

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Ninth Sunday after Trinity

August 1, 2021

Text: Luke 16:1–13

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

The gospel text for today from Luke 16 is a particularly challenging portion of Scripture. Before we look at this parable in particular, I want to set the context so that we might better understand what Jesus is teaching us. According to Luke 14:25, Jesus paused His journey to Jerusalem to teach the large crowds following Him. The people making up these crowds would include His close disciples, the 12 apostles, probably the 72 men He sent out to preach (Luke 10), and devout women such as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, who provided for Jesus and His disciples from their own financial resources (Luke 8). The crowd would also include the curious. Jesus' reputation as a miracle-worker and powerful teacher was widely known across Israel. The crowd would probably include some of those healed by Jesus on previous occasions, as well as those who witnessed His miracles, particularly the feeding of the 5,000 and the 4,000. The crowd certainly would have included Jesus' enemies, the scribes and Pharisees, with whom He has had several intense debates and encounters (Lk. 7; 15:2).

Jesus continued teaching this large, mixed crowd mentioned in Luke 14:25 through all of Luke 15–16. Our Lord doesn't speak to His close disciples exclusively until Luke 17:1. So we are in the midst of teaching that was meant to be heard by any and everyone, the curious, the sincere, the doubting, and those who considered Jesus an enemy. Listen to the very first thing Jesus says to this mixed crowd, beginning at Luke 14:26–27:

<sup>26</sup>“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. <sup>27</sup>Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

The requirement for being a follower of Jesus is absolute devotion. There are no exceptions. It applies to everyone who could be called a Christian. Love and commitment to Jesus must be greater than love for father, mother, wife, children,

brothers, sisters, and even one's very life. Anyone who isn't willing to live, suffer, and die for Jesus – bearing a cross in Jesus' day referred to a sentence of death, of execution by crucifixion, could not be His disciples. Such is the uncompromising nature of being a Christian, a follower of Jesus. But then again, think about the uncompromising nature of Jesus being the Savior of the world! He bore the cross of Good Friday's cross whereby He took away the sins of the world. He loved His heavenly Father and every man, woman, and child who would ever live, to such an extent that He willingly gave Himself up unto suffering, death, and resurrection so that sinful man and God might be reconciled for all eternity. He took up His cross and followed His Father's will in love for His Father and for us that we might be redeemed from a horrific eternity of judgment and torment. The disciples is not above His master, Jesus taught in Luke 6:40. All Christians must follow Jesus in a similar manner. It's a non-negotiable.

But Jesus continues teaching what this uncompromising discipleship looks like in the remaining chapters. He used parables primarily, sprinkled with shorter statements of wisdom and truth. Luke 15 contains the very famous parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. Through these parables we learn that Christian discipleship isn't really something we choose. Christ Jesus is the one who seeks and saves the lost so that they can follow Him. The angels in heaven rejoice when Jesus finds lost sinners and they repent, believe the gospel, and follow Jesus in faith and life.

It's this background of an uncompromising standard of discipleship marked by loving and trusting in Jesus above all persons and things coupled with the truth that such a discipleship must begin, continue, and end with the grace and mercy of Jesus that informs the parable of the dishonest manager in Luke 16, today's reading. This is a parable that causes us to evaluate our Christian discipleship. Have we been faithful in taking up our cross and following Jesus? Or to use vs. 2, does the "the account of (our) management" prove us faithful? Or have we, vs. 1, "wasted his (i.e., Jesus') possessions"?

The first thing we must note is that all of us will give an account to God for the life we have lived. The Bible consistently teaches that there will be a reckoning on the Last Day. Every thought, word, and deed will be judged. Remember the standard of discipleship: absolute, total devotion to Jesus above all things and persons. We are called by God to be faithful in how we use our bodies, our time, our resources, how we love and treat our family, friends, and neighbors, and so forth. And we are called

to be faithful in God's spiritual things, church, prayer, the gospel, worship in public and private, witnessing to family, friends, and neighbors. In all these things, we will give an "account of (our) management."

We should see ourselves as the manager in the parable. And what is the verdict of our management? We have wasted God's possessions, that is, we have not been faithful in the gifts God has given to us. We are poor, miserable sinners who have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed. We have not loved God with our whole hearts, nor have we loved our neighbors as ourselves. We justly deserve God's temporal and eternal judgment. Our management of God's earthly and spiritual gifts, according to God's strict judgment, is unfaithful.

