

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Third Sunday after Trinity

July 3, 2022

Text: Luke 15:11–32

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

The parable of the prodigal son is one of the most beautiful and powerful stories in the Bible. Some have called it the “gospel within the gospel.” What that means is that this parable is a statement of the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe, included in the heart of Luke’s gospel.

The details are very familiar. A man had two sons. The younger son wanted to live life without his father. So he did the unthinkable; he asked his father to give him his inheritance. The scandal behind such a request is that children receive the inheritance only after the parents have died. This younger son was basically saying, “Dad, you’re dead to me. In fact, I wish you were already dead. But since you’re not, let’s skip all the pleasantries. Give me my inheritance now and I’ll be on my way.” It’s an outrageous request.

What’s remarkable is the father grants the request. But take note of vs. 12. It’s so easy to miss what the father did, “And he (i.e., the father) divided his property between *them*.” The father gave the older son his inheritance, roughly two-thirds of the estate, while he gave the younger son his inheritance, about one-third. We mustn’t forget that detail.

The younger son leaves town. He squanders his inheritance with reckless living (vs. 13). That doesn’t mean sinful living necessarily. But just wasteful. His older brother accused his younger brother, in vs. 30, of wasting his inheritance on prostitutes. But it’s not clear to me that the older brother’s evaluation of his sibling can be entirely trusted. More on that later.

After reaching rock bottom, the younger brother decides it would be better to live as a servant in his father’s house than to be a pig herder longing to eat pig

slop. Don't miss the gut-wrenching punch that would have given to any Jewish reader of Luke's gospel. A rich, foolish Jewish boys living among and eating with the pigs! Pigs were considered the pinnacle of unclean foods. Such situation is lower than low.

In a similar way, we mustn't miss the connection this has for everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike. Sin and disobedience to God has brought us to the depths of degradation. St. Paul says all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). We humans beings, who were created in God's image to be coregents and rulers over a perfect creation are now subject to eternal wrath, unending shame, and the degradation of sin. No wonder the Paul laments his sinful condition by declaring with words of intense anguish, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). All humanity, including each and every one of us, has become the younger son living among unclean animals having been impoverish by our own willful sin and prideful rebellion against God's love and fellowship.

But then, by God's grace and mercy, the younger son goes home ready to be a servant. All the pride, the youthful arrogance, the foolish ambitions are gone. True enough. But what's even more extraordinary is the father's actions! Shocking! Almost scandalous in themselves. He runs to his long-lost son. Men of consequence and dignity in the ancient world never ran. Never. But here he is throwing aside all caution, all customary expectation, and embraces his long-lost son. Vs. 24 records some of the most impassioned, loving words ever recorded in human literature, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

From that moment forward, the son is restored to his original position in the family. Almost as if he had never left in the first place. And there is rejoicing. The best of the best is present. The fattened calf. The son clothed and adorned with the family ring. It's stunningly beautiful. It's the gospel of new life, forgiveness, and reconciliation within Luke's gospel, the larger narrative of the life and deeds of the Lord Jesus Christ. All of us are represented by the younger son. Dead and lost to our heavenly Father. But through Christ Jesus, His perfect life and sacrificial death, we have been sought and found, cleansed and

renewed, and declared to be the beloved sons of our heavenly Father. And heaven celebrates as Luke 15:7, 10 teaches us.

But what are we to make of the older brother? If Jesus had ended his story at vs. 24, “And they began to celebrate” we would leave with a wonderful tale of the power and redemptive grace foundational to Christianity. It would be satisfying.

But it would be incomplete. The older brother stands out as the great warning and admonition that we must heed! Will we rejoice in the restoration and reconciliation of the foolish, debased, but beloved younger son/brother? Do we rejoice that the father, who represents God, runs to embrace the ruined but repentance sinner? Will we join in the celebration accentuated by feasting and rejoicing or remain outside in judgmental superiority? The older brother presents us with the question of do we love the gospel of Christ Jesus. The gospel through which God the Father declares unrighteous, ungodly sinners to be just, holy, pure sons of God. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe.

