

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

First Sunday after Trinity

June 6, 2021

Text: Luke 16:19–31

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

There's a curious phrase that people sometime use especially when facing trial or adversity. It goes something like, "No matter what happens, I've got my faith." As Christians, we always strive to hear and understand people charitably. What folks generally mean by this phrase is that they believe Jesus will see them through the difficulty. And this is good and godly. For the crucified and resurrected Jesus will see His people through every twist and turn of this life as He prepares us for life in His eternal kingdom.

While I generally think this is what Christians means by this phrase, it is problematic; in fact, it's quite deficient. The deficiency lies in the fact that it doesn't mention Jesus! Faith always, always has an object; it never exists by itself or for itself. We have faith in something or someone. For Christians, we have faith in Jesus with the emphasis being on Jesus. The object of saving faith is the Lord Jesus Christ.

The author of Hebrews wrote to encouraged the Christians of his day; they were discouraged and beginning to feel the initial heat of persecution. Something very similar may be beginning in our own context. Faith was defined as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). After providing an impressive catalogue of Old Testament believers and their various deeds of faith, in the rest of chapter 11, the author then made a direct application to the Christians of his own day in Hebrews 12:1–2, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses ... let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith." Stay focused on Jesus with single-minded clarity. Jesus is the one who gives us saving faith in Him. And Jesus is the One who will bring our faith in Him to its completion on the resurrection on the Last Day. The Scriptures teach, from Genesis to Revelation, that we receive justification, the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and all the blessings of God's kingdom by faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:25, 28; 5:1). Jesus is the Savior; He is our assurance and conviction. So, a better way to speak is to say that "No matter what happens, I've got Jesus. He will see me through every difficulty and bring me unto His eternal glory."

True faith, the kind the Bible describes, is truly a great and marvelous gift created in us by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. Through faith, we receive Jesus. His life and love. All the promises of His kingdom. That's why it's a good thing to ask God the Father to increase our faith in Jesus. Until the resurrection on the Last Day, we see and live by faith, not by sight or human experience (II Cor. 5:7). Only on the Last Day, will faith be perfected and no longer needed. For we will see Jesus with our resurrected eyes, touch Him with resurrected hands, and live forever, body and soul, in His kingdom. That Day, however, has not yet arrived. Until then, we live by faith in the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus helps us to understand better what faith is and the how faith in Jesus allows us to see things as they truly are. Let's consider the story from Luke 16; Jesus doesn't call this a parable but it does appear to be a fictional story. There are two men. One, an unnamed rich man clothed in royal clothing who feasted sumptuously every day (vs. 19). This man's day to day life was filled with opulence and the best the world had to offer. From every external measure, this man was a great success. Men like him are sought out by authors and reporters for interviews and stories. His face would grace the cover of business magazines and publications of the social elites.

Now we come to the second man in the story, Lazarus a wretch of man covered with sores and begging at the rich man's gates (vs. 20–21). The only earthly comforts Lazarus had were friends willing to carry him to the rich's man's gate where he would beg all day. And the neighborhood dogs who licked his sores. We don't know what Lazarus ate day after day except that he desired to be fed from the crumbs that fell from the rich man's sumptuous table (vs. 21).

Desiring to eat what falls from the master's table might remind you of another desperate situation recorded in the Bible. A Canaanite woman who came to Jesus begging Him to cast out a demon from her daughter (Matt. 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30). At first, Jesus rebuffed the woman, ignored her! And then He said it was not proper to give the children's bread to the dogs. To all this she said, "Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat from the crumbs that fall from their master's table." The Lord Jesus enshrined this response as one of the greatest examples of Christian faith. "O woman, great is your faith" (Matt. 15:28). She recognized who her master was: Jesus. And no matter what He does or says, it will be enough for her daughter, for herself. The woman's faith was focused solely upon the Lord Jesus.

