

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

September 5, 2021

Text: Luke 17:11–19

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

King Solomon describes the life of Christian believers in a most curious, beautiful way. From today's OT reading, Proverbs 4:18, "But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day." You must imagine the dawn of a beautiful morning. It begins in darkness but the light of the sun begins to show more brilliantly as the minutes go by. Soon, the sun has fully arisen filling the day with the brilliance of full light. That is how the path of Christian faith is like. Our knowledge and love for God and His holy ways grows more and more as we journey through this world of darkness into His marvelous light. We live by the light of Christ. It shines with the brightness of divine glory and grace. Day by day, year by year we grow in the light of glory of Christ Jesus, the crucified and resurrected Savior of the world.

Our knowledge of Jesus is certainly made all the more glorious because of today's gospel reading from Luke 17:11–19. We must keep in mind the context. This is towards the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. Vs. 11 tells us that Jesus is "on the way to Jerusalem ..." Our Lord will soon perform the greatest act in human and divine history: His death which takes away the sins of the world. His resurrection which destroys the power of death. Mercy is what overcomes the tyranny of sin, death, and the devil. Love and mercy are the light the shines brighter even as the day grows longer.

While on His way to complete the greatest of God's mighty works, Jesus hears a plea for mercy. Ten leprous men stand at a distance and cry out "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" (vs. 13). Leprosy was the ancient scourge most feared by people of all stations in life. It had no cure back then. Today, it's relatively rare and very treatable. But in the ancient world, leprosy was a long, lingering death sentence.

Can't you imagine the pain and anguish in their cry for mercy. This may be their only chance to see Jesus. Rumor has it He can heal all manner of disease. So they yell "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." It's a simple, desperate cry for help. Mercy is that

virtue that provides grace and aid to reduce suffering even when the help is undeserved or not required by law or any other form of compulsion. Mercy is that divine quality which we humans are privileged to share in for the God of the Bible is a God of mercy.

The prophet Jeremiah found comfort in God's mercy and faithfulness even as he composed his great lament of Jerusalem's destruction. In the midst of the suffering, anguish, and death of Jerusalem's destruction, the light of righteousness grew more and more as it pierced the gloom of death and judgment. Lamentation 3:22–24:

²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ²³they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

In this passage of hope, we have the imagery of new life described in the freshness of the morning. God's mercy and love are new every morning. They grow light the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. God's glory shines the brightest in mercy and love. This truth we must never forget, dear saints of God.

Ten lepers cry out to Jesus for mercy. Based upon Jesus' past actions, we might expect the Lord to speak a word of healing or touch them in some fashion. Regardless of the means, we expect Jesus to heal them of this dreaded disease. Jesus doesn't do that. Vs. 14, “Go show yourselves to the priests” (vs. 14). The Lord sends them away, apparently unhealed! Initially, the Lord's mercy seems to have run dry. Go let the priests take care of you.

That actually misunderstands the Lord's command. In the Old Testament, Leviticus 14:20, a person who thought he was healed of leprosy was required to go see the priest. Jesus is telling the 10 lepers to go see the priest as if they were already healed! And sure enough, the leprosy is healed while they walk to Jerusalem. The Lord had mercy. Can't you imagine the joy of the 10! Hope and dignity are restored. No more pain and suffering. They can return back home to their families. No more stigma or separation and misery from their disease. God's mercy was found to be bright and new in Christ Jesus.

The Bible doesn't tell us what happened to the lepers after they left Jesus, at least, we don't know what happened to 9 of the healed lepers. No doubt they went to the priest, received their blessing, and returned home. Try to imagine the magnitude of God's

mercy just shown. If they had families, a wife and children, brothers, sisters, etc, they were returned to them. They could touch them again, hug them, run and play with them. They could work again and support their families. They would be able to show mercy and compassion on others if the opportunity arose. The immensity of Jesus' mercy is beyond quantification or description.

Luke does, however, tell us a little more about one leper. "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks" (vs. 15–16). Luke's original readers would have rejoiced in this turn of events. And then the bombshell, at least for Luke's Jewish readers. Look at the rest of vs. 16, "Now he was a Samaritan."

It's hard to describe adequately the racial tension between the Jews and Samaritans. The tension would have been as intense as the race relations in our own country between among whites, African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans and so forth; but the Jew/Samaritan tension was of a different character. It was almost personal because Samaritans traced their lineage back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob just like the Jews. Family animosity can be some of the most difficult to deal with.

