

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Day of Pentecost

June 5, 2022

Text: John 14:23–31

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

During the Sundays after Easter we have been considering some of the primary characteristics of Christ's Church. We have already seen that the Church is Christ's body with Christ Himself as her Head. She is a new creation born anew as a result of Christ's perfect life, death, and resurrection. We, the various members of the holy Christian Church, make up the body of Christ with all of our unique gifts, personalities, life histories, temperaments, strengths, weaknesses, and so forth. Christ's Church is wonderfully diverse yet she remains one holy Christian and apostolic Church.

Other characteristics of Christ's include that she is nourished and protected by Christ Himself, the Good Shepherd. He leads her by the Spirit of truth. Thus, we seek the truth and nothing but the truth. In the Spirit and by the Spirit, we sing our psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in love and praise to Christ our Lord and Savior. In the name of Christ Jesus and by the Spirit we pray to our heavenly Father with the boldness and confidence children who love and trust their Father. Through our prayers, our heavenly Father works His good and gracious will of restraining evil and upholding good. Consequently, the Church is led by Christ in the way of truth while she sings and prays to our heavenly Father. All of this glorious and varied activity takes place in faith, hope, and love as we wait for the greatest event in human history: Christ's 2nd coming on the Last Day.

In summary, some of the chief characteristics of Christ's Church include: she is born anew in the death and resurrection of Jesus, she is cared for and protected by Christ Himself, the Good Shepherd, she seeks the truth in all things because she is filled with the Spirit of truth, she sings, she prays, and she waits for the 2nd coming of Jesus in faith, hope, and love.

My goal in these reflections on the nature of the Church is to increase and strengthen our understanding of who we are Christians individually and collectively as the Body of Christ. These past couple of years have revealed that the Church in America – really around the world, didn't have a very strong, Biblical understanding of what it means to be Christ's Church. Too quickly we allowed others to tell us who the Church is, what her essential activities are and how we should do them, and what her purpose in the world is, and consequently, her purpose in the the next world is. Today's service will provide further teaching to answer those questions: who the Church is, what she does, and her purpose.

Today, is the Day of Pentecost, which marks 50 days since we celebrated Christ's resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday. As we have considered the various foundational characteristics of Christ's Church throughout the past weeks after Easter, a common feature has arisen. The Church is filled, blessed, empowered, and enlivened by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We seek the truth because we are filled with the Spirit of truth. Our songs rejoice and celebrate the truth especially in the revelation of God's love seen in Christ Jesus. Our prayers are directed and empowered by the Spirit. And unless the Spirit strengthens our resolve to wait for Christ's 2nd coming in faithful godliness of heart, mind, and life, we would fall away from the saving faith immediately.

The Day of Pentecost reminds us that the Christian Church and every Christian believer are filled with the Holy Spirit. You cannot be a Christian without being filled with the Spirit. Thus, the Church baptizes her members in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit because through this great gift, the Holy Spirit is richly poured out upon us, as Paul described in Titus 3:5–6. All that we are, do, and seek to achieve as Christian believers and members of Christ's body happens because of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, we seek to walk by the Spirit lest we gratify the sinful desires of our flesh which do not want to hallow God's name or live in His kingdom under His gracious will.

The Lord Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit in vs. 26 of today's gospel text. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name..." Notice the beautiful Trinitarian care and love the Church receives. The

Father sends the Spirit in Christ's name. Being baptized into the name of the Triune God means we are brought into the very life and fellowship of God. The Church is where people receive and participate in the very life of God Himself. In other words, the Church is not some form of religious social club made up of voluntary members who come and go as the moments dictate. The Church is the living body of Christ who is enlivened by the Spirit to receive all of the divine gifts of the Father. The Church is holy and alive because she is filled with the Holy Spirit. Consider the apostle Peter's description of the Church in II Peter 1:3–4:

³His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him (i.e., Christ) who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

Christians individually and the Church collectively are participants in the divine nature through which we receive divine life and godliness. The Holy Spirit is constantly teaching us these things about our life in Christ Jesus (vs. 26). The world and worldly wisdom cannot give us this Spirit-filled life. Only the Father who sends the Spirit in Christ's precious name. Cling to these precious gifts, dear saints of God as your highest and best treasure. They are your life and your salvation.

As the Spirit-filled body of Christ, we participate in God's life and nature. What an extraordinary promise! The question of how or by what means the Spirit works this in our lives must be considered. In vs. 23–24, Jesus is answering a question from one of his disciples about how Christ will reveal Himself to believers but not the world, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me."