The Bible doesn't say that Lazarus had great faith. But we know he did because in spite of his horrific circumstances, Lazarus was carried into heaven when he died. Although his life seemed to be a sad, miserable tragedy, he was in fact, a man of faith. In this earthly life, Lazarus received bad things. But he had faith in Jesus resulting in receiving God's good things in heaven (vs. 25). The crumbs he ate did not come from the sumptuous table of the rich man but the very bread of life, the Lord Jesus Christ. This story illustrates beautifully and powerfully what true Biblical faith is. Regardless of everything Lazarus experienced in his day-to-day existence, he trusted and believed in God. He had Christian faith, that is, faith that remained focused upon Jesus. Lazarus was a successful man, not by the standards of the world, but according to God's righteous judgment.

The same cannot be said about the rich man. He too died and was buried. Through the story, Jesus says the rich man was tormented in Hades, the realm of the dead. He died an unbeliever. He had no Christian faith. He received good things during his earthly life. He feasted on the best food money could buy. But he did not eat of the bread of life given freely to all who have faith in Jesus.

This is the contrast presented by our Lord's story. According to human wisdom, judgment, and observation, the rich man was the success, Lazarus the failure. How many of us would tell our children or grandchildren to admire or seek to be like Lazarus? And yet, that is what we should tell our loved ones! Be like Lazarus, the man of Christian faith, the man who could say, "No matter what happens, I have faith in Jesus. He is my Lord and Savior. He died and rose again for me. To save me from Hades. To give me the joys and comforts of His eternal kingdom. Jesus is my assurance and my conviction."

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, this story is probably fictional. But what Luke 16:19–31 teaches is absolutely true. Christian faith, that is, faith and trust focused upon Jesus is the final and authoritative standard by which our lives will be judged. All the gifts we receive in this earthly life – family, friends, jobs, money, possessions, years of life, everything – are gifts of God's love and grace; we receive them with great joy and thanksgiving. But they are not the standard by which our life will be judged by God. The standard is do we know and believe in Jesus as He is described and presented for us in Holy Scripture. We could spend a great deal of time considering vs. 29–31 where we learn that the only way Christian faith is given is through God's Word. Miracles and people rising from the dead will not give faith in Jesus. But God's Word does. That is why coming to Church and worshipping with

God's people around God's Word and Sacraments is the most important thing that happens in our lives. God's Word is the on-going feast of the bread of life. Without it, there can be no true faith in Jesus. But the primary focus of today's sermon is to exhort and encourage you to keep your eyes of faith focused on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

Only Christian faith, created by the Holy Spirit and informed by the teachings of Holy Scripture, gives us the ability to know that Lazarus was successful and the rich man a failure. Through faith in Jesus, we see the truth of how things really are and not merely what they appear to be. God created us in the beginning to have fellowship with Him and through Him to have love and fellowship with one another. The full human life can only be experienced as a Christian who has saving faith in Christ Jesus, the Lord of glory who died and rose from the dead to atone for the sins of the world. No matter what happens in this life – good, bad, and everything in between, Jesus is your Savior. Faith looks to Christ Jesus alone and rejoices with joy unspeakable and filled with glory.

✠ 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 after Trinity

June 13, 2021

Text: Luke 14:15–24

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

The Pharisees of Jesus' day were very fastidious about the traditions of the fathers and the ceremonial Law of the Old Testament. It was extremely important to them that hands were washed before supper, that only people ceremonially clean were allowed into one's home, that one take extra care not to defile oneself knowingly or unknowingly, and so forth. The Law must be kept, especially the Sabbath. That's why they were furious with Jesus when He healed sick people on the Sabbath; He's working on the Sabbath. In Luke 13, Jesus healed a woman afflicted with a disabling spirit – a demon! – the woman had been bent over for 18 years! The problem was Jesus healed her while He was teaching in the synagogue on a Sabbath. The ruler of the synagogue became indignant and said, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day" (Luke 13:14). The Lord Jesus chastised the Pharisees for his hypocrisy:

"Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13:15–16).

It's easy to roll our eyes at the Pharisee's self-righteousness. Our fellow human beings require love not just six days a week but seven! And our love for God and His Word includes all the days of the week, not merely the day of worship. The Pharisees were known for restricting what could take place on Saturday, the 7th day of the week. (No healings, very little cooking, wash your hands, and be careful who you touch or who touches you!) That was a grievous sin on their part. It resulted in hating their neighbor and, ironically and tragically, despising God's Word which says love your neighbor as yourself while loving God above all things.