Let’s look at the older brother a bit closer. His part of the story begins in vs. 25–32. The older son was working in the fields when he came home. He heard the merrymaking and celebration. It’s at this point his actions become strange, problematic. This is now his house, his property. Remember earlier I said that according to vs. 12, the father gave the older son his inheritance at the same time as when he gave it to the younger son. The house is all his but he refuses to go in to see what going on. Instead, he calls for a servant who tells him the younger son is back and the father is celebrating with a magnificent feast (vs. 27). He is separated from or outside the household. He’s outside the church not only physically, but spiritually. The truth of the matter is the older son is as dead to the father and the rest of the family as the younger son was at the beginning of the parable. He didn’t run off to a foreign country but he just as well have done so. By refusing to enter the family celebration, the older son is declaring himself outside the family. An outsider looking in. He’s lost. And needs to be found.

Jesus continues with the parable. The father learns that the older son refuses to join the party. Once again, the father must do the unexpected. He seeks out the older son too. Never forget, dear brothers and sisters, God does the seeking, the finding, and the saving. That's the wonder and the joy of our Christian faith. God the Father loves and saves us by giving us His Son, the Lord Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit's ministry of calling sinners back home to the Father through the Gospel, we are saved and born again to be redeemed children of God. It's simply amazing. Praise be to God for His steadfast love and mercy.

Let's continue with the older son, remembering that we faced with the question of how we will respond the message that God saves and loves sinners. Consider what the older brother says to his father in vs. 29–30. You might follow along as I read those verses as I will add some commentary as we go along:

<sup>29</sup>Look, these many years I have served you (*the Greek says slaved for you*), and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends (*actually the father had already given him the inheritance, the goats and the fattened calves were his already*). <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came (*he doesn't even claim his brother as brother, nor his father as father*), who has devoured your property with prostitutes (*Jesus never said the younger son was immoral, just reckless; the older son can't explain anything in the kindest way*), you killed the fattened calf for him (*but not for me*)!

The older son is as dead to the father and his younger brother as if he too went off into a foreign land and lived with the pigs. The father continues to appeal to his older son to join the family in celebration. Listen to the extravagant love of the father, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (vs. 31–32). The father loves both prodigal sons.

The question that remains for all of us is will we join the celebration? The story ends with a cliffhanger. We don't know if the older brother repents, embraces his father and his brother, and celebrates with the household of believers.

And so the spotlight of God's Word now shines upon our hearts and minds. Most of you have lived your entire lives within the Christian Church having been baptized as infants. There were ups and downs but the Church has always been part of your life to one degree or another. It's easy for us who have been around a long time and lived good, moral lives to develop a sense of spiritual superiority. "Look, these many years I have served you..." And then, in an unexpected moment, we see the joy and celebration the repentance of a sinner creates in the church. It doesn't need to be a "notorious" sinner like a convicted felon or something like that. Maybe just the guy down the street. Or that man you did business with in the past. Or, the classmate you used to hang out with in school; he knows a little of your past even as you do his. Those people are now Christians! Members of my church? And they are being received as equals with me? Animosity begins to set in. Spiritual pride.

Jesus leaves the parable unfinished so that each of us in our own lives can complete the story. It is true, we are all like the younger prodigal son, lost, dead, but found and loved. But we must finish the story of the older prodigal son. By the mercies of God, let us set aside every form of spiritual superiority and run into the celebration. Eat and drink – yes the Lord's Supper and sermons! – and celebrate. Sing the liturgy and the hymns with gusto. It doesn't matter if you are on pitch or have a good voice. The church isn't a concert but a feast. Join the celebration. King David, that sinful but forgiven man, wrote Psalm 103. May his inspired words be the song of our heart now and for eternity; hear his joy:

<sup>1</sup>Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! <sup>2</sup>Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, <sup>3</sup>who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, <sup>4</sup>who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, <sup>5</sup>who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

That's the gospel we celebrate. God be praised....

✠ 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

Fifth Sunday after Trinity

July 17, 2022

Text: Luke 5:1–11

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

What are we to make of Luke's retelling of Jesus using Peter's boat as a floating pulpit? You might say Peter's boat was the first Christian pulpit! To be sure, Jesus was using the resources available to Him at the time. Large crowds were following Him. Vs. 1 says the crowds were "pressing in on Jesus to hear the word of God." Using Peter's boat was a practical solution to a real problem.

And what a problem! People were eager to hear God's Word. Now that's something that ought to cause us to pause. It's too easy to point our fingers at people who do not hear God's Word read and preached on Sundays during the divine service. Sports, jobs, chores, vacations, and so forth easily crowd into the time dedicated to hearing the Word of God. It's also true that the human heart resists God's Word with indifference, unbelief, and outright hostility to the Christian gospel. But the bright beams of God's Word must shine into our own hearts and lives first and foremost. The apostle Peter wrote that judgment begins at the house of God first (I Peter 4:17).