The word of Christ is the means the Spirit uses to bring us into fellowship with the Father. Notice how love for Christ and His Word are inseparably linked together. “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word.” This necessarily means we must go back to the Bible time and time again to learn the truth about Christ. In the Scriptures, we hear the words of Jesus. Through those inspired, infallible words we learn the truth of God, who He is as one God in three persons and what He did to save us from sin, evil, death, and condemnation. Through those words we learn to love Jesus. The Spirit uses the Holy Scriptures to nurture our love for God. Loving God and hearing the word of Christ go together.

Practically speaking, this includes hearing the public reading of God’s Word and preaching and teaching upon the read word of God. The 4 gospels, Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John were written for this very purpose. To be read aloud and preached in Church. The epistles of Paul, Peter, John, James, and Jude were all written to congregations where Christians were gathered to hear God’s Word and receive the sacraments. Those letters were sermons! The pastoral epistles Titus and I & II Timothy were written to give instruction on how pastors should go about serving God’s people with the Word. Preach the word! Is the apostle’s Paul’s last admonition to Timothy, the young pastor. Paul would soon be executed for preaching the gospel. II Timothy 4:2, 5

²preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching....⁵As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

The Word of God is our lifeline. God’s Word is to fill every sound we hear in the Church! It is the measure and standard for all that is said, believed, and hoped. In addition to the Word filling our worship services, read and study the Scriptures at home with your spouse and children. Pray and sing together. Remember those are foundational characteristics of the Church! We pray the Scripture. We sing the Scriptures. We serve Christ and our neighbor by hearing, believing, and living according to the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit uses Christ’s Word to strengthen our love for the Father and His beloved Son. If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him. Thus says our Savior.

One last comment as we bring today's sermon to its conclusion. We have a promise attached to hearing and believing God's Word. Vs. 23b, "...and we (the Father and the Son) will come to him (the one who loves Christ by keeping his word) and make our home with him." And so we're back to where we began. The Holy Spirit uses Christ's Word to bring into fellowship with the Father and the Son. A fellowship that is so intimate and personal that God Himself dwells within us. Blessed are you dear saints of God!

This is what it means to be a Spirit-filled Church, to be a Spirit-filled Christian. Loving God's Word. Singing and praying it. Waiting for Christ's return in the faith, hope, and love given to us by the Holy Spirit through God's Word.

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

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

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

The Holy Trinity

June 12, 2022

Text: John 3:1–17

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

Nicodemus first appears in John 3. We don't know much about him except that he's a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and very interested in the teachings of Jesus. Being a ruler of the Jews indicates that he had some political respect and power. Most likely, he had a good measure of material wealth. Being a Pharisee meant he was a very religious laymen as the Pharisees were committed to studying the Old Testament writings, the teachings of the Jewish fathers, and living a pious life according to both. The Pharisees fasted often, gave a tithe (or 10%) on everything, even things like the herbs from their gardens (Matt. 23:23)! They prayed all the time and believed the entire OT to be the Word of God, not just parts of it like the Sadducees. Nicodemus was a very religious, pious man. A success by every standard.

This very successful Nicodemus went to Jesus by night to discuss theology. The conversation begins with high praise from this leading Pharisees, "Rabbi, we know that you are teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" (vs. 2). Nicodemus believes Jesus is a teacher of God.

But the Lord Jesus isn't impressed by Nicodemus' success or his courtesy. Jesus abruptly says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (vs. 3). The startling implication is that Nicodemus with all his success, piety, good works, wealth, etc. isn't prepared for the kingdom of God! To put it bluntly...Nicodemus, you are not a child of God! All your good works and merits amount to nothing when it comes to whether or not you will see God's kingdom. Instead, he must be born again.

Nicodemus is confused, and rightly so. He's a student and teacher of God's Word. It seems absurd to suggest Nicodemus might not be rightly prepared to see God's kingdom. By all appearances, he's one of the most likely candidates to enter God's heavenly kingdom. And what's this strange idea about being born again! How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (vs. 4). All of this is most unexpected.

Pay close attention to Jesus' answer. Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (vs. 5). Our Lord is saying that to be born again so that one can see and enter God's kingdom means to be born of water and Spirit. In other words, to know God rightly one must be baptized. Christian baptism gives the new birth of the Spirit. The apostle Paul also calls water baptism a "washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" in Titus 3:5. To receive Christian baptism is nothing less than to receive a new birth of water and the Spirit.

