

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Misericordias Domini (Third Sunday of Easter)

May 1, 2022

Text: I Peter 2:21–25

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.

In 1896, Charles Sheldon published a novel entitled, *In His Steps*. The subtitle is “What Would Jesus Do?”. The title was taken from I Peter 2:21, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” Over the past 126 years, Sheldon’s novel has sold more than 50 million copies making it one of the best-selling books of all time. It is certainly true that Christians are called to follow in the steps of Jesus. And writing devotional materials that encourage Christians to follow Christ isn’t new. In the early 1400’s, Thomas a Kempis wrote *The Imitation of Christ*, arguably the most popular devotional book in human history second only to the Bible. Christians have always sought to pattern their life after Christ Jesus.

Let’s go back to Sheldon’s book, *In His Steps*. The main character, a pastor, challenges his parishioners not to do anything for an entire year without first asking themselves the question, “What would Jesus do?” The rest of the book is a chronicle of how people applied that question to various challenging situations. The late 90’s and early 2000’s saw a renewed interest in pursuing a Christ-like life. Some of you may remember the various WWJD merchandise – bracelets, t-shirts, hats, pencils, etc. – being sold and used by large segments of Protestant Christianity. It became big business, for a while at least. I remember trying to live by that question, “What Would Jesus Do” as a high school and college student.

Let me say here at the very beginning that I am not suggesting you go out and read this late 19th century novel. Nor am I saying you should adopt a daily piety

centered around that question, “What Would Jesus Do?” One of the problems – and there are several – with the novel and all the subsequent programs and emphasizes was everything centered upon the individual Christian. It was an onerous and terrible burden of conscience and life to live a sinless life patterned after the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was the pattern of life to be lived. But He ceased to be the Savior of sinners to whom Christians found their hope, love, joy, and peace.

The most obvious weakness of such an approach is that Jesus did not experience every conceivable human situation. What would Jesus do about nuclear proliferation, immigration policy in modern nation states, carbon emissions, space travel, various scientific theories like quantum mechanics and relativity, etc. Or even more mundane situations like city zoning laws, building codes, and economic policy. Simply put, the Lord Jesus didn’t face these very modern situations. And the Bible, the only authoritative account of Jesus’ life we have, does not record everything Jesus actually did even within His own earthly ministry.

That being said, the apostle Peter, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, wrote to the Christian Church of all ages, places, and times that we are called to follow the example of Jesus, specifically His suffering.... “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” The primary example that we are to follow is our Lord’s suffering! It’s been a long while since I read Sidney Sheldon’s book, but I don’t recall thinking that the Christian life should be marked by suffering. Nor did any of the various WWJD programs prepare Christians for following Jesus in the midst of suffering.

The apostle Peter, in the verses before today’s epistle text, set the context for following in the steps of Jesus and His suffering. It may surprise you. Christian piety in day-to-day life includes:

- being subject to human institutions and government, “be subject to the emperor as supreme (vs. 13),

- God’s will is doing good so that such works put to silence the ignorance of foolish people (vs. 15),
- living as a free people – not so much political or economic freedom, for most 1st century Christians didn’t have such freedoms – but the freedom of life that comes from a clean conscience and walking in the grace of the Holy Spirit, “not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God” (vs. 16),
- proper submission to all masters, bosses, and human authorities, “not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly” (vs. 19),
- and finally, doing good and suffering knowing that “this is a gracious thing in the sight of God” (vs. 20).

This is what Christians have been called to follow; a Christological life of submission to proper authority, love for one’s neighbor, and a life zealous for good works in the sight of God, all of this characterized by a willingness to suffer for following Jesus. Those good works are defined not by some vague WWJD slogan but by the purity and righteousness defined by God’s Law summarized in the 10 Commandments.

How God’s Law is applied to the specific lives of individuals will be different. My life is different from your life; the life of the person in the pew behind you and in front of you is also very different from yours. The boundaries are the same; the details within those boundaries are unique. For example, the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” applies to me and to all married men and women. God’s law teaches me that I am to love and honor my lovely bride and lead a sexually pure and decent life with her. But my marriage is not just to any lovely bride but to a very specific woman. The manner in which I show love, honor, and purity to her will necessarily be specific to her. God’s law speaks to me and all marriage people equally; we share a common boundary. But the details are very unique. The uniqueness of each Christian’s life is why charity and patience are necessary virtues we need to cultivate as we live out our lives of faith together in this world. Each of us are facing different spiritual and earthly trials. We need each other’s support, correction, and love.

What is common to us all is that we Christians follow Jesus together, one flock under the headship and care of one Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ. What was missing in all such WWJD – In His Steps – type programs was the rest of I Peter 2:23, “When Jesus was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” Jesus suffered unjustly. But He did not demand equal rights under man’s political law. Nor did He strike out with reviling words of accusation. You know, “I am right and you guys are wrong. How dare you accuse me, an innocent Man of wrongdoing.”