Are we eager to hear God's Word preached, taught, and applied to our lives? Luther, in the Small Catechism, explained the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment by saying, "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it." The crowd demonstrated its glad desire to hear the Word of God by pressing in upon Christ Jesus as He preached. Christians do this by not only coming to worship services but disciplining their minds and bodies to hear God's Word so that they can appropriate God's Word for their own lives and make godly application. But this is not limited to hearing the 20-25 minutes of the Sunday sermon. It also includes hearing, reading, and contemplating God's Word throughout the week in the midst of fulfilling your various godly vocations. James and John heard the

word of Jesus as they were cleaning their nets; Peter stopped his work to row Jesus out into the water. The rest of the crowd took the necessary time to hear Jesus preach. We Christians give attention to these things because the Lord Jesus has the words of life (Jn. 6:68) and His gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). The Holy Spirit uses God's Word to nourish us so that our faith grows, our troubled and terrified consciences are assuaged; and we learn to delight in God's will because His word and Law reside in our hearts (Ps. 40:8).

These things we learn as mediate upon those simple, but powerful words, "...the crowd was pressing in on Jesus to hear the word of God." Through faith and obedience let us continually press upon Jesus so that He can teach us His Word through daily Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer as well as through hearing preaching combined with a godly reception of the Lord's Supper.

But what are we to make of this miraculous catch of fish? Preaching and 1<sup>st</sup> century professional fishing skills don't seem to go together, certainly not at first glance. What brings them together is the preaching of God's Word. Peter, James, and John caught fish by casting out a net and bringing in everything caught in its wake; net fishing is by its nature very indiscriminate. Rod and tackle fishing, the kind that most of us are more familiar with, is a different thing altogether. Rod fishing targets specific kinds of fish using the right kind of bait or lures. You catch trout with one kind of bait but that same bait won't work with catfish.

What Jesus is teaching Peter, James, and John – who will become fishers and catchers of men according to vs. 10, is that Christ's Word is to go out indiscriminately to all men, women, and children. The Church's ministry is to go out into every tribe, people, nation, and language. Anytime the Church targets a specific category of people with the gospel, she is becoming unfaithful to the Christian gospel. Let me be clear here. I am not talking about reaching out to a specific ethnicity using their own native language. Churches have always been established churches that use a people's common tongue. Hispanic churches using the Spanish language, Chinese churches using Mandarin, English speaking churches wherever English is spoken, and so forth. What I am

saying is what the Christian Church cannot do is target a specific segment within a particular group of people.

This is a huge temptation for 21<sup>st</sup> century American Christianity. Our entire society is established upon market driven capitalism. Commercials, billboards, spam messages, etc. are all built upon reaching a specific audience. Targeted advertising has only become more common with the rise of internet technology, smart phones, and social media. Companies pay big money to learn the particular habits – likes, dislikes, sentiments, and lifestyle choices, of their potential customers. And they employ rod and tackle like fishing techniques. Just place the right bait out there to entice the potential customer.

The Christian Church can never adopt such practices and remain faithful to the message of Christ. Her message must go out to every tribe, people, language, and nation without regard for specific groupings or categories within those various cultures and nations. The first big, big theological debate that took place within the Christian Church was centered on this very question. You can read about the debate in the book of Acts. Through chapter 8, the Church's membership was largely Jewish in composition. Then, in chapter 10, Peter goes to preach the gospel to Cornelius, a god-fearing Roman centurion. He and his entire household gladly heard the preaching of Christ crucified and resurrected for salvation of sinners; they heard, believed, and were all baptized. Chapter 11 records the criticism of the Christian Jews who thought the Church should remain exclusively Jewish in character and practice. Acts chapters 13-14 records Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey in which they took the gospel to various Gentile, non-Jewish, lands of the Roman Empire. The work of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas culminated in the Jerusalem Council of chapter 15. Acts 15:2 says there was "no small dissension" between Paul and Barnabas on one hand and the Jewish only party, on the other hand. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Church followed the Lord by saying the gospel must be preached to all nations without the cultural requirements of Judaism. Sinners are saved through faith in Christ alone without the works and requirements of the Law.