Nicodemus rightly understands the birth he received from his mother. It's the birth we all understand. Nine months after conception, I was born! In our culture, we celebrate our natural birth with quite a bit of pomp and circumstance: a birthday cake, gifts are often shared, and there is the expected song, Happy Birthday.

But there is another birth that must happen if Nicodemus wants to participate in the most important thing in eternity: the kingdom of God. He must receive a totally different birth. One that is of water and the Spirit. The first, natural birth is a great gift of God. But we sinners need a spiritual birth. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (vs. 6). The new birth of water and the Spirit comes through baptism, Trinitarian baptism with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Only through this new birth can anyone enter God's kingdom.

Now some might conclude that baptism is just another work we do; Nicodemus thought like that, "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (vs. 4) Notice Nicodemus' question assumes the person must do something to enter God's kingdom. That's the big, big mistake. To be born again is to be born of the Spirit through Holy Baptism. Baptism is the Lord's doing, for it is done "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." With the water and the Word, the Triune God Himself puts His name on us and thereby gives us the new birth into His family. We never say, "I decided to be born" (referring to our natural birth). Why should we say, "I decided to be born again into God's kingdom."? It's God's gift from beginning to end.

As you might guess, Nicodemus is complete flabbergasted. Verse 9, "Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?'" In answer, Jesus gives a gentle rebuke. "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (vs. 10) Then Jesus answers Nicodemus' question using the Old Testament. The Bible passage is from

Numbers 21 when the children of Israel were afflicted by poisonous snakes. God's means of salvation from the snakes was for a bronze serpent to be constructed and lifted up on a pole. Anyone bitten by a snake only had to look at the bronze serpent and he would be healed. Listen to how Jesus uses that incident to teach about His own death and resurrection, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (vs. 14–15). The new birth of salvation in water and Spirit is made possible because of Jesus' death on the cross; He is God's salvation lifted up on the pole of the cross for the salvation of the world. Baptism gives us the Spirit because baptism connects us to Jesus' cross and the love He shows to us there.

The very next words our Lord speaks are probably the most well-known from the Bible. John 3:16-17, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Maybe we can understand that divine love better as we hear them in light of our Lord's teaching to Nicodemus and the necessity of being born again of the water and Spirit, that is, being born again through Christian baptism.

The glorious truth about Christianity is that it's not about what we do for God, our works, our piety, our successes!! It's about God's love revealed to us in what Jesus does for us in His life, death, and resurrection. You know that God loves you because of what Jesus did on the cross. You know God loves you because of what He does for you through the new birth of water and Spirit. Your simple water baptism, which most of you, like your physical birth, don't remember, is God the Father's promise that He forgives you, loves you, and claims you as His own. For in that gift, the Father incorporates you into the death and resurrection of His Son. And, He fills you with the Holy Spirit. You don't work your way into to being a Christian. You're born into God's family. It's a new birth of water and the Holy Spirit.

Never let go of God's promises given to you in your Christian baptism. In that gift, you received the true name of God, the one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And in this regard, do not be led astray by the befuddled thinking of our day. The only true God is the Trinitarian God. The God of Christianity, and of Judaism, and of Islam are not the same. In that regard, the God of Mormonism or of the Jehovah's Witnesses is not the Trinitarian God of the Bible. Only Biblical Christianity says that Jesus is the eternal Son of God the Father Almighty who was anointed by the Holy Spirit without measure to be the Savior of the world.

Nicodemus came to Jesus to discuss theology with Jesus. He got more from Jesus than He ever could have expected. He heard about who God is, about His love, about the new birth of the water and the Spirit. Nicodemus learned that eternal life is God's work in believers from beginning to end. Let this teaching make you bold in your confession of faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let it give you courage to live in faith and devotion in all of life. For you bear the family name, that blessed name given to you when you received the new birth of water and the Holy Spirit. For the Lord who has begun a good work in you will complete it (Phil. 1:6).

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To him be glory forever....

✠ 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

First Sunday after Trinity

June 19, 2022

Text: Luke 16:19–31

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

I find this Sunday to be filled with things that need to be said. Urgent things. First of all, I want to say thank you to the wonderful laymen who covered for me last Sunday. In the name of Christ Jesus, thank you for your loving service to God's holy people. You guys embraced the task set before you with masculine grace and determination. Well done, good and faithful servants of God. Our congregation is blessed to have such spiritual leaders.