And yet, I think we moderns struggle with the opposite extreme. And it too results in hating our neighbor and despising God and His Word. Our problem is that we allow too much on the Lord's Day; we don't set proper priorities and boundaries in

relationship to God, His Word, other people, and the material possessions entrusted to us. The parable in the reading from Luke 14 demonstrates this powerfully.

The context is a Sabbath dinner feast at a ruling Pharisee's house. There has already been a great deal of tension because Jesus healed a man of dropsy during the meal. Jesus asked them if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath (vs. 3). They remained silent. And then Jesus chastised the entire group for seeking the prominent places around the table. It was just petty powerplays, people trying to look more important socially than they really were. Jesus warned them, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (vs. 11). And to cap it all off, the Lord told the leading Pharisee to invite the poor, the crippled, and the beggars to his next feast rather than his rich friends. Go love your neighbor who cannot repay you, trusting the Lord will reward you in the resurrection of the just (vs. 14).

In response to all these things, a guest had the cheek to say, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (vs. 15). It's a common tactic when everything is tense. You diffuse the situation with a vague platitude of spirituality and righteousness. The Lord Jesus has called them all, the ruling Pharisee and all his guests, to repentance for not believing God's Word and living according to it. They haven't loved their neighbor, not the man with dropsy nor each other as they sought to out-do one another in social prestige. All of them ought to have been seeking the Lord's forgiveness and seeking His grace for their sins of pride and selfishness. But no! Unbelief cloaked in pious talk. Dear saints of God, we need to be very wary of that innate desire that lives in each of us, according to our sinful flesh, to justify ourselves so that we always look good. We cloak our sin and our tormented consciences with platitudes trying to convince ourselves and others that we're all ok. When in fact, we need the healing balm of God's mercy in Christ Jesus. But that requires humbling ourselves before God and man. And setting priorities properly. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus taught we are to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. All the other things needed in life will be added. (Matt. 6:33).

This is the context of the parable that Jesus gives in vs. 16–24. Now the particulars. A man gave a great banquet and invited many. The man represents God the Father almighty. He sent out his servants informing the invited guests that the time for the feast had come. The feast represents the Gospel of forgiveness, life, and salvation given to God's people through His Word. The feast is ultimately found in the person and work of Jesus. For He is the bread of life come down from heaven upon which whoever feeds will never taste death. The crucified and resurrected Jesus is the feast.

The Old Testament prophets prophesied about Him as they invited God's people to receive His mercy and love through the participation in the sacrifices, feast and festivals, as well as the prayers and hymns of praises. Jesus healed the sick, gave deliverance from the oppressed, preached healing and forgiveness, and fed thousands with bread and fish in order to demonstrate that He is the feast of life. He is the Savior, the Messiah, the hope and light of the world. His people will feast in the joys of His kingdom throughout their earthly life through faith in Jesus and in the world to come through actual participation in the resurrection of the just. Jesus is the banquet of salvation. And He gives Himself freely. His servants, the apostles, prophets, and now pastors in Christ's Church, as well as members of the Christ's holy body, the Church, are continually inviting people to come to the feast of Jesus centered around His Word and Sacraments. Unlike the Pharisees of Jesus' day, there are no restrictions on who can and cannot come.

In the parable, Jesus focuses on three individuals. One recently purchased some land. Another purchased five yoke of oxen. The third just got married. All of them excused themselves from the feast of salvation. We need to consider this parable closely. The feast represents the salvation and the joy of heaven won for the world by the death and resurrection of Jesus. In order to take care of some land, to do more work, and to get married, they said no to Jesus. Obviously, there is nothing inherently sinful or wrong in these things. In fact, they are good. Many Bible passages teach that we Christians are to be good stewards of land and property. We are to work and support our family. And yes, most of us are called by God to get married and have children. These are God's gifts!! But we must not allow them to keep us away from the feast; to keep us away from Jesus, His life, and His love.