So what are we to do? Again, we go back to the parable. What did the manager do? This is where things in the parable become really interesting and quite challenging. The manager went to his master's debtors and illegitimately reduced their debts. One person owed 100 measures of oil. The manager reduced it to 50. Another owed the master 100 measures of wheat. The manager reduced it to 80. The manager took these actions with the purpose of securing his future. Vs. 4, "I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses." Our first reaction is this guy is a cheat! Are we Christians supposed to act like that? The answer is no. Jesus is not advocating dishonesty. It was the manager's lack of honest, faithful management that got him into trouble in the first place.

What the manager did, which is what we are to copy and emulate, is he trusted in the master's mercy and integrity. The manager reduced those debts in his name. The debtors accepted the offers given to them in good faith. The master will not go back on anything conducted in his name even though it results in his loss. The manager staked his entire future on the master's character of mercy and integrity. We know this is the point of the parable for vs. 8-9:

The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you in the eternal dwellings.

What is commended in the parable is the manager's ability to secure his future by using all means available to him, especially the master's goodness, integrity, and mercy. I want to make this application as clear and pointed as I possibly can. Our

future, both for life in this world and our eternal future in the life to come, is secure only in the goodness, integrity, and mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is our treasure, our hope, and our security. Everything depends on Him. We can't trust in the quality of our management of our life. It's tainted by sins and failures left and right. So what we must stake heart and soul upon is that in spite of our sins and failures in how we use God's gifts, Jesus will remain faithful and true to us even though it cost Him dearly. And it did cost Him dearly. Remember, He has already walked down the road of the cross. He paid the price for our mismanagement. So everything depends on Jesus. He is our wealth, our hope, our joy, our greatest love. We love Him above father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and even one's very life because He has already given Himself totally and completely for us. We love Him with such devotion because He first loved us.

We sang about this commitment in the fourth stanza of today's sermon hymn, "What Is the World to Me." Hear again. And rejoice in it:

What is the world to me!  
 My Jesus is my treasure,  
 My life, my health, my wealth,  
 My friend, my love, my pleasure,  
 My joy, my crown, my all,  
 My bliss eternally.  
 Once more, then, I declare:  
 What is the world to me!

Today's gospel text is a call to repentance and a powerful reminder of our joy and strength. It is good, right, and salutary that we evaluate our lives. Are we being faithful? Where there is mismanagement (i.e., sin), repent. Turn away from it. Fix what is wrong. Renew commitments to faithfulness in all areas of life. Find joy and strength in the good life that God seeks to give you. Don't be deceived by the allures and deceptions of this world, its pride, its trust in earthly wealth and power. Jesus warns us that we "cannot serve God and money" (vs. 13). Remember the standard Jesus gave us back in Luke 14. Love and trust in Him above all things and taking up our cross and following Him.

Above all else, seek and receive Christ's love and forgiveness. Our highest and chief treasure is Jesus. He's the Savior, the One who redeemed us from the darkness of sin, death, and eternal judgment. On the cross, we see love in divine perfection. God gave

Himself to us completely for our good, for our salvation. What Jesus gives – eternal life, forgiveness, the blessings of this world and the world to come – He gives freely and we receive with joy and thanksgiving. And according to Christ's mercy, integrity, and love, we will hear these joyous words on the judgment of the Last Day:

Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master (Matt. 25:23; c.p. Lk. 19:17).

✠ 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

Tenth Sunday after Trinity

August 8, 2021

Text: Luke 19:41–48

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

The summer vacation days are quickly coming to an end. It has been well noted and discussed by many observers how different this summer has been compared to last summer. People are traveling this year to see family and friends. The national parks are jammed packed. Festivals and camps are back in full swing, at least, for the most part. People are visiting one another again. And this is all to the good. There's nothing quite like have cherished friends and family stopping by for a visit. The sermon for today will consider that most basic human experience: visitation. A visitation is simply a time of seeing one another.