Instead, what did Jesus do? “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (vs. 24). And that is where all true Christian living must be focused! Jesus bore our sins on the cross so that (note the purpose clause!) we might die to sin and live to righteousness. The apostle Paul wrote something similar in Romans 6:11, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Because Christ Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead, we sinful men and women have the promised and steadfast hope of eternal and blessed life with God.

Day by day, we follow our Good Shepherd by dying to sin through repentance and self-mortifications while living in Christ and through Christ unto righteousness. By and large, the categories of self-mortification and self-denial have been largely lost in modern, American Christianity. Our material abundance and comfort care are simply overwhelming. That we should suffer discomfort or pain is viewed with skepticism. There’s medicine for everything; and medicine is a great gift of God. But remember what the apostle Peter wrote so long ago, “For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly” (I Peter 2:19). And later in the letter (4:13–14), the apostle Peter is even more explicit:

¹³But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

Living with sin is far worse than any form physical or mental suffering. There is a mindset that we Christians need to recover. Living in sin – physical, mental, emotional – is worse than suffering; living in sin is worse than dying. The martyrs of the church have given witness with their very lives to this basic biblical conviction. Better to die in Christ with a clean conscience than to live in the sin of unbelief and denial of Christ. Peter encouraged those early Christians. Christ Jesus Himself bore our sins on the tree of the cross so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. Alive to God in Christ Jesus. That's our desire and our goal. Real, eternal life in Christ. Which is ours now by faith. And will be ours in the world to come through the resurrection on the Last Day.

I realize today's sermon isn't your typical Good Shepherd Sunday sermon. We Christians continue to follow Jesus. And that includes suffering for Jesus as we die to sin day by day and live righteous lives in the political, economic, and domestic spheres of this world. Yes. We walk in Christ's steps. We don't look for ways to suffer. Heaven forbid. But when it comes, we entrust ourselves to our heavenly Father. You see, that is what Jesus did. Vs. 23, When reviled, Jesus did not threaten. Rather, He continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. Jesus trusted His heavenly Father. That's what we do as well. Our Father has placed us under the care of His resurrected Son whom Peter describes as "the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (vs. 25). No one can take you out of His strong and mighty hands. Follow Christ and live in His righteousness.

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

Jubilate (Fourth Sunday of Easter)

May 8, 2022

Text: John 16:16–22

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.

Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22. Every baptized child of God is a recipient of these blessed gifts. In the grace of the Holy Spirit, we can join the chorus of joyful shouts along with all saints from all ages, places, and times. Did we not already do so in Psalm 66:1–2, included in today's Introit? "Shout for joy to God all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise!" That's what Jubilate Sunday is all about! Rejoicing in Christ and praising our resurrected Lord of glory. He is risen from the dead. Humanity's sins, including your own, are atoned for, removed from us all as far as the east is from the west as David declares in Psalm 103:12. Death is a defeated foe whose dread stings has been removed. Now it must serve us! For death becomes the means by which Christians are brought into the immediate presence of God's throne. As the psalmist wrote, "Precious in the sight of Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps. 116:15). Notice the possession pronoun there: His saints, the Lord's saints. That means you! Because you bear His name. The spiritual gift of joy is certainly consistent with the great work of salvation God has accomplished for His people in the person of Christ Jesus.

The question that might come to mind, and rightly so, is why don't we always live in such joy? Let's be frank...though the gift of joy is promised to us and its nature is characterized as being "unspeakable and filled with glory" according to the apostle Peter (I Pet. 1:8), day to day life may be something quite different. Some days may simply be awful. Sins of heart, mind, and action. Sins against us. Disappointments and fears from within and without. All of it seems to drain joy from our lives. It's quite tempting to think our Christian life is a fraud, inauthentic, a sham.

And the devil rejoices – note the change in subject! – in this kind of doubt and shame. He will use it for all its worth. To rob us of our inheritance in Christ. To bring dishonor to Christ, His Word, and His kingdom. But know this, that the Lord God uses even these low times, the troughs of spirituality, to bring you to Himself so that your life and dependence rely all the more upon Him. For He is the source of strength and surety. Not ourselves. In this too we rejoice because God graciously and powerfully forces trials, temptations, and failures into serving for our good! Yes, just as death is now forced to serve for the good of God’s people so affliction and trial must serve for your good. The psalmist boldly wrote, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word” and “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes” (Psalm 119:67, 71).

In today’s gospel text, from John 16, we see how the Lord uses times of sorrow and adversity for the purpose of increasing our joy. The Lord described the disciples as weeping, lamenting, and being filled with sorrow. But then our Lord adds, His disciples will be gifted with a joy so profound and deep that no one can take it away. In other words, there are times of joy and sorrow, mourning and laughter, defeat and victory. But those periods of sorrow must serve for our good. That is a Biblical promise that I want you to grasp onto with might and main. We hear from Psalm 30:5, “For (God’s) anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

The Lord Jesus provides the pattern by which we are to understand how this works in our Christian lives. He told His disciples there is coming a time in which they will not see Him. The world will rejoice, but the disciples will weep and lament. The first and immediate situation Jesus is referring to are the three days after our Lord’s crucifixion. Good Friday evening, all day Saturday, and early Sunday morning were the hours of lamenting and sorrow for the disciples. Their hopes were crushed as Jesus bled and died on a Roman cross. The world, as represented by the Jewish leaders and the cruel Roman soldiers, rejoiced that Jesus of Nazareth was finally and completely dead, never to bother them again. But Jesus had told them in advance. “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy” (vs. 20). The joy came when the disciples saw the resurrected

Jesus. Joy returned to this broken world on the morning of Christ's resurrection. That resurrected joy is what no one can take away from us. But take note, saints of God, the sorrow was there. It was real and powerful.