The Pharisees restricted what could take place on the Sabbath. The men in parable allowed too much on the Lord's Day. They didn't say no to some very good things in order to receive the most necessary thing: Jesus. When we don't keep Jesus as our first and top priority, pride takes root and grows. Eventually, we despise God's Word which teaches us to love God and our neighbor.

You might ask how does not participating in the common life of the Church result in hurting our neighbor? Aren't each of us responsible for our own souls? If I neglect the things of God, then I will give an account of it before God. But surely I am not responsible for others. That is a grave mistake. God created us human beings to be in relationship with others. If I, as a husband, allow too many things to keep me away from Jesus, that will affect my wife and my children, my brothers and sisters, parents,

aunts and uncles, as well as my close neighbors, and so forth. My life and actions teach that Jesus isn't important or at least not as important as work, material possessions, or even other people. My actions teach others to despise God's Word and Christ's gifts. We cannot allow good things to become more important than Jesus. When we do, we not only hurt ourselves but those who we love the most.

Saints of God, learn to say no to things that will keep you from regular, faithful Church attendance on Sundays. Order the priorities in all the days of the week so that Jesus remains the focus. All of our lives are very different. How that might look for each person and family will vary. But find time to pray and hear God's Word with the members of your household. If single, then find ways to do this with others. Use your money in ways that reflect a priority upon the things of God. That includes food, clothing, medical care, leisure, caring for neighbors, the Church, etc. Don't take a job or a career advancement or a college program that will keep you from Church and worshipping at home with your family. Say no to clubs and extracurricular activities that require you to absent yourself or your family from faithful reception of Christ's Word and Sacraments. If you are a business owner, find ways so that your employees have the opportunity for worship and things of God. The Bible speaks about these things quite frequently.

I want to bring this sermon to a conclusion on a positive note. It's true that all of us fail to keep the main things the main things. But the Lord Jesus calls us to repentance so that we can participate in the true, lasting joys of life in His kingdom. The greatest gift you can give to yourself and your loved ones is to worship Jesus as THE priority in all of life, 24/7. Jesus is no miser or a kill joy ready to squash the fun out of life. It's quite the opposite in fact. He wants your life so full of the abundance of His kingdom that He suffered and died for your sins and rose again from the dead in order to prepare a special place for you in the feast of His kingdom. In conclusion, hear what King David wrote about the joys of life in God's kingdom.

Psalm 16:11

¹¹You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalm 36:7-9

⁷How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. ⁸They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give

them drink from the river of your delights. ⁹For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light.

✠ 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
Third Sunday after Trinity
June 20, 2021
Text: Luke 15:1–10

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

Christianity is a religion of joy! In fact, it's one of the chief characteristics of Christianity. This is what the Bible says about our most holy faith.

“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

“Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see *him* not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (I Peter 1:8, KJV).

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness...” (Galatians 5:22).

And I can't name another religion that says you ought to rejoice when you are persecuted and hated for confessing and living according to your faith. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus said (Matthew 5:11–12):

¹¹“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

A few decades later, James began his general epistle with different but somewhat related idea, namely, joy in the midst of spiritual trials and testing. James 1:2–4:

“²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Christianity gets a bad reputation for being dull, austere, and joyless. Sometimes, we Christians are partially to blame for this. Do we not, from time to time, give off the impression that Christianity is all about rules, regulations, do's and don't, obligations and requirements? Do we speak about the freedom, liberty, joy, reconciliation, peace, and love given to us in Christ Jesus? Or even that the Christian life is joyous even when facing various forms of spiritual or physical adversity?