Jesus mentions a divine visitation in today's gospel text, Luke 19:44. We'll consider that situation in more detail later. The idea of God visiting His people is quite common in the Old Testament. Genesis 21:1 records that God visited Sarah in her old age. Even though she was well-past the time of bearing children, Sarah conceived and bore a son for Abraham because of God's visitation. She gave birth to Isaac even though both Abraham and Sarah were well into their nineties; the Bible bluntly says that Sarah was barren, unable to bear children. But God promised that Abraham and Sarah would have a son even in their old age. Isaac was the son of promise. The messianic line would be traced through him. The Lord Jesus Christ was born more than 2,000 years later as a descendant of Isaac; the Lord Jesus is THE Son of promise, the Savior of the world. Through faith and baptism into Christ, all believers are children of promise as St. Paul writes in Galatians 4:28, "Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise." In other words, we are Christian believers and heirs of God's eternal kingdom because God visited us with His grace and love like He visited Sarah those many, many years ago. We are children of a divine, miraculous visitation.

The OT book of Ruth describes another divine visitation. You may recall that Elimelech and Naomi took their two sons and moved from Bethlehem to the country of Moab because there was a famine in Israel. It was a bitter time. Elimelech died along with both their sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Naomi became a widow and childless during her sojourn in Moab. Her only comfort was her widowed daughter-in-law,

Ruth. She stayed with her mother-in-law even during their affliction. But Naomi was a changed woman. Upon her return to Bethlehem, she publicly changed her name from Naomi, which means pleasant, to Marah, which means bitter. Her reason for such a dramatic change? "... the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:20–21).

In the midst of all this loss and bitterness, the Bible records these words of hope piercing the darkness, "(Naomi) had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. So she (and eventually Ruth) ... went on the way to return to the land of Judah" (Ruth 1:6–7). The Lord's visitation came in the form of rain and good weather so that crops could be grown thus bring good harvests back to Israel. The Lord visited His people and the famine came to an end.

But the Lord was doing another marvelous work in this visitation. Ruth would eventually meet Boaz. They would marry. Ruth conceived and bore a son for Boaz named Obed, who fathered Jesse, who fathered David, Israel's greatest king (Ruth 4:21–22). The Messianic line that began with Abraham and Sarah and their son of promise, Isaac, now ran through their descendants, Boaz and Ruth, and their great grandson, David.

The Bible calls David, a man after God's own heart (I Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). He received God's promise that one of his sons would sit upon Israel's throne forever. That promise was fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, a Son of David, according to his earthly lineage. Naomi eventually gave up her bitter name, Marah, because the Lord visited His people with good weather and food. She received new hope and a renewed family, Boaz and Ruth, and their children. And through that visitation, in the fullness of time, the Lord Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ has been the point in both of the Old Testament histories I have chosen to summarize. God's visitations of old directly led to the conception, birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Jesus. Salvation and redemption came to the world because God chose, out of His own great love and mercy, to visit His people in the person of Jesus. Jesus is God's visitation. He stopped in to see us, as it were. His visitation turns barrenness and bitterness into fruitfulness and joy.

We would do well to ask ourselves if the coming of Jesus is God's climatic visitation of grace and mercy. That's been the claim I have been making using the OT. In Luke 1:78–79, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, sang about the Savior, "Through

the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and *in* the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” The Lord Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary for the purpose of delivering this fallen world from the darkness and shadow of death. Jesus is God with us, that is, God visiting us for our good. He came to bear our sins, our guilt and judgment. Jesus is God’s visitation of grace and mercy unto eternal life.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He wept (vs. 41). Everyone else is rejoicing and waving palm branches while shouting, “Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest” (Luke 19:38). Jesus wept because He, the Savior of the world, came unto His own people and they received Him not. “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes” (vs. 42). Almighty God was hiding Himself in the person of Jesus in order to reveal His mercy and love. Jesus came in the likeness of sinful man to redeem the world. Many recognized Him. The blind beggar on the side of the road knew who Jesus was and called out to Him, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me” (Lk. 18:38). But Jerusalem, her priests and scribes and all her learned leaders were blinded to the truth and remained in the darkness of unbelief.

The result of their hardness of heart was they missed the things that made for their peace revealed in Jesus. They heard Jesus preaching and teaching. But they scoffed and grew angry at Jesus with murderous intent. They knew about His miracles, especially the miracle of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead just a few days before Jesus entered Jerusalem. These were the things that pointed to His Passion and death through which peace would come to the world.

But no. Jerusalem was blinded. They missed the day of visitation. And the result would be catastrophic. In vs. 43–44, Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem that did take place in 70 A.D. Those were days of horrific suffering and death for Jerusalem’s men, women, and children; famine, disease, slaughter in battle, etc. The cause of their agony? Vs. 44b, “...because you did not know the time of your visitation.” By rejecting God’s mercy and grace revealed in Jesus, they willingly chose sin and God’s wrath and judgment against their sin.