The modern church's temptation is to target the segments of our society that we deem desirable. Educated, wealthy, conservative politically, or the opposite –



those who embrace the various progressive or liberal social causes, congregations organized around music styles, targeted age groups, the young, families, retirees, or establishing ministries that cater to desirable segments of our culture. Or maybe worst of all, ministries established upon the charisma and dynamism of the pastor or the pastoral staff. All such approaches do not reflect the universal character of the Christian gospel. Christ Jesus loves all people. His blood was shed to atone for the sins of every man, woman, and child that will ever exist. The Church must embrace the totality of all people. At a local level, the congregations ought to reflect the makeup of the people in her area for she reaches to all the people in her area. To do otherwise, is unfaithful to Christ and His gospel.

But what are we to make of the miraculous catch of fish? This too illustrates the wondrous, unexpected power of the word of God. Peter, the professional fisherman, knew that Jesus' request in vs. 4 to throw out the nets into the deep was a fool's errand. It's just wasted time and energy. You don't catch fish in the Sea of Galilee in the deepest parts of the lake during the daytime. Though human wisdom and experience spoke against casting out the nets, Peter did so at the word of Christ. And the catch was so great it began to sink the boats! Whenever there is an apparent conflict between man's wisdom and God's wisdom revealed in the Bible, we Christians must always follow God's Word. The world and everyone around us may laugh, scoff, and scorn our doctrine, our worship, even our way of godly living in the world. So be it. We will continue to press in upon Jesus to hear His word, believe it, and follow it by faith knowing He will prosper His word in our lives and in the Church until the end of time. Such must be our Christian boldness and confidence in Christ and His Word.

Finally, what are we to make of Peter, James, and John's response to the great catch of fish? Peter realized he was in the presence of the almighty God in human flesh and blood. Such realization brought fear and terror. He was a sinner quite literally trapped in God's presence with no place to go! Jesus was in the boat with Peter! Jesus forgave Peter his sins. "Do not be afraid" (vs. 10) was the absolution Jesus spoke to Peter. Yes, you are in the presence of God but you need not be afraid for I forgive you all your sins. Be a peace. And then, Peter,

along with James and John were called to be fishers or catchers of men. They closed up shop, went out of business, and followed Jesus.

And this is where we must bring our sermon to its conclusion. Christians follow Jesus. Wherever He leads and guides them by His Word through the Spirit. Christians follow Jesus. Using human wisdom and experience, Peter, James, and John should have continued with fishing. Such a catch combined with their normal activities would have sustained them for some time to come. Instead, they left it all behind in obedience to follow Jesus (vs. 11). We mustn't overlook that one word, "everything." They left "everything" and followed Jesus.

What this means practically for us and really all Christians, regardless of where and when they live, is that their entire lives are conformed to the standard of God's Word. I hope you see this unifying theme throughout this sermon. The standard of our life, conduct, worship, everything is the truth revealed in God's Word. We follow Jesus at work, at home, during our leisure, in our thoughts and emotions, in our goals and sentiments. In all things, we follow Jesus by hearing and obeying His Word even when it's hard. This is what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus. The only outcome that is promised to us is eternal life and glorious victory in the world to come. Not success and ease in this age. But Christ promises to be with us always in this age and forever. Let us always press in upon Jesus to hear His Word and follow Him.

✠ 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

Sixth Sunday after Trinity

July 24, 2022

Text: Matthew 5:17–26

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

Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches in today's gospel text that without a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, no one will enter into the kingdom of heaven (vs. 20). All of us must have a righteousness, defined by God, or you will not go to heaven. Without this righteousness, your eternal destiny is to share in the judgment of eternal fire prepared by God for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41); those are the words of Jesus! Much is at stake in that word, "righteousness."

So what do we mean by righteousness? To begin with, this righteousness is defined by God, not man. For when man speaks of righteousness, he thinks primarily in terms of morality and external actions, ethics. To be sure, that is one aspect of biblical righteousness but not its primary reference. Jesus says our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. They understood righteousness in terms of right, moral, and religious behavior.

And they were really good at it!! That is, they were good at the external behavior. They gave a tenth of everything they possessed including the spices and herbs they used in their food (Matt. 23:23, mint, dill, and cumin). The scribes and Pharisees scrupulously observed the traditions of the fathers such as the washing of their hands when they return from the marketplace and the washing of cups, pots, copper vessels, and dining couches (Mk. 7:1–4). They fasted often (Matt. 9:14), memorized the Torah and made phylacteries with Scripture passages included for easy reference, and made long prayers for all to hear and see (Matt. 23).