In light of our own historic and present struggles with racism, it is good that we Christians be reminded that racial prejudice is a sin. What I mean by this is that any idea that a person or a group of people are inferior to any other person and group based solely upon their race is simply wrong. For we share in a common humanity traced back to Adam and Eve through Noah and his wife. The eternal Son of God became fully and completely man in order to redeem all mankind. Revelation 7 describes a great multitude which could not be numbered gathered around the throne of God. They were clothed with white robes washed in the blood of the lamb. This glorious multitude was made up of people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev. 7:9). In the beginning, God created us in His divine image. Through the incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of His Son, God redeemed all humanity. We certainly must note the distinctions between the races even as the Bible does in Revelation 7. But distinctions are not equivalent to notions of inferiority or superiority.

The light of God's love and mercy and clearly seen in Jesus healing a Samaritan of leprosy. It knows no racial barriers. God's mercy knows no physical barriers. Gender, socioeconomic status, education, political persuasion, or past history stands in the way

of God's mercy given in and through Jesus Christ. Our Lord's mercy extends to all people fully and equally; it extends to you and me.

This Samaritan outsider returns to confess what the other nine apparently Jewish lepers failed to realized. The place of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving is wherever Jesus is. Jesus is the true Priest who declares men and women free from the stain and stigma of sin. Jesus is God's temple made without human hands. Jesus is not only God with us; He is God's mercy with us.

The Samaritan ex-leper got it right! Jesus is God's mercy manifested in human flesh and blood. And so He worships Jesus with a loud voice and giving of thanks (vs. 16).

Every Sunday morning, we join together in Christ's name and cry out, "Lord, have mercy." The prayers we will bring before God's throne later in this service appeal to God's mercy. After each petition, I will say, "Lord, in your mercy." To each, the congregation responds, "Hear our prayer." The great confidence we have in God hearing and answering our prayer is rooted and grounded in God's mercy and love. The mercies of the Lord are new every morning. Through faith in Christ Jesus, we live and walk in the eternal morning of God's mercy. And it grows brighter and brighter as dawn become full day. God's glory is chiefly seen in His mercy. Let us always rejoice and exult in divine mercy.

For we sinners know that without His mercy given in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus, there would be no forgiveness of sins. Our consciences would remain stained by sin and guilt. And at the end of our life, we would face a bitter, terrible judgment. But God has had mercy upon us through Christ. Each and every day, the Lord renews our hearts and minds. For we are His baptized children. By His precious blood, we are cleansed from the leprous filth of our sin. The contagion of this world is wiped away for the Lord has had mercy upon us. The words Jesus spoke to the Samaritan leper apply to us too, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well" (vs. 19). Christ Jesus has saved us! We now walk by faith on the path of the righteous which grow brighter and brighter, like the light of dawn growing in brilliance until the full day.

A Samaritan leper returned to Jesus to give thanks. This is the highest worship we can give to God. To believe His Word and everything He says to us. Through faith, we return sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving for all that God has done and continues to

do for us. Hebrews 13:15–16 teaches us praising God in thanksgiving is our continual act of worship:

¹⁵Through (Christ Jesus) then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

By the grace of the Holy Spirit, your sacrifices of praise are well pleasing to our heavenly Father. For you are the redeemed of the Lord. Precious and holy in His sight. Live in the light of God's love and mercy. May they always be new, growing brighter and brighter in each of your lives until the final day of Christ's glorious return.

✠ 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
Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 12, 2021
Text: Matthew 6:24–34

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

Twenty years ago yesterday, the priorities of America changed. In a few short hours, we suddenly realized that much of what we thought was important in life wasn't all that important. Thousands of men, women, and children going about their ordinary lives were killed on September 11, 2001. And so much has happened in our world as a result of that fateful day. We do well to remember in repentant humility and steadfast faith. In the face of such evil, we witnessed great courage as men and women risked their lives to save their neighbor. And we heard rulers and leaders from across our country and the world that God was at work, doing something of great significance in our country. We do well to remember. To remember those who died directly from the attacks themselves and everyone who died serving their neighbors. To remember God calls us all to repentance for our sins and failures when faced with tragedy and to trust in Him above all things for all things, but especially for saving, steadfast faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. May God the Father grant us true humility and courage to live and die loving Christ and our neighbor through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The gospel reading from Matthew 6 is a good and timely reminder of how we Christians are to order the days of our lives. Two verses will serve as bookends. They are Matthew 6:24 and 6:33:

²⁴“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

³³But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

The Lord Jesus established for us two absolutes: 1) Christians will serve God alone through faith and love and 2) we are to seek the things of God as our chief priority.