Mark this well, saints of God. Today’s gospel reading is a call to hear God’s Word in repentance and faith. For the divine visitation that began with Jesus continues. The

crucified and resurrected Lord of glory continues to visit His people to this very day through the preaching of His Word and the administration of His Sacraments; they are the things that make for your peace. For Christ Himself has promised that wherever His Word is preached and people are baptized in His name He Himself will be among them. My body and blood given and shed on Calvary's cross, says Jesus, are continually offered under the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper for the forgiveness of your sins. This divine service is the place of visitation. This is the day of grace. Let us rejoice in it dear saints of God lest a dreadful judgment come upon us.

The Lord God of heaven and earth has served the Christian Church a severe warning this past year. Churches, pastors, and congregational members too easily gave up the things that made for our eternal peace when we shut down our divine worship services. Can we not see now that we were saying no to the days of divine visitation? When people needed to hear and see that disease and death were defeated through the death and resurrection of Jesus and that peace and joy which transcends the afflictions of this world could be freely received by all, the Church said stay home. It is true that St. John's and Immanuel never canceled her services because of the Covid-19 crisis. And we give hearty thanks to God for His mercy. But that is no cause for boasting. It's a call to repentance and renewed commitment to the things that make for our peace; all of us too easily neglect God's Word. Covid cases are on the rise. In some places, restrictions of various kinds are starting to be reinstated. I do not know what the rest of the year will bring. But what I do know for certain is that God visits us with His grace, forgiveness, and love in the public gathering of His people around His Word and His Sacraments. Under God's grace, let us not despise His visitation corporately as a congregation nor individually as members of the body of Christ.

Brothers and sisters, here are the things that make for your peace. Christ's Word. His body and blood. Baptism into His death and resurrection. The full and complete forgiveness of your sins pronounced in Christ's name. The Lord's Prayer and the prayers of His people. The psalms and hymns of praise. Remember the visitations of Sarah and Naomi. Barrenness turned into fruitful joy. Bitterness transformed into pleasant fulfillment. God the Father grant us all the peace and joy that turns conquerors death and hell through the visitation of His beloved Son, Jesus.

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

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

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

August 15, 2021

Text: Luke 18:9–14

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

Two men went into the Temple to pray. Isn't that a good thing? Praying. Well yes. Praying is good. So is fasting, and going to public worship services, and giving offerings, and listening to sermons, and ... You get the point. These are all good things commanded by God. We don't have a choice whether or not we do them, that is, not if we want to be Christians in truth. But one man's prayers were rejected by God. God accepted the other man's prayer. The reason why one was accepted and the other rejected might surprise us. It had nothing to do with the words spoken, or the physical posture, or even the external behavior of the men. The difference was one had faith and trust in God. His prayer was heard and accepted. The other trusted in himself. God rejected his prayer because of his self-righteousness.

The same distinction – faith vs. unbelief – must also be used when considering the tragedy between Cain and Abel, today's OT reading. Both offered sacrifices to God. That's a good thing to do. Sacrifices were offered to God throughout the early chapters of Genesis. Later, under the Mosaic Law, God instituted various sacrifices with very explicit instructions. Who could offer them, when, where, how, and for what purposes. These are recorded in the later chapters of Exodus and the entire book of Leviticus. Offering sacrifices was a good thing. Cain brought an offering from the fruit of the ground. Abel brought an animal offering from the firstborn of his flock. Both kinds of offerings were prescribed under the Mosaic Law with a predominance of animal sacrifices. But both kinds are commanded. Why did God accept Abel's animal sacrifice and reject Cain's sacrifice of produce? Genesis 4 gives no indication that the type of sacrifice was an issue. The NT author of Hebrews tells us why Abel's sacrifice was accepted. Hebrews 11:4:

“By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.”

Abel had faith in God. Cain did not. The difference is as simple and profound as that: faith. In the parable from Luke 18, Abel is represented by the tax collector whose prayer was accepted by God. Cain is represented by the Pharisee whose prayer was rejected by God. The question we must wrestle with this morning is which set of men represents us. Do I fit in the line with Cain and the Pharisee or with Abel and the tax collector? The “right” answer is obvious. We are supposed to identify with Abel and the tax collector. While this is the obvious answer, rejecting the path of self-righteousness and unbelief is more difficult than we might think.