Those times of sorrow are not to last. We Christians died to the law of judgment and condemnation through Christ's physical death on Good Friday. Forgiveness of sins has been given to us by the Spirit so that we now serve God in the Spirit with a renewed and clean conscience. The promise of joy remains true and unchanging. Our life is now hidden with God in Christ (Col. 3:3). Day by day, we are continually being renewed and cleansed from the stains of sin by the blood of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is continually bringing forth the fruits of His grace in our lives.

The Lord Jesus, in today's text, provides an illustration to help us understand better our Christian lives. "When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come..." (vs. 21a). Pregnancy is a wondrous, mysterious time. Each woman experiences it differently. For some, the early months are very trying while the second and early third trimesters settle down. But then, the 8th & 9th months of pregnancy seem to drag on. But the sorrow doesn't arrive until labor and delivery. The pain and anguish are intense; sometimes, the mother approaches death itself. For most of human history, until the last 100 years or so, there was no relief for women from the pain of giving birth. They simply had to get through it. As an aside, this is why the historic litanies of the church included the petition "to preserve all women in the perils of childbirth" (TLH 111). By the way, remembering and giving thanks to all of physical and spiritual mothers is good and proper. They endure much for the sake of their beloved children, not only the perils of childbearing but also the nurture and love they gave in Christ's name.

When the newborn child finally arrives, the sorrow of labor gives way to joy! "...but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world" (vs. 21b). The seasons of joy are all the more intense and precious because of the sorrow and pain experienced. A new and deeper joy are given. Life in the Spirit is sweeter and more beautiful.

Through trials and afflictions, we are made to share in Christ's holiness. We do not become more holy. That is given to us completely in Christ through our baptism into His death and resurrection. But God's discipline exercises our participation in His holiness resulting in "peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:11).

We ought not be surprised by times of afflictions and discipline. This is the way of the Christian life. Peter describes this in rather practical terms in today's epistle text. Peter doesn't try to hide the facts that Christians can be vilified as evildoers, we may suffer unjustly from government and society, and that our employers may be good or bad. Regardless of all those contingencies that very, very often we cannot control, we Christians live in the true freedom given to us by God in Christ through the Spirit. He (i.e., God) is our joy and our strength. He alone turns our sorrows into joy as Peter writes confidently, "For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God" (I Peter 2:19–20).

The Lord is working in our lives so that our joy and peace can be known all the more deeply. Remember Christ's promise: "I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (vs. 22). We see Jesus now by faith. But one day, we will see Him in His glory and splendor. Until then, "Shout for joy to God, all the earth. Sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise." No one can take this joy from us!

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

Cantate (Fifth Sunday of Easter)

May 15, 2022

Text: John 16:5–15

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.

There's a common but bad idea Christianity has continually had to fight against. It's this. That God the Father is perceived as being the mean, judgmental God while Jesus, His Son, is the kind, loving Savior of mankind. The most extreme example of this kind of thinking was advocated in the mid-2nd century AD by Marcion of Sinope, a city in northern Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) located on the southern banks of the Black Sea. Basically, Marcion said the God of the Old Testament was bad. But the God of the New Testament, who sent Jesus, was good. Everything associated with the Old Testament God including the 39 books of the OT must be rejected. The only New Testament books Marcion considered authentically Christian were a shortened version of Luke's gospel and 10 modified versions of Paul's epistles.

Marcion actually believed in two different gods, one described in the Old Testament – a demiurge of sorts – the other, the true God, in the New Testament. Strictly speaking, people today who are uncomfortable with much of the Old Testament are not Marcionites. They don't think the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to an evil god, and God the Father the good god. But they don't know what to do with God commanding the Israelites to wipe out the inhabitants of Canaan, including women and children. Or even the judgment against the sin-infested Sodom and Gomorrah. Or the world-wide destruction of the human race in Noah's flood. Compared to these kinds of Old Testament events, the judgments of God recorded in the New Testament seem much milder.

The New Testament, in this way of thinking, describes God as less severe. Just think about Jesus, the Savior of all mankind. The apostle Paul beautifully and powerfully wrote that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself (Romans 5:19). Or even Jesus in John 3:17, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them; He commands that children to be brought to Him so that He can bless them; He’s the Good Shepherd calling His precious sheep by name leading them to the still waters of baptismal salvation. Jesus causes the self-righteous to drop their stones of execution when they caught a woman in the very act of adultery (John 8). To be sure, Jesus got angry. He drove out the moneychangers working in Jerusalem’s Temple. And our Lord had no difficulty in describing the scribes and Pharisees as white-washed tombs filled with death and corruption. But overall, the New Testament just doesn’t have the judgmental edge of the Old Testament.