According to Jesus, everyone has a god. It's either the one true God revealed in Holy Scripture, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or it is a false god, represented in today's text by money. There can be no sliding scales of devotion. You either love one or the other, but not both. You can have only one master in your life. God or money and all the things that money can give you.

If we serve anything or anyone other than the one true God of heaven and earth, we are serving an idol, a false god. Idolatry, the worship of a false god, comes in many forms. False worship is more than simply bowing before an idol of wood, stone, or precious metal. Idolatry is a matter of the heart. Where is your comfort, joy, and hope? What does your heart, soul, mind, and body long for? That is your god.

It's quite easy to say all the right things when being asked these kinds of questions. To think and speak all the pious platitudes. Well, of course I love and trust in God above all things. Yes, Jesus died for my sins. And I plan to die and go to heaven, and so forth. Those are the kinds of things we are to think and say. But what do your actual day to day priorities say? What do your spending accounts say about your priorities? What does your calendar say about your priorities? When you go to sleep at night, what were the priorities of your thoughts, your will and emotions, your passions and desires, your use of time, money, and other resources? How you use the things of this world reveal your spiritual condition. They reveal who your god is, what brings you ultimate comfort, joy, and hope.

Now, there is nothing wrong with having and enjoying the material things of this world: food, clothing, house, home, vacations, vehicles, music, art, sports, leisure, etc. God the Father gave us the splendor and beauty of this world to enjoy. We receive them with joy and thanksgiving for they are made holy by the Word of God and prayer (I Tim. 4:4–5). Everything and everyone in this good universe are gifts of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are to receive them with joy and thanksgiving.

Thus our Lord Jesus teaches us in today's text that we are not to be anxious and worried about life, what we will eat and drink or what clothes we will wear. Or even how many years we have to live on this side of eternity. God our Father knows that we have need of these things (vs. 32). I want you to note what Jesus says here. Your Father knows that you need these things. And He promises to provide these needed things. We worship and serve a God who delights in taking care of you! This world is His gift. And the greatest need is the life and salvation won for us by the Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit works this faith in your hearts by the precious gospel.

We Christians must be clear about who our Lord and master is: God and God alone. We serve Him through faith that is active in love toward Him and our neighbor. This part of our life is simply not negotiable. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is our Lord and master. All false gods must be absolutely and decisively cast down.

Now, we turn to the second absolute established by Jesus. The holy things of God are the priority. We need to realize that it is quite possible for Christians to have sinful priorities, that is, to worship money, as Jesus said in vs. 24. And the temptation to do so is quite strong and ever present. Who among us hasn't thought: If I only made a little more money, more intelligence, a more charismatic personality, etc., things would be better? The lie in all this is that more necessarily means better, and maybe even more insidious, that God is not giving me everything I need for life and happiness. The author of the letter to the Hebrews combats this kind of sinful thinking with these words:

⁵Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." ⁶So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13:5–6).

When facing these struggles of sin and its many, many discontents, remember God's direct word of promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Instead of looking to money and the things of the world as our priority, we Christians "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (vs. 33). God's kingdom and His righteousness were first given to us when we were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We seek Jesus and His righteousness, first and foremost. Without Him, we have nothing of lasting value. Jesus and His eternal gifts are our priorities.

We must resist the ever-present deception of our day which says Jesus and the things of God cannot be the priority. This kind of thinking says we can have Jesus and spiritual things on Sunday or other special holidays. But not the day in and day out hustle and bustle of where you live, work, and play. Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, says Jesus. And He promises "all these things (i.e., earthly, material things such as food, clothing, life, etc...) will be added to you." It is certainly true that "seeking first the kingdom of God" will look differ to some extent for each of us as we all have unique lives, families, and circumstances. But there are some things that are common to us all:

Families need to pray together daily. Fathers, lead your families in home worship. Wives and mothers, encourage and support your husband in leading family worship. It needn't be long or complex. Parents, I would remind you that God's Word commands you to raise your children in the Christian faith; the Bible does not command us to give them vast sums of money or material possessions.