Next, and somewhat related to what I just said, thanks and encouragement must be given to the fathers of our congregation. Both our physical fathers who care for their children and grandchildren as well as our spiritual father who love and nurture not only those of their own families but the members of the household of faith. Your prayers and intercessions stand as a bulwark against the evils of this world which seek to silence Christ's precious Gospel and to destroy the saving faith implanted by the Holy Spirit into the hearts of Christians. Do not grow weary in your labor. Continue to train your children in the nurture and discipline of the Lord Jesus as the apostle Paul teaches in Ephesians 6:4.

And we must be like the mighty men of old who spoke the truth in love. You fathers are the given the noble task, the front-line, first order priority work of teaching your children the mighty deeds of God. Listen to Psalm 78:4:

⁴We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

But before you can fulfill that great task, you must first learn God's Word and truth, and under the grace and strength of the Holy Spirit, live according to it. Consider Deuteronomy 11:18–21:

¹⁸“You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ¹⁹You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ²⁰You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, ²¹that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.

Dear fathers in Christ, there is no greater task than nurturing your wives and children, and your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ with the precious gospel of Christ. The world may not recognize your efforts. It may, in fact, discourage you by demeaning your efforts, mocking and scorning them. You may even be threatened monetarily. Reputations and social standing may be jeopardized. But know this. God the Holy Trinity is well pleased with your faithfulness. He will reward you according to His riches in glory. Father’s Day is but one day of the year in which we give thanks for you. God our heavenly Father rejoices in you constantly.

Now we comes to today’s primary task. The preaching of God’s Word from the appointed Gospel reading from Luke 16. We need to know that the Lord Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem where He will eventually be rejected by the elders of Israel, handed over to Pontus Pilate under whose authority He (i.e., Jesus) will be crucified, and ultimately through the will and power of the Father be raised from the dead for the world’s justification. Jesus is on His way to save the world from the judgment of sin, from the condemnation of hell sentenced upon the devil and all who follow in His rebellion, and from the nauseating corruption of the world.

On the way to complete this greatest of God’s mighty works, Jesus pauses from time to time to teach and preach about His kingdom. His preaching has been controversial and severely rejected and scorned by the Pharisees. Luke 16:14 (just five verses before today’s text) describes how acrimonious things have

become between Jesus and the Pharisees. Vs. 14, “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.” In Luke 15:2, the Pharisees grumbled because Jesus received and ate with sinners. Now, they are ridiculing Him because of the love and forgiveness He gives to the sinners He receives and eats with. Seeking and saving the lost – the very heart of the Gospel – has become ridiculous and scornful to these self-righteous Pharisees.

This is a warning we must all consider. Too easily our human pride and ambition corrupts the grace and mercy of God revealed in Christ. Our sinful nature continually seeks to exalt itself even into this precious gift of salvation. Good works, our own merit, even our own will. Look at my good works, my growth in sanctification, my worthiness of God’s love and attention. But the gospel of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and the hope of eternal glory must solely rest in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. His perfect, divine love. His mercy. His blood shed on Calvary’s cross and His glorious resurrection from the dead are our highest and greatest treasures. They are the greatest works of God studied by all who delight in the truth. The great marvel of marvels is that God the Father loves us with such passion and devotion that He gave His only begotten Son for us and for our salvation. All who believe in Christ Jesus shall not perish but have eternal life. That which the human sin and pride ridicules – the gospel of salvation freely given in Christ Jesus – is that which we Christians cherish as the greatest good.

Luke recorded that the Pharisees were lovers of money rather than lovers of God (Lk. 16:14). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus from Luke 16 reveals the vanity and unreliability of wealth and riches. Two men are described, the poplar opposites of each other. An unnamed rich man feast sumptuously every day. He was clothed in purple. In the ancient world, purple clothing was extremely expensive. Only the wealthiest of the wealthy could afford such extravagance. Lazarus, however, was a poor as poor gets. He had to beg to survive. He couldn’t walk. According to vs. 20, Lazarus was laid by the rich man’s gate to beg. And we readily remember and feel the anguish of Lazarus’ oozing sores. His only comfort was the dogs who licked those sores, providing some relief and even a bit of cleansing. By all appearances, the rich man was successful while Lazarus was a failure. No one would wish to live like Lazarus.

But the truth was hidden under the external circumstances of these two men. The rich man appeared to have all the blessings of God. Whereas Lazarus seems to be utterly abandoned by God. His only comfort was the dogs licking his sores. But the truth was revealed after their deaths. Lazarus had nothing earthly to place his trust. No money, no health, very little human comfort. But he had the greatest treasure of all! Saving faith in God, the Lord of heaven and earth. At his death, Lazarus was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. Abraham, that great patriarch of old, the father of the faithful, led Lazarus into God's presence. Again, just a reminder on this Father's Day as to what fathers are called to do: lead those under their love and care to God.