And when people consider the Holy Spirit, they think of Him as being even more gentle than Jesus. The Spirit is the Lord and giver of life (Nicene Creed); He lives in our hearts and minds by grace. Jesus calls the Spirit the Comforter in today’s gospel reading from John 16. The English translation in vs. 7 says Helper. That’s a legitimate translation. But Comforter, which is much better in my judgment, gives a better sense of the Spirit who stands with us and for us in the midst of the trials, temptations, and adversities of life in this world. And who can forget the fruit of the Spirit given to all Christians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). These kinds of Bible passages may give the impression that the Spirit is indeed non-threatening, never judgmental in the least.

Let me say here that all these caricatures of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are absolutely incomplete and misleading. The judgments of God in the Old and New Testaments are the judgments of all three persons of the Trinity. Likewise, the desire to save every man, woman, and child is the desire of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Any kind of arbitrary and artificial separation of God’s works to mankind is false. To be sure, God the Father almighty sent His only begotten Son into the world to take upon human flesh and blood. The Son’s incarnation happened through the Holy Spirit’s power. Only the Son

became incarnate. That is absolutely true. But the work of God to save man is unified. The Father send the Son by the power of the Spirit. Nothing happens for your salvation without all three divine persons. Thus, from beginning to end, we Christians are Trinitarian. We worship the God revealed in the Bible, all sixty-six books, Old and New Testaments. One God in three persons. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We do not worship some generic deity – God, the divine, the ultimate transcendent, or something like that. The only true God is the One revealed in Holy Scripture. Any other god or conception of god is simply false, a violation of the First Commandment.

But I want to go back to my original warning about this erroneous idea that the Holy Spirit is somehow harmless and non-judgmental. I want you to grab your bulletin and look at John 16:7, “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper (i.e., Comforter) will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (vs. 7). Note here that Jesus says the coming of the Spirit is for our advantage, for our good. Jesus ascending to the Father’s right hand to rule and reign over the universe means that our Savior is directing all things for our good. Wow! That’s a comforting truth. Jesus rules according to the will of our heavenly Father by the power of the Spirit! Again, the works of God for us are always Trinitarian. And they are for our good even when we don’t fully understand what God is doing in the world on our behalf. This truth gives us all the more courage and boldness to pray “Thy will be done.”

Now let’s look at vs. 8, “And when he comes (i.e., the Spirit, the Comforter), he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” The Spirit convicts the world. That means He brings sufficient evidence to demonstrate the world is guilty concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. When the world stands before the exalted Christ as He sits on the judgment seat of His heavenly Father, the Spirit will bring evidence condemning the world for its sinful unbelief and rejection of Jesus; the Spirit will convict the world because of its lack of righteousness, a gift given freely to all Christian believers by Christ who sits of the Father’s right hand; and the Spirit convicts the world with the same judgment given to Satan, the ruler of this world, because all

unbelievers participate in Satan's rebellion. The criteria I just described comes from vs. 9–11. The Spirit judges the world. And Jesus says this is for our advantage.

What advantage might this convicting work of Spirit be for us? The truth. And not just some general idea of truth like $2+2=4$. This is certainly true. But the Spirit's work in the world is reveal Him who is truth; that means He reveals to the world Jesus, the Son of the Father who is the world's Savior. Look at vs. 13–15:

¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he (i.e., the Spirit) hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He (i.e., the Spirit) will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said he (i.e., the Spirit) will take what is mine (which also is the Father's) and declare it to you."

The Spirit brings us to Christ Jesus and gives us everything belonging to our Lord who received them from the Father. Everything that is true, good, beautiful points to Jesus. He is the foundation behind everything that is true. As Biblical Christians, we are always searching after and looking for the Truth, for Christ, the Son of the Father. Nothing less will do. That is why today, Cantate Sunday, the Singing Sunday of the Church Year, we are able to sing with such boldness and joy. For we know Him who is Truth, Life, and Salvation. Christ Jesus the Son of the Father revealed to us by the Spirit of truth. The Spirit convicts the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. And we rejoice. For by so doing, He stamps out Satan's lies. The Spirit reveals the truth and calls all men, women, and children to saving faith in Christ Jesus. Thus we sing, this week and every week, yay! every day. Jesus is our Savior, the Son of the Father, revealed to us by the Spirit through the witness of the Bible, God's Word.

Dear saints of God, be bold in your witness to the truth. Stand firm in the saving grace of Christ. The Spirit has revealed that your sins are forgiven because of Jesus, that you stand before the Father righteous because Christ Jesus intercedes on your behalf to the Father, and that your judgment unto salvation stands firm

in the work of Christ Jesus. The unbelieving world will be judged and condemned for its refusal to listen to the Truth. But God's salvation has come to the world in Christ. We live in the Spirit who brings us to Jesus to receive the inheritance promised to us by the Father. Rejoice and sing. God's love and truth have been made known to us and to the world.