Sunday worship and Bible study and the time required by them must be held sacred. Through Word and Sacraments, God's kingdom comes among us. Christ is present with His gifts of life and salvation. Other activities need to be scheduled around this time and not Church around other activities. We're talking about priorities.

Review how you are using your material resources in order to ensure that the things of God's kingdom are being cared for. This includes tithes and offerings. It means caring for your family and their real and most important needs. Don't allow otherwise good and wholesome activities to drain your resources (financial, emotional, spiritual, and physical energies) so that you cannot give your family, friends, church, and community the time they need.

Your job. Does it allow you to serve Christ Jesus by faith through frequent and regular hearing of His Word as well as to serve your family, friends, church, and community in love?

Take a good look at your calendar. Does it reflect the worship of God alone in all things while seeking as first priority the things of God, namely family, church, friends, and community?

The Lord Jesus established for us two absolutes: 1) Christians will serve God alone through faith and love and 2) we are to seek the things of God as our chief priority. Thus, our lives are to be ordered rightly around loving God and loving the people He has placed in our lives. Our comfort and joy and hope and strength are found in Christ Jesus and the many, many gifts He gives. Seek Him first dear saints of God. All these other really good things will be added. But the priority is Jesus, the same Jesus who loves each of you, the same Jesus who desires to give you His blessings in this life and the life to come.

✠ 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

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

September 19, 2021

Text: Luke 7:11–17

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

Jesus is traveling in the northern region of Israel called Galilee. While traveling in Galilee, Jesus approaches the town of Nain, a small village southwest of the Sea of Galilee. He and His disciples encounter the funeral procession for a man recently died. Luke lets us know the important details of this particular funeral, “[A] man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her” (vs. 12)

This story reminds us of how unnatural and how wrong things are in this world. First of all, death is a foreign and unwelcome invader. God did not create mankind to die. But sin works its devastation. Paul tells us in I Corinthians that the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law (I Corinthians 15:56). Not only has death taken the life of this man, but it has already taken the life of his father. So this man's mother must suffer yet again. She's a widow who must now bury her only son. As a result of these two deaths, life for the widow will be very hard indeed. She is bereft of family. Unless close friends or other more distant relations step in and help, she will most likely live in abject poverty. In those days, there were no forms of social security or social services except for one's family and friends.

Jesus sees the situation and is moved with compassion. He feels her sorrow down to the depths of His soul. Shockingly, Jesus does the unthinkable, not only in His day, but our own. He finds the grieving mother and says, “Do not weep” (vs. 13). Strange words for this occasion. Don't weep. Don't be sad at the death of your only son. Really? Can Jesus be serious? She has to do what every parent hopes he or she will never have to do, bury their own child. But our Lord's gentle command, “Do not weep” is no empty sentiment. His words are filled with power, comfort, and action.

Jesus approaches the bier. “Young man, I say to you, arise” (vs. 14). The man does exactly what Jesus commands. He rises from his coffin, alive and well. There can be no mistake about this miracle. Jesus has raised the dead back to life.

“Arise.” That’s a resurrection word. Christians reading or hearing these words from Luke 7 already know about Good Friday and Easter. Jesus died and rose again and now lives and reigns to all eternity. One word is all it takes for our Lord Jesus. For Him, raising the dead is no more difficult than waking someone from a short, afternoon nap. Jesus is the Lord of life. “I am the way, the truth, and the life” says Jesus in John 14:6. He created life in the very beginning when God the Father spoke through Him to bring the universe into existence. Through Him, the Holy Spirit gives life to every human being in their mother’s womb at the moment of conception. “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” says the apostle John (1:3). Jesus, the eternal Son of God now in human flesh and blood, delights in giving life. And He wants us to enjoy it as His good gift. We were created for life, not death. I have come that “they may have life and have it abundantly” says our Lord in John 10:10.

Jesus speaks a single word, “Arise,” and the dead live. Don’t forget that most important observation. For our discipleship, our following Jesus is based upon our Lord’s ability to raise the dead. More on that later.

Did you notice how similar this story from the Galilean town of Nain is to the account of Elijah raising the widow’s son of Zarepheth back to life? That story also tells us of a widow who loses her son in death. By God’s grace, the prophet Elijah raises him to life and gives him back to his mother.

