturgy are now filled with alleluias to God. The Church's music here and around the world is festive and exuberant. Later today, many of you will gather with family and friends to eat and celebrate in your homes over food, drink, games, and many expressions of love. Joy and celebration have returned with renewed vigor and vitality after the weeks of fasting and spiritual struggle. And all this is good, right, and proper. May this day and these weeks of Easter be filled with renewed joy and love because of the resurrection of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ who died and rose again from the dead never to taste the sting of death again. Alleluias and shouts of joy and triumph are certainly in order!

But did you notice in both the Old Testament and Gospel readings the strong note of fear? Fear felt and experienced because of the resurrection of Christ from dead? Job, that great Old Testament patriarch, said, "My heart faints within me!" (Job 19:27). And the women left the empty tomb on that first Easter morning so amazed and astonished that Mark recorded, "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mk. 16:8). The fear these saints felt was a sense of overwhelming, holy awe. A realization of tremendous power and overwhelming love.

The patriarch Job was suffering physically, emotionally, and spiritually because of – please note this, because of his fear, love, and trust in God. Everything important to him had been stripped away, all his children were killed in various accidents, all his flocks, cattle, and servants were stolen or killed by robbers, and he suffered from painful boils that covered his body. He went from being one of the wealthiest men of the east to utter dejection.

Job's plight is one of the greatest mysteries in the Bible and there are no easy answers or resolutions as to why he was called upon to suffer so greatly. Later in the book, we see Job's final end. After the Lord marvelously restored Job's life and wealth, He blessed him with more children. The Lord commended Job for remaining true and faithful although he was surrounded by accusers and false friends. His wife and friends accused Job to his face while Satan was accusing him before God's throne. Job's wife despaired and had told him to curse God and die. His so-called friends mercilessly accused him of harboring some secret sin. Through it all, Job stood utterly alone except for the Lord God of heaven and earth, who stood with him and for him.

In the midst of such suffering, Job confessed his unswerving faith in God. "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..." (vs. 25–26). Through prophetic knowledge given to him by the Spirit, Job saw Jesus, the resurrected Redeemer. It is not entirely clear when the book of Job was written, but the events recorded probably took place some 2,000-2,500 years before the life of Christ Jesus. And Job confessed faith in Christ Jesus. And he likewise confessed his own resurrection from the dead, "And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God" (vs. 26). This is the context of his Job's fear, "My heart faints within me!" (vs. 27).

This is simply incredible. Job's heart isn't fainting because of his suffering. But because of the hope of the resurrection seen first in Christ on Easter and then his own bodily resurrection on the Last Day. A good and proper response to the dead rising from the grave is awe and fear. We not only serve an awesome, holy, powerful, and loving God who created the universe by the power of His

spoken Word. We adore the Lord of life who raises the dead back to full and complete life.

The most powerful weapon the devil has is death. It is the great evil afflicting mankind. The prophet Isaiah (ch. 25) described death as a dark veil covering the entire earth. The universal affliction of sin and evil is death; not even Christ Jesus avoided death's dreaded sting and He certainly bore all of man's sin while suffering on the cross. Though our Lord took the full force of that piercing sting – Jesus died and was buried for three days – He rose triumphantly. Job and Isaiah saw and prophesied about the same event! The resurrection of the Lord Jesus never to die again. The Old Testament recorded a few people who were raised from the dead. The Lord Jesus raised several from the dead: Lazarus, the widow's son at Nain, Jairus' daughter, and so forth. But they died again. Jesus rose from the dead never to taste death again. And by so doing He destroyed death. On Easter morning, death's sting was blunted; the devil humiliated. And God vindicated for His righteousness and love. Job saw this and His heart fainted with awe, wonder, and godly fear. God Himself died in the person of Jesus and rose from the dead. And because of Him, the glorious resurrection of all believers is firmly and decidedly secure.

In Mark's gospel, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to Christ's tomb early Easter morning expecting to find the dead body of Jesus. Instead, they met an angel who preached the first Easter sermon, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him" (Mk. 16:6). These women saw Jesus' agonizing death. The spilled blood, the cries of thirst and anguish, and the final breath after hearing, "It is finished!" These women knew about the apocalyptic events on Good Friday: the darkness, the Temple's curtain torn in two, the earthquake, and it's possible they saw some of the saints of Jerusalem who were raised from the dead (Matt. 27). Think about this seriously. After experiencing all these things, the most impossible thing imaginable would be to go to Jesus' tomb early Sunday morning expecting a resurrection from the dead!