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

Rogate (Sixth Sunday of Easter)

May 22, 2022

Text: John 16:23–33

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.

In the Nicene Creed, we confess together that there is “one holy Christian and apostolic Church.” The Apostles’ Creed simply says we believe in “the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.” The Ecumenical Creeds don’t really give a textbook-like definition of the what the Church is, rather, the Creeds assert the Church’s existence. The Church exists! And its holy, apostolic, and one. The closest we come to a definition is the phrase “the communion of saints.” This phrase teaches us that the Christian Church is a fellowship of holy people, united together under apostolic doctrine and practice. The Augsburg Confession, the Lutheran Church’s chief confession of faith and doctrine written in 1530, simply says the “Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered” (AC VII:1).

We Lutherans believe the Church of Jesus Christ is the assembly of believers who gather around the preaching of God’s Word and Christ’s Sacraments. Ephesians 5:23 teaches that the Church is Christ’s body, Christ Himself is the head of the body, and He is her Savior. The Church must always be defined and understood Christologically. The assembly of believers is the body of Christ. There can be no Church without Jesus. He is the Church’s head. We are connected to Jesus as a body is connected to the head. Our life and vitality flow from Him.

We assemble together as the body of Christ not only because the Bible commands us to do so(!) but also because by so doing we receive Christ’s life, strength, joy and peace. Christ’s Word and Sacraments are His appointed means

by which He gives us His Spirit and lavishes us with His love. Saints of God, attending Church is essential to our Christian life and faith. As essential as the body must remain connected to the head in order to live and flourish. You are the body of Christ Jesus, precious and beloved in His sight, the very apple of His eye. According to Holy Scripture, all of heaven and earth is awaiting the glorious revelation of Christ's Church, the body of Christ, who will rule and reign with Him for all eternity.

This is the glorious truth we are confessing to one another and before the world whenever we gather around God's Word and Sacraments. We are the body of Christ Jesus. He is our head. And He rules and reigns over the universe for the sake of His beloved Church. All other human relationships are subservient to our fellowship and union to Christ. For example, I am Vickie's husband. My love for her is genuine and true. And I would add she is the recipient of the fullest expression of love I can humanly give. But it is a dim reflection of Christ's perfect love which He gives fully and completely to every Christian. Our love for each other as husband and wife is a true but imperfect image of Christ and His bride, the Church. Here is a second example of how human relationships are placed below the fellowship we have with Jesus. I am an American citizen. As such, I am proud our country's history and culture, her achievements. And I share in her failure and defeats. I gladly submit to our country's laws, customs, and traditions. But Christ Jesus is my true ruler and king. He is the Sovereign Lord to whom I must give full and complete allegiance, above and beyond, the civic love and duty I give to the United States and my local communities. I fulfill my civic responsibilities and duties with a sincere conscience as an act of love and devotion to my sovereign Lord and Master, Christ Jesus my Savior. More examples could be given. When we gather in Christ's name around His Word and Sacraments, we are proclaiming His ultimate and decisive lordship over every area of our lives. We are the congregation of Christian saints made worthy and complete because of Christ Jesus and His perfect, redeeming love.

This reflection on the nature of the Christian Church is a necessary introduction to give explanation to why we sing and pray. Last Sunday was Cantate, the Sunday in which we acknowledge we are a singing Church. We sing because we

are the body of Christ, the assembly of believers gathered in His precious name. Our hymns of praises rise to the highest heavens in joyous celebration that our risen Lord loves us and unites us with Himself in His glorious kingdom. Through the Holy Spirit, we receive all of Christ's love, His gifts, His affection, and His attention. Because of Christ, we call God "Our Father." The love of Christ for His Church and her love demonstrated in return is the highest and best subject of music, poetry, and song. I mean what I just said at face value. I am not engaging in homiletical exaggeration for the sake of making a point. The music and song of heaven recorded in the book of Revelation is about Christ Jesus and His love for His bride, the Church, His body. Other songs – secular songs, if you will – are good and proper. But if they are to be true and genuine, they must resonate with the new song of salvation described in the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible. All true art flows from the highest art of Christ and His Church. Defending such a broad statement is beyond the purpose of a single Sunday sermon. But suffice it to say that if God and His work of creation and redemption are the grounding of all reality, of all that is real, then all noble endeavors – arts, sciences, every vocation, all areas of learning and human experience – find their fulfilment and purpose in Christ. This is as true and certain, yea even more certain, than saying $2+2=4$! The Church sings because of Jesus!

But today is Rogate Sunday, the Sunday in which we acknowledge and rejoice that we are a praying Church. Rogate simply means, Pray Ye! Come and pray. As the beloved body of Christ, we are invited and commanded to pray to our heavenly Father through the grace and ministry of the Spirit in Christ's name. Such is the honor given to all believers. Jesus said, in John 16:25–26, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full."