But there is one very important difference from Jesus raising the widow’s son of Nain. Elijah basically raises the son back to life through the power of prayer. Three times he cries out, “O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again” (I Kings 17:21). Jesus does not need to pray to restore life. Jesus is greater than the prophets. He simply gives life. He speaks, life is given, the dead are raised. It’s that matter-of-fact with our Lord.

That’s the power of Christ’s Word. We must never forget the virtue and power of God’s Word. Everything we believe and hope for is based upon that powerful Word.

The good people of Nain see this remarkable event and start making the connections. We’ve read about this kind of thing before in the Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. “A great prophet has arisen among us” and “God has visited His people” the people declare (vs. 16). It is quite possible they are thinking of Elijah when they declare Jesus to be a great prophet.

But we must notice what they don't say. Jesus is a great prophet, true enough. But they don't declare Him to be the Son of God, nor the Messiah, nor the Savior. They proclaim that God has visited His people, true enough. But they fail to see and confess that Jesus is Immanuel, God with us.

The people of Nain have seen a great miracle. A widow's son was raised back to life. But the miracle can only create curiosity, wonder, fear, and awe (vs. 16). What this miracle (and any other miracle for that matter) can't do is create faith, at least it can't do it by itself. God's Word must always be present to perform the greatest miracle of all: creating faith and trust in the Lord Jesus. For every man, woman, and child is dead in sins and trespasses. To be a Christian means having been raised from the dead! Through God's Word, the miracle of saving faith in Christ Jesus is done. A greater miracle than Zarephath and Nain is performed when God the Holy Spirit gives a person the fullness of God's life found in Christ Jesus. Let me illustrate this from today's epistle reading from Ephesians 3.

In this text, the apostle Paul prays for the Ephesian Christians and all Christians with the full assurance of Christ's death and resurrection. "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (vs. 14–17a). Paul's prayer is 1) according to the riches of God the Father's and 2) empowered by the Holy Spirit 3) for the purpose of Christ dwelling in our hearts by faith.

The crucified and resurrected Jesus, the Lord of glory, dwells in our hearts by the power of the Spirit according to the great riches of the Father. This is the glory and wonder of our Christian discipleship. All of you are wonderful, beautiful men and women. But there is an unseen majesty in every Christian believer: Christ Jesus, the Lord of glory living in your hearts through a steadfast faith created by the Spirit in Christian baptism and God's Word. Dear saints of the living Christ, the wealth of heaven and earth pale in comparison to the riches of the Father revealed in you. Christ Jesus is doing His good and gracious work in your life through the Spirit. The reason the hardships of this life cannot overcome us is Christ Jesus has claimed your heart as His home. You belong to Him and He belongs to you. There is no greater treasure God the Father can give you.

But there's more!! With Christ dwelling in your heart by the Spirit, you are "rooted and grounded in love" (17b). The love of God in Christ Jesus is our stability and foundation. And get ready to hear something even more extraordinary. The Spirit, working through God's Word and Sacraments, grounds us in God's love so that each of you "may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (vs. 18–19a). Because Christ Jesus dwells in our hearts and minds we have the strength to comprehend that which surpasses knowledge. We can know that which is beyond knowing! Namely, knowing "the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." Such glorious knowledge can only come by the Spirit working through God's Word and Sacraments preached and administered in Christ's precious name.

The final goal and purpose for Paul's prayer is stated at the end of vs. 19, "...that you may be filled with all the fulness of God." All that God is and desires to give – the fullness of God – fills each and every Christian believer. The fullness of God's mercy, His love, His power, His life, His victory, His joy, the fullness of God Himself. It all belongs to you because Christ Jesus suffered, died, and rose again from the dead for the salvation of the world. The devils cannot stand against God's love. The perplexities of life in this world cannot undo or thwart the fullness of God's love and will for your lives. The miracles of Zarephath and Nain both point to Christ's death and resurrection. The fullness of Christ's life permeates our every thought, word, and deed. There is absolutely nothing, and I mean nothing, that is beyond the surpassing greatness of Christ's life and love for you.

We are Christians. Followers of Jesus. Christianity isn't about rules, do this and do that. There are plenty of other religions that give you that. Being a Christian means living and walking in the fullness of a single, powerful word, "Arise." We Christians are a resurrection people. Live in the abundance of Christ's life. That includes the fullness of Christ's physical, mental, and emotional life. It all belongs you as God the Father wills.