And Jesus says that kind of religious, spiritual, and ethical righteousness won't get you to heaven. That should cause us to pause. Our external acts of

righteousness are insufficient to get into God's kingdom. To put this in modern terms. Imagine the kind of person who goes to Church whenever the doors are open, he gives 10% on his gross income, plus a little extra for special projects; he memorizes Scripture and the Catechism, he prays and fasts regularly, he knows the Church's liturgy inside and out, he knows his church history and the richness of the Christian tradition. His life is clean, orderly, upright, without a profane word uttered, and his life is impeccably good. That kind of righteousness will not get you to heaven.

So what is this righteousness that God demands? It's a just and pure standing in God's sight that flows from fear, love, and trust in Him. In other words, it's a righteousness of faith, a spiritual righteousness of the heart that must come from God Himself. This righteousness is described by the Ten Commandments. But the Ten Commandments do not give this righteousness. That was the error the scribes and Pharisees made. They thought righteousness in God's sight could be obtained and achieved by human effort in keeping the external demands of the Ten Commandments. So, they did everything God's Law demanded and then some. But their heart was impure, corrupted, and an abomination in God's sight. God desires a righteousness of faith that changes hearts and minds as well as behaviors. But it all begins in the heart.

Listen to Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. The 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment says, "You shall not murder." Jesus said, in Matthew 5:21–22,

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."

Anger in the heart against your brother is the same as murder in God's sight. An insult deserves judgment. A rash condemnation of "You fool" spoken out loud or in your heart is damnable to the hell of fire. The 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment certainly forbids the taking of human life. That only the external. What it demands but cannot give is actual love and concern for your neighbor's physical wellbeing.

The righteousness that God demands is more than not harming someone; it requires love and concern from the heart that then leads to action for the wellbeing of your neighbor. The spiritual righteousness comes first as a gift of God through faith in Christ. And then love in thought, word, and deed follows. But the righteousness of faith come first, then righteous deeds as a fruit of faith.

For many years, we have been told two erroneous things about Christianity and the Bible. First, that it's only about the spirit. It doesn't really matter what you do in and with your body, so long as you don't hurt anyone. It's all about having a good spirit, sincere intentions, as if the body and the deeds of the body are indifferent to God. Not so. The second error is the opposite and is closely akin to the error of the scribes and Pharisees. This error says righteousness is defined only in terms of external, moral actions. It's all about doing the right thing as if the intents and motivations of the heart and mind are irrelevant. One error says it's all about the heart with no regard for the body. The other error says it's all about your behavior with little thought to the condition of your heart. Both are wrong.

Our Lord Jesus holds both together. The righteousness that is required for entrance into heaven is a righteousness of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This righteousness of faith is spiritual and includes the thoughts and intentions of the heart. But this righteousness of faith, which receives the forgiveness of sins and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, moves the Christian to live according to the demands of the Ten Commandments, internally and externally. That is, love for the neighbor from the heart to actual, tangible deeds.

The Lord Jesus taught this in today's text when he said, "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (vs. 23–24). The desire of the Christian, who has received the righteousness of faith, is to be reconciled to anyone – the brother in today's text – who might have a complaint against him. It is simply wrong to say or think something like this, "Well, that's his problem. As long as I'm not physically hurting him, then everything is ok; no skin off my

back. And besides, my thoughts are my own. They are none of his business or anyone else's for that matter." Not so with the Christian.

For the Christian has died with Christ in the waters of baptism. The Christian is dead to sin and hypocrisy but alive to God in Christ Jesus. By the grace of the Spirit working through baptism, the Christian has been raised from deadness of sin to walk in newness of life. The old, sinful nature with all its evil desires and intentions and merely external acts of righteousness have been crucified with Christ. The Christian is alive to God, reconciled unto eternal life through the merits and mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Having been so loved and reconciled to God, the Christian now seeks reconciliation with his brother; he seeks to love his brother for the sake of the brother. These verses, vs. 23–24, have informed one aspect of our communion practice. That is, as much as lies within you under God's grace in Christ, you seek to be reconciled to an estranged brother or sister. Sins are confessed. Forgiveness is sought. Reconciliation is prayed and worked for. This is the righteousness of faith in action. If that means refraining from receiving the Lord's Supper for a while until reconciliation is achieved, then so be it. Leave this gift on the altar, be reconciled, and then come. Receive Christ's gift and offer your sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving with a joyful heart.