The Christian's life of prayer is a mysterious combination of duty, work, obligation with love, fellowship, and joy. Yes, prayer is a discipline that must be cultivated and developed. Set aside specific times for private and family prayers. Protect those times. Ignore phones, turn off televisions, radios, and other distractions. If family or friends happen to be present when you and your

family have your daily prayers, then invite them to join you. The public gathering of the Church is regular and consistent. Every Sunday 8am/10am. Our prayers and praises will begin. And we have an ordered service listening to God's Word, responding with hymns of praise and prayers, intercessions, and petitions. We use prepared prayers – they are some of the greatest treasures of the Church, reflecting her wisdom, experience, and devotion to Christ, and we use spontaneous prayers, those spoken in the moment as needs arise. Either way, there is the steady, discipline of prayer.

And yet our times of prayer are also to be joyous periods of fellowship with God the Father in Christ through the Spirit. “Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (vs. 24). Prayer and joy go together precisely because we are believers in Christ. We are His body assembled together in His holy name to rejoice in the great works of love He has accomplished on our behalf! The Church prays because of Jesus.

I stated earlier that God and His work of creation and redemption are the grounding of all that is real. Prayer is part of our joyous recognition of this truth. God the Trinity made this world for us! It is where we live, work, and play. Our sin and rebellion have marred the world. But it remains beautiful and good. God Himself resolved to redeem His broken world. Christ Jesus became man to be our Savior. The Lord over creation became part of His creation in order to redeem that creation. That, in part, is why we pray for the peoples of the world. So that every man, woman, and child would know Christ Jesus and have fellowship with Him. We pray with joy and gratitude because of all that the Father has done in and for us in Christ through the Spirit.

The Church is the body of Christ, the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered. As we hear the Gospel and receive Christ's Sacraments, we sing and we pray. This is what we do at Church, at home, and whenever the occasion allows. For Jesus is our Lord. We sing and we pray so that our joy may be full as Christ promised.

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

Immanuel Lutheran Church – Burns, WY (members of St. John's present)

The Ascension of Our Lord

May 26, 2022

Text: Mark 16:14–20

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

Mark's gospel provides details about the events leading up to our Lord's ascension that are not included in the other gospels. You might have noticed that the Lord Jesus rebuked the disciples for "their unbelief and hardness of heart" (vs. 14). Luke's gospel tells that the Lord Jesus rebuked the disciples for being slow to believe both the Old Testament Scriptures and Jesus' own teaching about His death and resurrection. But that correction came very soon, the first days and weeks after our Lord's resurrection. But Mark's gospel seems to place this correction very near the end of our Lord's time just before His ascension to the Father's right hand. Jesus had been with them for 40 days before His ascension. And here the disciples are still struggling to believe the witnesses of Christ's resurrection. The apostles themselves had seen Jesus. But our stubborn, sinful human hearts are tough nuts to crack.

Time and time again we need to come before the Lord with humble repentance. There's never a time we can read the Scriptures or come to church to hear the Scripture public read and preached without recognizing that our sinful nature does not want to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come.

In one sense, I want us to hear and understand our Lord's rebuke of the disciples as being very much applicable to our own lives. Our hearts are hard because of sin. Unbelief is a constant and perennial malady from which we must turn. The apostles saw the risen Lord and had heard the various witnesses of His resurrection, both the witness of the Old Testament and the testimony of the various eyewitnesses. And yet they still struggled with unbelief and hardness of heart. We dare not think our hearts any different. Instead, we need to seek the spiritual attitude and discipline described by the prophet Isaiah in 66:2b, "But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and

trembles at my word.” He looks upon with favor His children who hear His word with humility and with deep reverence. God Himself is speaking to us through His holy word. That is a great and awesome privilege.

But I also want us to hear about the apostles’ struggle so that we are encouraged, strengthened, and renewed. The Lord Jesus will rebuke our unbelief and hardness of heart. This is fantastically marvelous news! That’s right. You didn’t misunderstand me. Our Lord’s correction is good news because it means He loves us and will not abandon us to the whims of our sinful nature and the tumults of this world.

After He corrected their unbelief with the truth of His resurrection and softened their hearts with His forgiveness, He commissioned them for their apostolic ministry. You see, Jesus didn’t wash His hands of the disciples and say, “I’m done with you. Your hardheartedness and unbelief have broken the camel’s back and I’m moving on without you.” Instead, Jesus said, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (vs. 15). These very sinful men are loved and redeemed by Christ the crucified. He honors the disciples with the work of preaching love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope for life in this world and the world to come.

What is very unique to Mark’s gospel are the signs that accompany the apostles’ ministry: casting out demons, speaking in tongues, safety from the bites of poisonous snakes, and protection from drinking poisonous liquids. Many of these signs are described in the Book of Acts as the apostles preached the gospel during their various missionary trips as well as in the life of the Church. But those signs were specifically promised to the apostles.

What is given to us as the New Testament church is the promise of vs. 16, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” That message has changed the world. Not speaking in tongues or casting our demons. But the gospel! The holy, precious gospel of Christ Jesus loving and dying to save sinners and rising again from the dead to bring light and immortality to the world. That message of baptism and salvation continues to bring hope, comfort, and peace to a very broken, tumultuous world.