Consider what Jesus is teaching here! Lazarus, who lived one of the most wretched and miserable lives imaginable, was led by one of the greatest men in human history into the presence of God. And the reason for such an honor? Lazarus had saving faith in God; he was a Christian. Lazarus didn't go to heaven because he was poor and miserable. He was given what every Christian receives in his baptism: the eternal treasure of life, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and adoption into God's family. Nothing else matters – from the perspective of eternity – than knowing and loving God by faith unto salvation. Everything else in our earthly lives must be subordinate to this greatest need: saving faith in Christ Jesus. For this most important gift, we seek and pray for day by day in the confidence and certainty of Christ's sacrificial death and glorious resurrection from the dead. He is the reason, the only reason, we can have such confidence. Christ Jesus died and rose again to save me, to save my family and friends, to save the world. He alone is our hope and comfort.

The rich man had every earthly comfort in abundance. But his wealth proved to be a false, unreliable god that failed to provide his greatest need. Salvation and eternal life. The exquisite food, the purple clothing, a great home, the applause and admiration of men – all these things failed. The parable describes his eternity as one filled with the misery and anguish of fire and bitter regret. Did he suffer such a fate because he was rich? No, perish the thought. The rich man failed in his earthly life because he did not have saving faith in the Lord who created him for fellowship with God and man. He did not love God because he had no faith; the rich man thought he didn't need God. Likewise, the rich man

had no love for his fellow man. He could have been a father to Lazarus and provided for his physical and spiritual needs. But he could not give what he did not have. This wealthiest of wealth men was poverty stricken, utterly bankrupt.

The Bible teaches us that the truly blessed life is one filled with hearing the Word of God and living according to it. Your blessedness does not rest in your wealth, your career, or in your prestige but in the faith which lays hold to the Lord Jesus Christ who suffered and died as the atoning sacrifice for your sins and was raised again to give life to all who look to Him. Apart from Christ Jesus, there is only death. But in Him there is life. Lazarus came to know that life. May God the Father grant us the same life of faith and faithfulness by His Spirit through His beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

✠ 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 26, 2022

Text: Luke 14:15–24

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

During dinner conversation at a Pharisee's house, a participant exclaims, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (vs. 15). We don't know exactly what prompted the dinner guest to make this statement except that it was in response to the things Jesus had been teaching. The verses just before today's text reveal that during this festive Sabbath meal, Jesus healed a man of dropsy (vs. 1–6). Thus Jesus taught it is lawful to show love to your neighbor even on the Sabbath Day. Our Lord also told the parable of the Wedding Feast in response to the petty ambitions of the dinner guests who were all competing with each to get the best seats of honor. Our Lord concluded by declaring that whoever exalts himself will be humbled. And who humbles himself will be exalted (vs. 7–11). And immediately before today's text (vs. 12–14), the Lord Jesus admonished the host, a ruler of the Pharisees, to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. They cannot repay his love and devotion. But God will in the resurrection of the just.

To all these things, a man exclaims, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (vs. 15). It's a true statement, to be sure. But it seems to miss everything that had taken place. Loving God and neighbor. Humility and faith in God. At any rate, Jesus responds by giving another parable, today's text vs. 16–24, that teaches about the universality of God's love for all people. The Pharisees and his guest weren't interested in the poor, the crippled the lame, and the blind. But God is. He wants them to know Him, His love, and His mercy. Let's take a few moments to consider this great parable about God's kingdom.

Jesus said, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many" (vs. 16). Banquets and feasts of the ancient world were extravagant affairs. It took months to prepare. Animals had to be fattened months in advance. Extra food

had to be grown or secured by other means. Feasts in the ancient world were huge, joyous occasions. The highlight of the year or maybe the highlight of several years. This feast is the biggest feast imaginable. For it represents God's kingdom. Everyone is invited to come! And the day has finally arrived, "And at the time for the banquet (the man) sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready'" (vs. 17).

But the most shocking, unimaginable things happens. The invited guests won't come. The reasons given are reasonable enough. According to vs. 18–20, we find that one just purchased some land and must go see it. Another just purchased a yoke of oxen and he must examine them. Another man just got married. Not this time, please have us excused. It's shocking and scandalous! Everyone knew this day was coming. But they all said no when it arrived. Remember, this parable teaches us about Christ's kingdom.