But that is the glorious truth of the Christian gospel. God died for the sins of the world and rose from the dead to save His fallen, suffering creation. God didn't

send someone else, a superhero of modern imagination or a demigod of the ancient stories. No, God Himself came in human flesh and blood. God's Son became one of us so that He might fulfill the righteous requirements of His own Law, God's Law. And He bore every human sin and misery. From the smallest "white lie" to the most heinous human atrocities and every sin in between. He bore our sicknesses and infirmities, from the annoying paper cut to the most debilitating, painful death. The Lord Jesus took these and every form and experience of human sin and suffering. He died for them, made atonement, and rose from the dead so that we, His beloved creatures, might have life and love again. Jesus rose from the dead, destroying death, and bringing joy, hope, peace, love to this world. That's the experience of fear and awe Job and the women had. God Himself died and rose from the dead!

The foundational theme running through all of the Holy Week services since Thursday to the morning has been the perfect and perfecting love of God seen in Christ Jesus. John 13:1 describes our Lord's perfect love, "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Jesus loves us with perfect love, a love which, in turn, perfects us. He brings us to our God-intended fulfillment, to the end for which we were created in the beginning. That we may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. That we may know Christ according to the breadth, length, height, and depth of His love. For only then, will we be complete. Only then, will we have reached our God-intended end.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the brilliant light of revelation in which we see our glorious end. Eternal life, participation in God's life without the shame of sin and the sting of death; in Him who is love incarnate we find perfect love.

Celebrating Christ Jesus on Easter Sunday is the more perfecting, human thing you could possibly do. For Christ, our Lord and God, is risen from the dead. The fears of this world and the taunts of Satan will continue to assault you. Death itself will try to steal away your most holy faith. These things are certainly true. But like Job and the women at the tomb, we see past all these

dreadful distractions and find our perfected life in Christ Jesus. In Him, we are embraced in perfect love. The fear this creates in us is good and godly. By the grace of the Spirit, we sense, sometime more sometime less, the overwhelming, perfecting love of Christ demonstrated in His death and resurrection. On this joyous day, God grant you the vision to see with fearful wonder and awe the perfect love and glorious future which is yours in Christ Jesus.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ 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

Second Sunday of Easter

April 24, 2022

Text: John 20:19–31

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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

The wide-spread tradition of the Lutheran Church is that midweek Advent and Lenten services have a theme that unites all the services together. For example, the theology and practice of the Lord Supper was this year's recently concluded Lenten theme. This kind of thematic preaching is very good and helpful. It allows for more greater reflection and deeper study in a particular doctrine of the Bible. Sometimes, though not always, I follow a similar type of thematic preaching for the Holy Week and Easter Sunday services. I did that this year.

The theme was the perfecting love of Christ Jesus as described in John 13:1, the first verse of the gospel text for Maundy Thursday, "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Particular attention was given to that last phrase, Jesus "loved them to the end." To be sure, God's love is perfect even as He Himself is perfect. Christ Jesus loved His people perfectly throughout His entire earthly ministry. He loves until the end of their earthly lives and will live until the end of time into eternity. All of this is included in the phrase, "he loved them to the end."

But Christ's love is also perfecting, that is, His love brings us to our God-intended end, our fulfillment, our perfection. Or to put it in the negative, without knowing and living in God's perfect love, we human beings will never reach the end for which God created us. The services of Holy Week and Easter morning all touched on that idea in one way or another. For example, we know and experience God's perfecting love through Christ's crucifixion (Good Friday). Our fulfillment could only be achieved by Christ dying for our sins and rising

again on Easter morning. The perfection of Christ's love, joy, and peace brings us to the hope of our own resurrection on the Last Day. You get the idea.

Here we are, a week into the Easter season. The gospel text from John 20 describes a fearful group of disciples. Vs. 19 says the disciples, all of whom had abandoned the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night when Judas betrayed Jesus to the Jewish authorities. It doesn't seem like the divine love of Christ has done its work in their lives as of yet. And that would be true.

On that first Easter evening and the Sunday evening a week later, the disciples gathered together behind locked doors. Both occasions are highlighted by Christ Jesus coming among His disciples – in spite of their fears and locked doors! – to forgive and refresh them in His love and forgiveness. Peace be with you Christ said on both occasions. That peace flowed from the marks of His crucifixion. On the first Easter evening, Jesus showed the 10 disciples His hands and His side and said, "Peace be with you." (vs. 19b–21).