We Christians should be the last ones to give off an air of joyless solemnity. After all, we worship the Lord who takes delight in His creation. The psalmists are consistently calling our attention to the wonder of God's mighty works in creation. Throughout this beautiful universe you will find the imprint of God's joy and humor. Have you ever stopped and looked, and I mean really looked, at, for example, a rabbit? Or a hornbill bird? Rabbits have ears that are about half as long as their entire body! Hilarious. Or the hornbill bird with a beak about half the size of its entire body. How does it fly? Or the platypus. Is it a duck, or a beaver, or what? A kangaroo! Seriously. A pouch in the front, super-sized rabbit legs, skinny arms, and donkey-sized ears. The Lord God, the creator of heaven and earth, has an incredible sense of humor. This world is filled with divine joy and laughter. Our God delights in variety, spontaneity, and curious originality. Remember what the psalmist sung, "...at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

It's sin and unbelief that bring misery. Boredom and dullness come, not from God, but from the devil. God is not a kill-joy, the devil is. When we were baptized into God's Trinitarian name, we received the spiritual gifts of divine joy, love, goodness, etc., all filled with God's glory.

The problem we sinful human beings face is seeing and experiencing the joy that comes from Christ's gifts of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. The Pharisees and scribes of Jesus' day were certainly not finding any joy in God's salvation. Luke 15, today's gospel text, describes the Pharisees and scribes grumbling and complaining that Jesus was receiving and eating with tax collectors and sinners (vs. 1–2). The New Testament gospels don't sugarcoat the fact that the crowds flocking to Jesus were filled with people with broken, sinful, ugly lives. But those sinful people were finding joy and peace in Christ's preaching of God's kingdom, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise that they too are loved by God. The Pharisees and scribes, by contrast, were appalled and shocked! How can Jesus claim to be a man of God and a teacher of truth while receiving the likes of these kinds of dirty, ugly, sinful people?

In a number of places, the Lord preached that He came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). Or that He came to heal the sick and the oppressed for only the sick need a physician (Matt. 9:12). In Luke 15, the Lord answers the objections of Him receiving sinners by giving two parables. In the first parable (vs. 3–7), a shepherd leaves behind 99 sheep, who are enjoying the care and comforts of living in the green pastures of the Lord’s protection, in order to find the one lost sheep. In the second parable (vs. 8–10), a woman turns her house over from top to bottom to find one lost coin. She has 9 safely in hand but devotes her complete attention to finding the one lost coin. And here is the incredible, fascinating thing. Both parables conclude with these words, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep (vs. 6)...Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin” (vs. 9). Twice, there is the call to rejoice!

And then, if we were to keep reading the rest of Luke 15, you would find that immediately following those two parables is the greatest, most famous parable of all! The parable of the prodigal son. That parable describes the father, who represents God the Father almighty, throwing a family feast with all the joy and celebration his love and riches could provide when his terribly sinful, but now repentant son, returns home. God rejoices when sinners return home the gloom of sin and death. But there’s a twist in the parable’s conclusion. The older brother comes home from working and responds with anger and resentment when he learns about the feast taking place because of his younger brother’s return. The father goes out to his angry son and appeals to him to join in the celebration. And that’s where the story ends, on a cliffhanger. Will the older brother rejoice in the salvation of his brother? Or will he remain in the dull, angry resentment of sin and unbelief? The Lord Jesus gave these parables in response to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling over Him eating and receiving sinners. The question all three parables presents to us is, “Will we rejoice in the salvation of sinners?” Or maybe to put it differently, “Will we find joy in what brings God joy?” The first two parables conclude with a clear, definitive statement describing the hosts of heaven rejoicing in the repentance of sinners. Let’s read them again.

“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous person who need no repentance” (vs. 7).

“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (vs. 10).

God the Holy Trinity rejoices and celebrates each and every time a sinner repents.

I began this sermon by reading various passages of Scripture that describe the joy found in God's works and the joy received through His Spirit. I had a bit of fun describing a few animals God created. And yet the Bible calls us to study and consider God's many and various works. Psalm 111:1–2:

¹ Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

² Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.

³ Full of splendor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.