Tragically, so many say no to God's invitation to His banquet. The excuses are pretty much the same. Too busy, there's not enough time. Other priorities must be attended to first. Please have me excused from the feast that is offered week after week in Christ's churches. Maybe in the years to come, when life is slower, then I'll be able to feast with Jesus. Excuses are given, but they ring hollow compared to magnitude of the gifts God offers.

It's here I want to pause and take a side path. Even as I rejoiced when I learned that Roe vs. Wade had been overturned, I found myself in the aftermath to be convicted for my lack of faith. The words of Jesus come to mind, "O ye of little faith" (Matt. 8:26). Though I prayed for it to happen, I must admit I didn't think I would see it in my lifetime. But here we are! Thanks be to God. Many unborn babies will be spared a horrific death. We rejoice that many, many women will be spared the life-long trauma and guilt of knowing they did not love their babies as themselves. We rejoice that many men will be required to learn yet again that true manliness is not found in the ability to get a woman pregnant. Rather, men who would be manly and courageous demonstrate such virtues by becoming a husband to the woman he loves. And a father who loves sacrificially the children he and his wife conceive together.

Though we rejoice that Roe vs. Wade has been overturned, more work must be done. More prayers must be prayed. More Christian witness to God's gifts of life, marriage, and family must be given. Once again, we Christians need to raise the banner of the goodness, beauty, and wonder of marriage and family. We must do again what the early Christians did when the pagans discarded their unwanted children. They saved them, loved them, and raised them as their own. Women who had been abused or abandoned were brought into families. Young men were taught discipline, virtue, and godliness. In today's epistle text, we heard the apostle John's admonition, "Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (I Jn. 3:18).

How this relates to today's gospel text is made clear when we remember that excuses were given as to why people couldn't attend the feast. The purchase of new property, new oxen must be examined, one couple got married (vs. 18–20). The common assumption behind all these excuses is that our lives, our bodies, our possessions belong to us. We can do with them as we wish. Claims upon my time, attention, or priorities can be nullified at will, including God and His kingdom. In the debate over abortion, have we not heard time and time again that it's a woman's body, she can do with whatever she wishes? And nothing has the right to alter her autonomy, not the child, not a man, not her family, not the larger community. Her body, her choice. Now such thinking is being used in the debates over gender identity and the very definition of marriage. I determine by gender at will; it's mine not yours. Not even my physical body can tell me my sex. My marriage is mine, to define, alter, and arrange as I see fit. It's my life, my property, my choices. Nothing can make any authoritative claim over and beyond my will and choice, not even God.

To all such thinking, the Christian Church must speak the truth. You do not belong to yourself. God makes a claim upon us as our creator. As Christians, Christ Jesus has redeemed your body and life by His own precious blood. Every baptized believer is a living temple of the Holy Spirit. The idea that we can do whatever we like, whenever we want regardless of the wishes of others is simply a demonic lie. Listen to I Corinthians 6:19–20, "¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from

God? You are not your own, ²⁰for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

Our natural inclinations are always to turn away from the good, holy, and pure. Never trust in your own power and strength. Instead, return time and time again to God’s Word, His Sacraments, His Church, the Lord’s Prayer, to our given sex, family, marriage, children, and all the holy things of God. I appeal by the mercies of God, humble yourselves before the Lord, set aside the excuses we so easily make, and seek His goodness in repentance and faith.

In the parable, the man offering the feast, who represents God, responds to the excuses with anger and determination. The ingratitude of some will not thwart His desire to be gracious. There will be a feast. More servants are sent out, “Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame” (vs. 21). The Lord Jesus sends out His preachers to everyone. Yes, the poor and forgotten, the marginalized and downcast; they will come. And they do.

And yet the master wants more! This is the banquet of all banquets. “Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet” (vs. 23–24). Dear church of God, we are the gracious recipients of Christ’s invitation! He would have us be here to receive all the riches of His kingdom! And we would have more come. So that together, He can give the healing in body and soul that comes from His love and forgiveness. Christ Jesus is the bread of life. By participating in this feast of His Word and Sacrament, you receive the life of God’s incarnate Son, the Lord Jesus who lived, died, and rose again to give us His kingdom.

There will be more feasting next week. Bring your family and friends. The blessed bread of His kingdom cannot be exhausted. What Jesus offers and gives you today, you, your friends and loved ones, the strangers you don’t know, all of them, all of us will need next week. And it will only be better. More joyous, more refreshing. The holy Christian Church is THE place of joy and feasting. Come, let us feast on the bread of life.

✠ 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.