The Lord Jesus will never cast you aside, dear saints of God. His work of discipline is for your good. And though He does not call us to be apostles, Jesus does place us into various vocations in which we love and serve Him and the world. Vocations like being sons and daughters to our parents whom we honor, cherish, serve, and obey. He calls most of us to be husbands and wives so that we might sacrificially love each other with marital fidelity, sacrifice, and mutual joy. In turn, children receive Christ's love through their parents. He places us into various jobs whereby we not only provide for the needs of our family and friends but through the work we do, the Lord uses us to serve our communities and the world. Jesus calls us to a life of prayer for the world. This ministry and its importance cannot be overemphasized. We Christians intercede for the good of the world. To thwart the plans of evil men and demonic spirits. To strengthen that which is good and wholesome for everyone. Through our intercessions, the Lord maintains order and peace. The tragedies of the past couple of weeks only highlight the on-going need for the Church to pray fervently and unceasingly. As the Church, the collective body of Christ, we send out men to serve as pastors, missionaries, and evangelists. These men fill the apostolic office of preaching and administering the sacraments. While you, as the members of Christ's Church, continue to give witness to family, neighbors, coworkers, friend and foe alike, that Jesus is their Lord and Savior.

So yes, the Lord rebukes the disciples' hardness of heart and their unbelief. We should hear that as a call to repentance as well as a reminder of Christ's enduring and steadfast love. Our Lord will never abandon us. On top of that, He uses us in so many different and various ways to share His life and love with the world! You are privileged and blessed people indeed. And heirs of the hope of Christ's eternal kingdom.

Finally, Mark describes our Lord's ascension with a single verse, "So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God" (vs. 19). This single verse tells us at least two things, both ought to swell our hearts and souls with joy and courage. The first is that Jesus ascended to the Father's right as the sovereign king who rules over all heaven and earth. His ascension to the Father's right hand is His coronation. Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. His good and gracious will as well

as His work of judgments shall be accomplished without fail. He rules over the universe for the good of His Church. That means all that Jesus does He does for your salvation and the wellbeing of His Church. No matter how crazy things seem to be in this world, the Lord Jesus is ultimately and decisively ruling over the all the affairs and events in the universe. King Jesus works all things for our good without fail. This we know and believe because of the promises of God's Word and our Lord's ascension to the Father's right hand in glory.

The second thing this verse teaches us is that what happens to Christ in His ascension will also happen to us. Just as Christ bodily rose from the dead on Easter morning, so shall we rise bodily from the dead on the Last Day. His resurrection becomes the pattern of our resurrection. Likewise, as Jesus ascended into heaven, so we too will ascend into heaven in the glory and majesty of the resurrection of the just. All believers in Christ will ascend to heaven to rule and reign with Christ over the new creation. When He appears on the Last Day, we shall appear with Him in glory (Col. 3:3–4). This great promise is highlighted in the last stanza of tonight's concluding hymn. I want you to be looking for it when we sing it later tonight:

He has raised our human nature
On the clouds to God's right hand;
There to sit in heav'nly places,
There with Him in glory stand.
Jesus reigns, adored by angels;
Man with God is on the throne.
By our mighty Lord's ascension
We by faith behold our own. (LSB 494:5)

Take heart dear saints of God. The risen and ascended Lord loves you and remains with you now and for all eternity. God in Christ reigns over the nations. He is working His gracious will for your good and the good of His beloved people.

✠ 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

Exaudi (Seventh Sunday of Easter)

May 29, 2022

Text: John 15:26–16:4

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

On the Seventh Sunday of Easter, we remember that there was a time when our Lord's disciples had to wait in prayer. There were ten days between our Lord's Ascension to heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. This past Thursday night, we celebrated our Lord's Ascension. Next Sunday, June 5th, is the Day of Pentecost. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He commanded the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father, that is, to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:14 records what the disciples were doing in Jerusalem, "All these (i.e., the 11 apostles) with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." For ten days the Holy Christian Church stopped and waited in prayer; the foundational members of Christ's Church – the 11 apostles, Mary the Mother of our Lord, and other faithful women, our Lord's brothers, all of them put life on hold and devoted themselves to prayer as they awaited the promised Holy Spirit. Today, is the commemoration of this period of prayerful waiting and eager expectation for the fulfillment of Christ's promises.

If there is one common malady that all modern people suffer almost universally, it would have to be impatience and an overall busy-ness. Life is hectic, frantically filled with numerous coordinated and overlapping activities. In the past, life was hard, usually referring to arduous physical labor from sunup to sundown. People today still live and work hard, don't misunderstand me here. But a frantic level of activity sometimes coupled with physical work is the norm today. So you hear sayings like "moving at the speed of business" from UPS to Elon Musk. The pace and speed of life have made us very impatient. Things should have been done yesterday! Smartphones, computers, the internet, the postal system, restaurants, doctors' visits, speed limits on the interstate(!) you

name it, are never fast enough. People are constantly checking their watches and phones to see what time it is. Or to get the latest update from various media sources. We've got to live in the immediate, in the here and now. It's frantic. And exhausting.