Our Lord teaches that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Thanks be to God! We have this righteousness in Christ Jesus; our Lord is the fulfilment of God's Law (vs. 17). The 10 Commandments describe Jesus! The marvel of the Christian Gospel is that through faith in Christ, the Christian is declared righteous in the sight of God the Father. The Christian has the goodness, virtue, purity, and integrity of Jesus given to him. Dear saints, in Christ Jesus you are righteous. Christ Jesus has fulfilled every iota and dot of the Law. He taught and lived righteously according to God's holy Law in thought, word, and deed. And that righteousness is yours through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why St. Paul is able to say Christians are dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11).

This is the righteousness we are to seek: the righteousness of Christ Jesus given to us freely in the Gospel and lived out in life under His grace and love. His righteousness endures to all eternity.

✠ 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

Seventh Sunday after Trinity

July 31, 2022

Text: Mark 8:1–9

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

The Lord created us human beings to be hungry. After the Lord God formed Adam from the dust of the earth, He placed Adam in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve, his wife given to Him by God, could eat of every tree. They could eat as much as they wanted. The food was God's gift to them to be receive in thanksgiving and with joy. Only the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was withheld for them, and this for their good. The Lord God gave Adam a warning about this one tree, "...in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:7–11).

From this we should note that life and death, good and evil are defined by God's Word. God Himself declared all of creation to be good, very good in fact (Gen. 1). This includes man, woman, marriage between man and woman, the procreation of children who are loved and nurtured so that they too may love God, and this beautiful world He has given to us; the good of work, eating and drinking, love and fellowship with one another. All of these things and so much more are to be received in faith and prayer according to God's holy Word. But most especially, we human beings were created to know and love God, to participate in His life and His love. He alone is the highest good, as our hymn beautifully set forth. We fear, love, and trust in Him above all things. The Giver of the gifts must be cherished above the gifts.

Eventually, Adam and Eve's hunger led them to eat of that tree; the hunger was not the problem. But seeking to satisfy that hunger in a way God had not commanded. Death came to them and this beautiful world because of their disobedience to God's Word. But the Lord had compassion. A savior, born of a woman, would come and fix the mess they created. Satan would be defeated by the divine Son born of Eve's descendants. The effects of the Fall, however,



would continue until the end of time. God's judgment of death stands firm and true. Henceforth, man will satisfy his hunger for bread by the sweat of his brow. God created man for work, a gift of God. But now that work will include adversity, pain, suffering, and ultimately, death. For you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gen. 3:19).

This recounting of humanity's beginning is important in order to understand the gospel reading from Mark 8, the feeding of the 4,000 men plus women and children. For three days, Jesus taught the crowds about God's kingdom. Our Lord saw their greatest need: the bread of the kingdom,! The only food that can satisfy the hunger of the soul. These precious souls were starving for truth and new life; He gave them His Word. And thereby Jesus was giving them Himself through His Word. This is and remains our highest need, the bread of life, Christ Himself.

But our Lord also knew that after three days of nourishing them with the wholesome food of God's Word, they needed physical food. In this hot, dry desert place (vs. 4), the people hungered and thirsted. Jesus knows our human nature and all our needs for His not only true God but true man. For 3 days, He fed their souls with the Gospel. Now, He must sustain their physical bodies as well. Jesus, the Good Shepherd of bodies and souls, knows our need, and He provides. And please mark and note this, dear saints of God, Jesus provides so that all who receive His gifts are "satisfied", as vs. 8 teaches. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:6).

Do we, however, recognize our needs and know who can satisfy them rightly? We're pretty good at identifying our physical needs; we take care of them very well, at times in fact, we give them way too much attention. God's Word teaches us that God provides for our physical needs through the many godly and noble vocations of this life: family, jobs, a stable economy, education, government, good weather, health, the ability to learn and do things, and so forth. Psalm 145:15-17:

<sup>15</sup>The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.  
<sup>16</sup>You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. <sup>17</sup>The LORD is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works.

We give thanks for all godly vocations because God works through them to satisfy the desire of every living thing.