We sinners are very good at self-justification. That is, we interpret and explain our actions, intentions, and thoughts in such a way that they appear to be righteous. Not only in our own eyes but the eyes of others. When asked about his slain brother, Cain responded to the Lord God of heaven and earth with “...am I my brother’s keeper?” Abel isn’t my responsibility. Go find him yourself. The Pharisee in the parable described his own life as infinitely superior than that of the lowly, despised tax collector. I fast. I give offerings. I live a morally superior life. Thank God I am not like tax collectors and other sinners.

Self-justification is the other side of the coin of self-deception. It grows from our sinful nature, which was corrupted from the moment of conception with original sin. The deeper problem we all face is not the bad fruits of immorality in thought, word, and deed. It’s the corruption of our heart, soul, and mind. Summarizing the Biblical witness on man’s sinful nature, our Lutheran Confessions state that all mankind is conceived and born “without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence” (AC II). Concupiscence simply means a natural desire and inclination to do evil. In this brief description, our Lutheran Confessions note that human nature can be rightly described as lacking fear and trust in God. And as actively seeking after sin and evil. So, we sinners lack the right disposition of fear, love, and trust in God while possessing an evil disposition that seeks sin and evil.

Because we lack fear and trust in God and seek after evil, we sinners constantly justify our actions so that we come off looking good and righteous in our own sight and in the sight of others. In the case of the Pharisee, he was righteous doing all kinds of righteous things. He contrasted his life with the tax collector and other types of notorious sinners: extortioners, the unjust, and adulterers. But there was no faith. No love or trust. The result is that God rejected his prayers. He was not justified in God’s sight because of his self-righteousness. King David prayed to the Lord that he be spared from presumptuous sins in Psalm 19:13. Moses, the man of God, confessed in

Psalm 90:8 that his secret sins were revealed in the light of the Lord's presence. The apostle Paul exhorted the Roman Christians that they were not to allow sin to reign in their bodies nor to surrender to its passions (Rom. 6:12). Instead, we baptized Christians are to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:11). Our minds are to be daily renewed so that we can discern God's will (Rom. 12:2) and live in peace with God and man through the justifying, redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1).

The exhortation we must hear and consider is that even though we know we must become like the tax collector, it is far too easy and natural for us to be like the Pharisee. Dear saints, humble yourselves before the God of glory and holiness. Confess not only your sins but your sinful nature. Your lack of fear and trust in God and the ease with which you seek out sin and evil. Set aside the pretenses of self-righteousness. God's Word reveals that our sinful nature cannot be tamed or rehabilitated. It must be crucified daily through repentance and faith. Now is the time for repentance. This the day of cleansing and renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Abel brought a blood sacrifice to God. He had faith that God was merciful and forgiving. The Lord heard Abel's prayer and accepted his worship not because Abel possessed more inherent righteousness or was a better man than Cain. The primary difference was faith, simple trust in God's love and goodness. Abel humbled himself before the Lord His God. And God received him graciously. Abel was a Christian believer and died a martyr. For his blood cries out from the ground (Gen. 4:10) like the martyrs in the book of Revelation who pray to God, "How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth" (Rev. 6:10).

The tax collector in the parable from Luke 18 was no more righteous than the Pharisee. In outward conduct, the tax collector would have been seen and considered far inferior to the Pharisee. But his heart was humble and contrite. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (vs. 13). Holy Scripture clearly and beautifully teaches, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps. 51:17). Repentance and faith are the spiritual attitudes that cause the angels of heaven to rejoice. Humility and faith before God are precious treasures. The Lord Jesus concluded the parable by saying, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (vs. 14). The highest form of worship, the highest praise we can give to God is to believe what He says about His desire to forgive sinners. The Lord Jesus Christ shed His blood in order to give answer for everyone of our sins of thought, word, and deed. Real blood, divine and holy, shed

for real sins, ugly and sinister. God seeks to give Himself to us and for us. Through the holy and precious gospel of the forgiveness of sins, the Father sees us as righteous and well-pleasing in His sight. Christ gave Himself fully and completely for us. He held nothing back. Through faith in Christ Jesus, we sinners are declared to be righteous in the Father's sight. The Holy Spirit lives within us, recreating us after the image of Christ Jesus.