May that joyous hope bless and preserve you today, tomorrow, and into eternity. Arise dear people of God and live, live abundantly...

✠ 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

St. Michael and All Angels

September 26, 2021

Text: Matthew 18:1–10

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

The Collect for St. Michael and All Angels begins by saying, “Everlasting God, You have ordained and constituted the service of angels and men in a wonderful order.” That’s a beautiful and profound statement. We Christians rightly recognize that whatever God does, He does in an orderly manner.

Consider, for example, God’s work of creation which He accomplishes through the power of His Word. As you read the creation account in Genesis 1, it quickly becomes apparent that each day of creation is characterized by bringing greater and greater order to the universe. It begins with the creation of light and darkness and their orderly separation one from the another on the 1st day, then the orderly separation of the waters to form the heavens on the 2nd day, then the ordering of the waters into seas and the formation of dry ground with plants and vegetation on the 3rd day; on the 4th day God brought greater order and complexity to light and darkness by creating the sun, the moon, and all the stars; these lights separated day from night and God established the orderly rhythm of the seasons, days, and years, then on the 5th day God filled the waters with sea creatures according to their various kinds as well as the skies with birds according to their kinds. Finally, we come to the 6th day of creation. God filled the land with many, many animals according to their different kinds. Because God created the universe in such a wise and orderly way, we can study the stars and all the wondrous things in space as well as all the various species of plant, animal, bird, and fish in a wonderfully organized manner. All our sciences are based upon this foundational truth. The universe is beautifully and spectacularly ordered because God is a God of order.

This quick review of creation is meant to illustrate how God works. He is a God of order. Consequently, the various teachings of evolution are incompatible with the Biblical witness. There are any number of reasons why evolutionary theories of the origins of the universe and the Bible’s account of creation are incompatible. But for

today's purposes, I simply want to focus on the truth that God created the universe with order. A foundational element of evolution theory is that all that now exists came into being through blind, random chance. The so-called laws of nature work the way they do because it happened to work out that way. But it didn't have to turn out the way it did. It was all by random, chance. Even "theistic evolution" which says God created the universe but through the means of evolution is contrary to the clear word of God. For God did not use disorder and random chance to form the universe but the ordering power of His Word. In fact, John 1 teaches us that God the Father created the world through and by His Word, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Such beauty and order in the world prompted the psalmists to contemplate God's works in creation and redemption. They found joy and delight in the mighty works of God. They are studied by all who love and find pleasure in God. The psalmist writes (Psalm 111:2–4):

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

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

⁴He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and merciful.

The works of God including the service of angels and men are orderly, great, and beautiful.

Genesis 1 doesn't mention which day God created the angels. But they were created during those six days because Genesis 2:1–2 says, "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them...and God rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done." Mankind, however, was created on the sixth day as the pinnacle of God's creative work.

Now we come to the heart of the matter. What is the distinctive order God has given to men and to angels? Let's begin with men. The Lord God created Adam from the dust of the ground on the 6th day of creation. The Lord spoke the universe into existence. But not man. The Lord God formed Him from the earth so that He would reflect God's divine image before the rest of creation. We were created to rule over the

world as His representatives. We are the stewards and lords over the ordered beauty and majesty of this world.

Mankind is unique in that every man, woman, and child consists of two natures: a physical bodily nature which we readily see and experience with our senses and a spiritual nature which we know from both experience and the revelation of God's Word. We humans are enfleshed souls or spirited bodies. While being tempted by Satan in the desert, the Lord Jesus said man does not live by bread alone (i.e., physical nature) but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (spiritual nature). In today's gospel reading from Matthew 18, the Lord Jesus taught that sinning against another Christian, that is, doing them spiritual and physical harm, is a great offense. In fact, Jesus says better to maim yourself physically than harm another or yourself spiritually!! Vs. 8, "And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire." We human beings are so ordered and constituted that we must consider both our physical and spiritual natures.

Much of the mischief we see today at all levels of society is founded upon a faulty understanding of man's orderly nature consisting of body and soul, flesh and spirit. There is much that the world has suffered as a result of Covid-19. That suffering was exacerbated because the world's response has focused primarily on man's physical nature, his medical health, to the extreme detriment of his spiritual health. We have been treated as if we are only bodies with organs, cells, immune systems, etc. who only need to receive the right medicines, treatments, and procedures. But the truth of the matter is that we are also spiritual creatures, created in the image of God.