But the Bible calls us to be different. Our lives, both spiritual and physical, are to be characterized by patient waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises. We pray day after day for God's good and gracious will to be done in our lives. And then we wait trusting and believing with might and main that God will answer our prayers in the 1) right manner and 2) at the right, opportune time. Those two components form the bedrock of our confidence and faith. God will answer in the best way (yes, no, or in a manner we didn't consider) and at the perfect time. All that God does, He does for our good. But the Lord of heaven and earth calls us to wait in faith, hope, and love. Christ's Church is a waiting Church.

I would like us to consider this part of our spiritual lives a bit deeper. God's people wait for Him to fulfill His promises in faith, hope, and love. Such reflections are timely and necessary especially in light of the fact that the world around us lives in such a fast, impatient manner. Has it ever struck you as curious that God promised Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head only to realize that the fulfillment of that promise took more than 4,000 years! God's people longed for the Savior crying out, "How long, O Lord?" And yet, the apostle Paul, in Galatians 4:4-5, wrote, "But when the fulness of time had come, God sent for his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." The coming of Jesus was at the perfect time, the most opportune moment for the salvation of the world. But God's people had to wait in patience in prayer and longsuffering.

Or we might even narrow our focus to the ministry of Jesus. The Lord Jesus lived about thirty years before beginning His earthly ministry. Why so long? For that matter, why did God choose to become man via conception in Mary's womb? To be born after 9 months? Live through infancy, adolescence, into adulthood? And was 3.5 years of public ministry necessary to accomplish the salvation of the world? Couldn't God's Son have cut to the chase and become

man instantly, preached a few weeks, died on the cross after a few minutes, and rise from the dead the next morning? Wouldn't something like I just described been "moving at the speed of business"? The answer to such speculative questions is that God did all things necessary according to His good and gracious will for the salvation of the world. The length of time and the completed events were necessary for your salvation and the redemption of the world. In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son...

Such reflections on the patient, waiting characteristics of God's people are nothing new. I provided for you a half-sheet with Scripture passages from the psalms. Please take those out so that we can look at this more closely. We begin with:

Psalm 37:3–7

³Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. ⁴Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. ⁵Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act. ⁶He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. ⁷*Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!*

Psalm 62:1–2

¹*For God alone my soul waits in silence;* from him comes my salvation. ²He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.

Psalm 46:8–11

⁸Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. ⁹He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. ¹⁰*“Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”* ¹¹The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

As we went through those beautiful psalms, did you notice the combination of trusting in God's work of salvation in the present with a willingness to wait for the revelation of His saving work? In other words, God's people have always

trusted in the Lord, lived active and holy lives in the world while at the same time waiting for His salvation. This is what the Lord Jesus taught us in today's reading from John's gospel. Christ Himself will send to us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts and lives with His on-going presence. By the grace of the Spirit, we will bear witness to Jesus! In all that we do at home, work, and leisure. The Christian life is not one of indolence, laziness, or sloth. Far from it. We eagerly seek to do good. To perform deeds of love for our family, friends, neighbors, and enemies so that everyone may experience the saving, redemptive love of Christ.

Please hear this well. A life of good works is to be the standard for all Christians as described and commanded in God's Word through the 10 Commandments and other passages from the Bible. But we go about our active lives of faith, hope, and love while we wait in patience for the Lord to bring about the fulfilment of His promises recorded in Scripture and to answer our daily prayers. The tragedies of the past couple of weeks only highlight the necessity for the Church to continue to intercede for the world. To pray against all forms of evil, to pray for all that which is good and wholesome. To live godly lives of love. In faith and hope, we live and believe that God will 1) answer our prayers 2) in the best way. This is the source of our peace and our strength. As the psalmist said, "For God alone my soul waits in silence...I shall not be greatly shaken" (Ps. 62:1-2).

The past several Sundays I have been highlighting foundational characteristics about the nature of the Church and our Christian faith. Beginning with Holy Week and Easter, we saw that our faith, hope and love are established upon the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus through whom we have the forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation. Jesus fills us with His Spirit because Christ is the Good Shepherd guiding us to the green pastures of His eternal kingdom. We then saw that the Church seeks the truth and rejoices in the truth because we are filled with the Spirit of truth. Because we know the truth, the Church sings. Finally, last Sunday, we considered the Church prays. Today, the Church waits.

These are the characteristics are God's holy people. Redeemed by Christ, filled with His Spirit, seeking the truth in joy, singing with courage and hope, praying without ceasing, as we await the Lord's second coming on the Last Day. Yes! We are waiting for the coming of Jesus who has promised to come again in glory to resurrect and transform our bodies so that in the glories of the new creation we will no longer be subject to corruptions, sorrows, and miseries of this sinful life. In the meantime, we wait in patience and longsuffering mixed with courage, joy, hope, and God's steadfast love.

✠ 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.