The forgiveness of sins and the renewal of heart and mind by the Spirit go hand in hand. Day by day, week by week, we come before God the Father confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness through faith in Jesus. And yet, we seek to live our lives according to God's will and word. The Gospel never gives license to continue in sin. God forbid. We have died to sin. And are alive to God in righteousness through Christ Jesus. The Father's reconciling work through His Son Jesus not only gives forgiveness but renewal. The apostle Paul beautifully links these together in II Corinthians 5:17–21:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. <sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself ... that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them ... We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

It is good to pray, fast, give offerings, and come to public worship services. All these are divine gifts given to us by the Spirit. We do these things through faith in Jesus trusting that He has reconciled us to the Father. In joyous, courageous humility, we believe that the Father is recreating us. He gives us true fear, love, and trust in God. We now seek the narrow, wholesome way of righteousness through faith. The righteousness of faith manifests itself in lives filled with good works of love toward God and neighbor at home, work, and play. But the old ways of sin and evil are constantly pressing themselves upon us. So we never leave off saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Our boast is in the Lord who loves and saves sinners. Glory be to Jesus ...

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

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

Pastor Kenneth Mars  
 St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY  
 Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity  
 August 29, 2021  
 Text: Luke 10:23–37

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

O grant that nothing in my soul  
 May dwell, but Thy pure love alone;  
 Oh, may Thy love possess me whole,  
 My joy, my treasure, and my crown!  
 All coldness from my heart remove;  
 My ev'ry act, word, thought be love. (LSB 683, st. 2)

That's quite a prayer we just prayed to God. It was the second stanza of the hymn, "Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me." It was composed by the great German Lutheran pastor and hymnwriter, Paul Gerhardt, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. When considering this hymnic prayer, we need to know that Gerhardt didn't write these words leisurely sitting at a local pub drinking German beer. Those words were born out of deep suffering. He lived through the Thirty Years' War, one of the most devastating wars in European history. Four of his five children died and he outlived his wife. Because he refused to compromise the truth of the Gospel, he was deposed from his parish. He served another faithfully, though with many hardships, until his death. Near his portrait posted in his final parish is this inscription, "A Theologian Sifted in Satan's Sieve." Our hymnal contains 17 of his 120 or so hymns. I tend to gravitate toward them because of their rich doctrinal content and deep, Christian piety. This man suffered greatly. And his prayer, recorded in his many hymns, was that God's love would fill his heart and soul so that every act, word, and thought be love. Paul Gerhardt's confession of faith and love, "Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me" carries much authority and weight in my ears because those words were expressed in the crucible of life and death.

Some 120 year earlier, Luther famously wrote in "A Mighty Fortress":

And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife,  
 Though these all be gone, Our vict'ry has been won;  
 The kingdom our remaineth (LSB 656, st. 4b)

Paul Gerhardt lived those words. And through it all he said, “Jesus loves me, this I know.” Lutheran hymnody, at its best, not only presents us with the saving doctrines of the Bible. It also provides a model of deep, Christian piety and devotion that is unparalleled in all of Christendom.

I provide this rather lengthy introduction centered on Gerhardt’s life and hymn so that we can ponder the depths and mystery of God’s love found in Jesus. How could a man who had lost 4 children and his wife, his job and reputation, and all that he held dear, make such a bold, courageous confession that Jesus loved him? Most of his life looked as if God had abandoned him. He was, after all, a theologian sifted in Satan’s sieve. The answer to this question is found, in part, in the gospel text from Luke 10. That answer comes in two ways. First, the blessedness described in vs. 23–24 and secondly, the parable of the Good Samaritan in vs. 25–37. To both of these sections, all Christians can and ought boldly and triumphantly to say, regardless of the circumstances of their earthly life, Jesus loves them with a love that transcends the momentary experiences of life in this world.

In the first section, vs. 23–24, the Lord Jesus declared that His disciples were blessed. That’s a word that means “enriched, made happy, and complete.” The disciples were enriched, made complete, and filled with happiness because of what their eyes were seeing in the person and work of Jesus. For they were beholding with their very eyes and touching with their very hands and hearing with their ears the life of God found in Jesus. Prophets and kings of old desired to experience what they had. David, Isaiah, Abraham and all the patriarchs, Hezekiah, Micah, and all the noble men of old longed to know, touch, see, and hear the Messiah. Though they walked by faith and died triumphantly in the grace of the coming Savior, they did not receive in their lifetimes the answer to their prayers. But the disciples of Jesus did. The hope of all nations was standing in front of them. Divine love incarnate, in the person of Jesus. Listen to what the apostle John wrote about this very thing, the blessedness given to them as apostles and believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of glory (I John 1:1–4):