I can't adequately describe the various reactions from people when I have advocated for spiritual care during this crisis, really, during any crisis, even before Covid-19. At times, I think people thought I was crazy. How can you be worried about the niceties of spirituality? Don't you know we have to stop this virus? Yes. And we do that by also caring for people's souls. They need to hear the truth of God's Word. That Christ Jesus died for their sins and rose from the dead to destroy sickness and death. People need to pray, and sing, and be fed with the Holy Supper of Christ's body and blood especially during a crisis. And we mustn't forget that one of the spiritual aspects of our dominion over the world is to intercede for the world through prayer.

Care for the soul isn't a nice luxury when things are going well. The precious gospel is needed especially when the world is falling apart. The reason is that God created us in the beginning with an ordered nature that is spiritual and physical. The more we live faithfully according to the unique characteristics of our physical and spiritual natures, the closer we come to fulfilling God's plan and purposes for our lives. The bond that unites all things together is love, love for God and love for man. We were created to have a loving, rich, ordered relationship with God and our fellow man. Now we come to the angels. God ordained and constituted the angels to serve and worship Him in heaven and to help and defend all believers. The angels are pure spirit beings. Unlike we human beings, they do not have a physical body. When they appear visibly, one sees their spiritual bodies. Some angels do have wings. They are mighty and powerful. Michael and Gabriel are archangels specifically named in the Bible. And there are evil angels, Satan being their chief.

The Bible calls angels ministering spirits, in Hebrews 1:14. They serve God as He performs His mighty, ordered works. The book of Job describes the angels singing at creation (38:7). Most of the big events in Jesus' life include the service of angels. The archangel Gabriel was sent to Mary to announce that she will give birth to the Savior. Mary conceived the Lord Jesus in her virgin womb through the power of the Holy Spirit when she heard and believed God's Word spoken by Gabriel. Angels announced our Lord's birth in Bethlehem; they ministered to Him after His 40 days of fasting and temptation in the desert. And the angels were the first preachers of Christ's resurrection from the dead. The OT and NT describe the angels worshipping God in heaven as well as in the worship of the church! In Luke 15, Jesus teaches that when sinners repent and return to God in faith, the angels in heaven rejoice.

The angels do battle against Satan and his fallen angels. Today's readings from Daniel and Revelation specifically describe the archangel Michael waging war against the evil angles both in heaven – described in Revelation 12, and on earth – described in Daniel 10 and 12. The devils seek to destroy all of God's ordered works: creation, government, home and families, and most especially saving faith in Jesus. The devils' primary weapon is deceit, lies. Through their lies, they bring chaos, disorder, destruction, and death. This is why we Christians can never compromise the truth at any point. To do so would be to work with and collaborate with evil. Remember our Lord's warning against sinning against another Christian in today's gospel text.

We Christians join with the angels in serving God and resisting the devils. But we do so in different ways. God is a God of order. We serve God by hearing His Word, receiving Christ's sacraments, worshipping Him in Spirit and in truth, offering prayers of praise and thanksgiving, and loving our neighbors sacrificially. The angels serve God as they participate in heavenly and earthly worship and as they protect Christians from the evil plans of the fallen angels.

We Christians never pray to angels. God commissions the angels to protect Christians, most of the time we are unaware of their protection. But Jesus describes His believing children – Christians – as having angels “who always see the face of My Father who is in heaven” (vs. 10). That's another reason why sinning against Christians is so heinous; it offends the holy angels as well as God Himself. The holy angels thwart and hinder the devil and his angels as God directs them. We Christians resist the devil by hearing God's Word in faith, prayer, and fasting.

The importance of understanding the ordered nature of angels and men is summarized by Jesus in vs. 11, “For the Son of Man came to save the lost.” From the very beginning, God the Holy Trinity created man to live in loving fellowship with Himself, the heavenly hosts, and with one another. Jesus came to save us from the disordering lies and deceptions of the devil and his angels. God's angels serve God and Christ by helping and defending us. This is the wonderful order that God ordained and constituted. Great are the works of God, studied by all who delight in them. Thanks be to God for His mighty angels who help and assist us as we praise and serve God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

✠ 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.

Note: I was giving presentations at both congregation on the relationship between faith and science; hence, the reason for some of the material in this sermon.