God's greatest work is the salvation of the world completely through the person and work of Jesus, God's Son. While we should find great joy and pleasure in God's creative work (the sun, moon, stars, the animals, our fellow human beings, children, etc.) our greatest source of joy ought to come from our Lord's work of salvation. "Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them." All the hosts of heaven, says Jesus, rejoices in the repentance of sinners. That includes our own repentance as well as the repentance of our brothers and sisters. Wallowing around in sin destroys joy and peace. It wrecks our lives. Sin promises fun and happiness. And let's be honest with ourselves. Sin often gives a measure of pleasure. But it takes more than it gives. Whereas the salvation of Christ Jesus keeps giving more and more and more. It grows richer and deeper. It doesn't take away. "At your right hand are pleasures forever more" sang the psalmist.

Each Sunday divine service is a feast and celebration of the Lord's joy. Deep, lasting joy comes through repentance, that is, turning away from the gloom of sin and evil and returning back home to the Father through the salvation won for us by Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. Do you know that after every sermon, we pray a portion of Psalm 51 which says:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.

Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free spirit.

Amen.

To be sure, we know absolutely that God the Holy Trinity and all the heavenly hosts are rejoicing when we sing those great words in Christian faith. True, deep, lasting joy is found in the great works of God. Christianity is a religion of joy, the only religion of joy, because of God's greatest work: the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, all done for the salvation of sinners. Invite your family and friends to Church. Tell them it's the weekly celebration of the most joyous event in human history: the salvation of sinners. All of the hosts of heaven join us, week after week, in celebration. By God the Father's grace and with the power of the Holy Spirit, may each one of you be filled with the joy and peace of Jesus, the Lord of glory and 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.

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Fourth Sunday after Trinity

June 27, 2021

Text: Luke 6:36–42

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

The eighth commandment says, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” The Small Catechism teaches us what this means, “We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.” Isn’t it so easy to speak a quick, harsh word of judgment? On just about anything with almost little or no real knowledge about the situation? It is commonly acknowledged today that the internet and the various social media outlets encourage every kind of falsehood, betrayal, slander, and unmerciful condemnations. God’s Word calls us to be a different kind of people. Our standard is truth and love combined for God’s glory and our neighbor’s good. By God’s grace, we seek to explain everything in the kindness way possible so that God’s name is kept holy and our neighbor’s lives and reputations are protected and cherished. In today’s Gospel reading, the Lord Jesus calls us to be merciful (vs. 36).

And then, the very next words our Lord speak, are “Judge not, and you will not be judged ...” (vs. 37). Tragically, this beautiful teaching of our Lord Jesus is used to justify believing and doing all kinds of sinful things. Has someone ever said to you, “Don’t judge me or my actions. Jesus said, ‘Judge not lest you be judged.’” Another teaching of our Lord, also from today’s gospel text, is used in a similar way, “Take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye” (vs. 42). Have you ever heard someone say, “Get the log out of your own eye before telling me about the speck in my eye”? Thus, our Lord’s own teaching become the trump card to justify sin, shame, and vice.

So we’re presented with a dilemma. On the one hand, the world, our sinful nature, and the technologies of the world encourage us to pronounce quick and irrevocable judgments over situations and persons we have no business speaking about. On the other hand, we are told that we can never speak a word of judgment because Jesus Himself said we can’t do so. It’s almost a perfect catch-22.

Let's try to sort this out just a bit. Today's reading from Luke 6:36–42 is only a portion of a larger sermon sometimes called the Sermon on the Plain. It's similar to the Sermon on the Mount but the situation and circumstances are different. Earlier in this sermon, Jesus said false prophets would come into the world (vs. 26). In the Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 7:15–16a) the Lord gave more teaching about how we are to think and act about them. Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits." In this situation, Jesus commands His people to make a judgment between what is true and false based upon their fruits – their teaching and their way of life – lest we are consumed by ravaging wolves bent on destroying our souls.

The judgment that is forbidden in Luke 6:37 is judging the heart of a person according to our own standards rather than according to the Word of God. In addition, what is forbidden is for us to stand in judgment over a person so as to determine whether or not they are worthy of salvation or damnation. In either case, we are putting ourselves in the place of God.

No, dear saints of God. These things must be left in and under God's authority. We must judge actions and deeds by the standard of God's Word to determine whether or not they are true and right. But the standard is God's Word not ours. And the condition of one's heart can only be rightly determined by God Himself. God and God's Word are the only just and righteous judges of human hearts. Not you. Not me.