But do we recognize our great spiritual need? God's Word reveals that we do not and cannot recognize our need without the grace of the Holy Spirit. Today's epistle reading describes life without the Holy Spirit and God's Word as "slavery to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness" (Rom. 6:19). In and of ourselves, we are slaves to sin, free from righteousness and a right knowledge of God. Such a life, without God's Spirit and His holy Word, ends in death (Rom. 6:21).

The Holy Spirit, working through God's Word of Law and Gospel, reveals our desperate need and our Lord's magnanimous provision. The Law reveals we are slaves to sin and subject to death. And the Law reveals that even as Christians, born again through the Gospel and baptism, we cannot sustain our spiritual lives through own efforts. God's Word of grace, His Gospel word of forgiveness, life, and salvation, creates and sustains our spiritual lives. God's Word teaches us that God the Holy Trinity must provide for our physical and spiritual needs. In all things, He alone is our highest good.

From God's Word we have established that God Himself provides for all our physical and spiritual needs. The question priority must be considered. Do we seek to nourish our spiritual life as much as our physical life? The Lord Jesus orders our priorities. In today's text, he taught the crowd for 3 days in a desolate place before feeding them miraculously with bread and fish. During our Lord's wilderness fasting and temptation (Matt 4), He told Satan that man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Jesus said these words after fasting for 40 days! In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:25–33), Jesus taught that the Gentiles and unbelievers seek after houses, homes, clothing and so forth. But His people are to seek first (not second, third, or fourth, but first) the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these

things will be added to you. Jesus placed the priority of our spiritual lives over our physical lives when He said, “Whoever would follow me, let him deny himself, take up His cross and follow Me” (Mk 8:34). To follow Jesus means, dying to yourself, to sin, to the world, knowing that Jesus will provide all that is necessary for life in this world and the world to come. We are to seek spiritual life and vitality more than physical life. Therein lies our challenge and our struggle. For do we not reverse the priorities Jesus has set for us?

Here are but a few situations to consider as evaluate the priorities we have set for our lives. If parents must choose between various opportunities for their children (sports, clubs, music, etc.) or catechism class and regular, worship attendance, who wins? How often do Christians turn down good, wholesome things because to do so would require us to neglect God’s Word? Will a congregation which teaches the Gospel in all its articles be chosen even if that means driving or attending worship at times that aren’t convenient? Would we ever turn down a lucrative job opportunity because we know that there isn’t a faithful, Lutheran congregation available in the area to feed and nourish our souls and the souls of our children? Do we teach our kids that the first question you should ask before pursuing a university or vocational opportunity is not how much money or what degree can be earned but is there a faithful Lutheran congregation that will nourish our souls with the purity of God’s Word?

I realize the general situations I listed have many factors that must be considered. But before we start softening our uneasiness, I want us to consider forthrightly our priorities. The Bible teaches us that God and His Word are to have the priority. Our spiritual needs must be met above our physical needs coupled with our Lord’s promise to provide for both. But seek first the Kingdom of God...

Jesus waited three days before He fed them with physical bread. But the crowd stayed with Jesus. As He provided for their real spiritual need so He satisfied their desperate physical need. Our Lord takes 7 loaves of bread and a few fish (Matt. 15:32-39) and feeds them miraculously. And Mark writes, “And they ate and were satisfied” and there were 7 baskets full of fragments leftover (vs. 8).

We come back again to those great words of vs 8, “And they were satisfied.” This was certainly true of the physical bread our Lord gave the people. But it also includes the bread of heaven He gave them during the 3 days of teaching. And this is the encouragement and renewed strength I want you to have this morning. The Lord Jesus will always satisfy us with what is good and right. There will be challenges and afflictions. But Jesus knows our needs. He promises to provide for them completely and fully. Seek first Christ and His kingdom. And like the crowd of 4,000 men, plus women and children, you will be satisfied. Trust Jesus. He suffered, died, and rose again. He’s proven Himself trustworthy.

Today’s text teaches us that our Lord Jesus Christ is a gracious Lord who is eager to help us both physically and spiritually. For revealing this truth to us, let us rejoice and give thanks to God today. Let our prayer to God the Father continually be that we would always hunger and thirst not only for the good gifts of this world but even more for the blessed gifts of life, forgiveness, the fruit of the Spirit, and all the wonders of God’s kingdom.

✠ 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.