<sup>1</sup>That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— <sup>2</sup>the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— <sup>3</sup>that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Saints of the living God, this communion and fellowship with God so sought after by the kings and prophets of old is ours through faith in Christ Jesus. Through the prophetic and apostolic word, the blessed life of Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the world, is given to us freely by the Holy Spirit. Our baptism in God's trinitarian name is no mere ceremony or religious nicety. Quite the opposite. It brings us into the very life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our fellowship is with the Father and the Son by the grace of the Spirit. In the Holy Supper, we participate in the very thing longed for by all the men and women of old. King David wrote, in Psalm 34 (st. 8, 18–19; 22):

<sup>8</sup>Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! ... <sup>18</sup>The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. <sup>19</sup>Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all. ... <sup>22</sup>The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

In the Lord's Supper, we taste and see that the Lord is good. He redeems our life. Our broken hearts are mended. No condemnation comes to us. For we are born again into the life of Christ Jesus. Blessed, indeed, are your eyes, ears, and mouths. The Lord is good. Thus Gerhardt could write, "Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me."

In the second section, vs. 25–37, the Lord Jesus answers the testing questions of lawyer who wanted to justify himself rather than receive God's love and mercy freely through faith. God's law beautifully and powerfully declares, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (vs. 27). The Christian life is summarized by love, love for God and love for man.

The question that arises, however, is how does one experience this love. How does a sinful human being receive love, both divine and human, and give love? Jesus gives the parable of the Good Samaritan to answer this question. A man was traveling between Jericho and Jerusalem when robbers attacked him, took his possessions, and left him almost dead on the side of the road. Some time later, two men passed by the man, a priest and a Levite. Neither one offered any assistance to the man. It's surprising, shocking, in fact, that these upstanding, religious men don't render any assistance.

Finally, a third traveler comes upon the man lying on the side of the road. He's a Samaritan, a man despised and scorned by the Jews. The biggest surprise in the story is that the Samaritan helps the man as he binds his wounds with oil and wine. The Samaritan places the man on his own donkey and carries him to an inn and takes care of him. He even provides for any future expenses with the innkeeper. To all this, Jesus then asks, "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" (vs. 36). The lawyer provides the only sensible answer, "The one who showed him mercy" (vs. 37).

Paul Gerhardt could pen such powerful words of love and devotion to Jesus even in the mist of suffering and anguish because he knew that Jesus was his Good Samaritan. Gerhardt and all Christians, you and me, must see that we are represented by the man beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, came to our rescue, bearing our burdens, healing our wounds, and forgiving our sins. He reaches out to us in love even when we are most unlovable. Beaten, broken, dying. Left for dead. Unwanted by others. Too burdensome and costly. But not to Jesus.

The ultimate and highest expression of God's love is seen not only when the Good Samaritan binds the man's wounds and takes him to the comfort of an inn, but also when he pays in advance for the man's future needs. All of this points us to Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection for the salvation of the world. There we see divine love. Jesus doesn't fix us up once and then leave us to ourselves. Perish the thought. His love and grace are life-long. He takes care of everything, from beginning to end. "Jesus, thy boundless love to me." That God Himself would take upon Himself our human nature in order to bear our sins and suffer our death so that we can stand before His Father and all the heavenly angels as pure, holy, redeemed sons and daughter of God is staggering. "No thought can reach, no tongue declare." God loves you and me and the world in and through Christ Jesus.

The world, the devil, and even our own sinful conscience will tell us that we really aren't all that loveable. We're just not worth the trouble. But Jesus says, "You are my beloved. And I am yours. Come to Me. You are more than worth it."

Blessed are you indeed, dear saints of God. For your eyes see and your ears hear the love of God in Christ Jesus. We love God because He first loved us in Christ. With all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, we love God who gives such boundless love. And we love our neighbor as ourselves because Jesus first loved us as His neighbor. Beginning with your family, close and extended, then to brothers and sisters in Christ,

then to those who God brings into your lives day by day, we love them in Christ's name. We pray, like Gerhardt so many years ago:

Oh, may Thy love possess me whole,  
My joy, my treasure, and my crown!  
All coldness from my heart remove;  
My ev'ry act, word, thought be love.

God hear our prayer and grant our petition for Christ's sake who loves us now and into the ages of ages ...

✠ 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.