But what's even more distressing about this problem of judging hearts and specks in one another's eye is how easily we overlook what Jesus said first, specifically, vs. 36, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." On the one hand, we are quick to say, "Don't judge me" and "Get the log out of your own eye first" but are we even more eager to be merciful? Where is the zeal to be gracious, to explain everything in the kindest way? To give kindness every when it is not deserved? That's what mercy is. Giving kindness and favor when the person deserves judgment, discipline, and punishment.

Before mercy can be given, there must be a true judgment that something is wrong. Mercy determines that there is a debt that must be paid. And then pays it for the indebted person. Mercy judges that an action was wrong and then determines that the person will not be held responsible. The loss will be borne by the one showing the mercy. You see, mercy is that great virtue that desires to see favor and goodness given to someone who, in fact, deserves punishment.

According to Jesus, the standard of mercy is God the Father Himself. We baptized Christians know the mercy of our heavenly Father. He is the one who sent His Son to die for our sins. In mercy, the Father forgives our sins for Christ's sake. In mercy, the Father declares us righteous through Christ. In mercy, God the Father baptizes us into the death and resurrection of Jesus so that we become newborn children of God and living temples of the Holy Spirit. We Christians know that if God the Father judged us according to the just merits of our sins, we would be lost forever in the punishments of hell itself. But He has shown us mercy! Without compromising the truth or violating His love. And we rejoice exceeding with joy unspeakable and full of glory!

God the Father desires, above all else, that we know Him according to His mercy, love, and truth. These reflect His true nature. God is, first and foremost, a God of mercy and love. His work of judgment and condemnation is what the Bible calls, in Isaiah 28:11, His alien work. Through the preaching of His holy Law with all its strict and uncompromising demands, God reveals to us our sins and His judgment against them. Although necessary, it is not God's proper work. Above all else, God seeks to show mercy to sinners. He seeks to save by bringing them out of their self-inflicted misery and exalt them to the status of redeemed, holy, precious children of His eternal kingdom (c.p. Luther's Heidelberg Disputation Thesis 4). Our God is a God of love and mercy.

Saints of God, we can neither allow our sinful nature to indulge in the senseless breaking of the 8th commandment so common in all of human history, but which is so celebrated in our time through technological advancements. Nor can we resist God's work of revealing specks and logs in our heart, soul, and mind. Instead, we seek God's discipline so that we can repent of our sins and receive God's mercy, love, and grace.

The greatest sign and wonder of the Father's mercy is found in the cross of Jesus. On Calvary's cross, Jesus bore our sins and the Father's judgment against them. Jesus cried out in dereliction, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?" (Psalm 22:1). But the Father's mercy and love were then revealed to the world when He raised His righteous Son from the dead on Easter morning. Through faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus, we come to know the Father in His mercy, that is, His undeserved favor, kindness, benevolence, forgiveness, exaltation, eternal life.

Because we Christians have received this enduring, everlasting mercy of the Father, we seek to share it others. Thus, we refuse to stand in the place of God. Instead, we

desire to show mercy to anyone caught in sin and error because the Father has shown us mercy. He has not judged us unto eternal death. He has removed the logs and specks from our eyes through the blood of Jesus. We cannot compromise the truth. Nor can we violate love. Love and truth mingle together in the life and ministry of Jesus. Through Christ, we receive God's mercy.

And when we find errors in someone's life and doctrine, we must speak a correcting word of truth and love according to God's holy Word. To leave our neighbor in their sin that very well could endanger their immortal soul, would be the worst form of hatred and malice. Mercy, love, and truth, as they are revealed in God's Word, compel us to speak and act for the good of our neighbor.

The standard of mercy we seek to receive and to give is God the Father Himself. And what did Jesus promise regarding His Father's mercy and love? Vs. 38, "give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you." Such is the abundant, super-abundant, mercy and love of our Father. The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. May we be like Him. Known for being God's people of truth, love, and mercy. May we be like Christ. Christians in the truest sense of the word with mercy running over every thought, word, and deed.

✠ 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.