Thomas was not there that first Easter evening. But when the disciples told Him Christ had appeared among them, Thomas responded with definite certainty, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nail, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (vs. 25). Thomas needed to see Jesus and the marks of the crucifixion. In love, the Lord Jesus granted Thomas' request, the following Sunday evening. "Peace be with you" Thomas (vs. 26). "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe" (vs. 27).

For our Lord's original disciples and all Christian believers ever sense have needed to see and experience the marks, the proofs of Christ's death and resurrection. Such proof comes through the preaching of God's Word and the reception of the Sacraments of baptism, Holy Supper, and Absolution. When the Holy Spirit brings sinners to repentance and faith through the Word of God, they always receive Christ's peace and forgiveness. The Christian's response to Christ's death and resurrection is always, "My Lord and my God" (vs. 28).

It's one thing to evaluate the disciples' faith on Easter evening. But we ought to ask ourselves has the perfecting love of Christ completed its work in our life? The answer is obvious. No, all Christians living on this side of eternity continue to face fear, doubts, sins, the afflictions and temptations of the world and the devil, and many other forms of failure. And yet, at the same time, we experience glimpses of this great truth. For through faith in Christ, we experience His perfecting love that continues to be shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Such is what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:5, "...and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been give to us." Did you notice the baptismal language used here? God's love is poured – like the waters of baptism are poured over the person being baptized – into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. You and every Christian has already received the perfecting love of Christ given to you by the Spirit in your baptism. Day by day, through repentance and faith, we return to our baptism and continue to grow in the perfecting love of Christ through the Spirit.

The Lord Jesus loves His people perfectly; this truth I want firmly established in your hearts and minds. His love endures and remains steadfast now in time and throughout eternity. This is the bedrock hope and confidence we have in Christ. Such foundational knowledge is absolutely needed because we Christians will continue to struggle with sin and the fear of death. This is true even though Jesus died to pay for the sins of the world and removed death's dreaded sting.

It's not easy being a Christian. The Bible always describes the life of faith as one of continual struggle and spiritual affliction. The Bible also promises Christians joy, peace, love, and goodness in this world! Thanks be to God. Through it all, the good, the bad, the ups and downs, Christ Jesus loves us perfectly and His loves is bringing us to our final, glorious end. But we are not there yet. That we may continue to receive and grow in His love, He gives us mighty and wondrous gifts distributed by the ministry of Christ's Church.

Christ's perfecting love always gives us what we need most. And our greatest need as the Lord's beloved is not more intelligence, or material prosperity, not even more faith. For Christ said that even if we had faith the size of mustard

seed, we could say to that mountain be gone and it would obey (Matt. 17:20). To be sure, we need to grow in our faith and knowledge of Christ Jesus. But what we need more than anything else is the forgiveness of sins.

That's what Christ gave to His disciples on those first Sundays after His resurrection. "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld" (vs. 23). In perfect love, Jesus died to forgive our sins and rose from the dead to give us the joy of His undying life. All the disciples failed our Lord. Every one of them. And yet, Christ loved them perfectly all the same and gave them their greatest need: the forgiveness of sins. Without the forgiveness of sins, we cannot know and experience Christ's perfecting love.

The world-wide preaching of this great gift has been given by Christ to the Church. This most-important task must continue throughout the world until the end of time. That, in part, is why we support our congregation (St. John's & Immanuel). So that we may receive the most needed things now but also so that our children and grandchildren and many others may also receive Christ's love and forgiveness. That's why we remain part of a larger Church body, the LCMS, so that Christ's love and forgiveness may be preached in places we ourselves cannot go. To the ends of the earth is the teaching of the Bible.

But this most necessary gift of forgiveness has been given to each of you so that you can share it with your family. Some of the most powerful words you can say to you loved ones, your spouse, children and grandchildren, parents and siblings, your friends and neighbors, even your enemies is "I forgive you." Not just "I'm sorry" though that too is good. But the divine blood of the resurrected Christ stands behind those beautiful words, "I forgive you."

To receive Christ's forgiveness is to receive His love. To grow in Christ's perfecting love is to be forgiven and cleansed day after day into eternity. This is what the perfecting love of Christ does for us and to us.

I want to close with a final Bible passage in order to help us retain the importance of Christ's love in our lives. I have not referred to this Bible passage

in any of the sermons in Holy Week or Easter. It's I Peter 4:8, "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." How are the multitude of sins covered? Through Christ's blood-bought forgiveness which we speak to the world in Christ's name and to one another. To be forgiven and to forgive is to be loved and to love.

Receive the love of Christ and be forgiven. May all of you continue to grow into the perfection promised in Christ's perfect love. Christ Jesus loves you to the end!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ 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.