

Trinity Lutheran Church, Terre Haute, Indiana
Sermons by Pastor Karen Husby July-December 2023

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Anna and Simeon had been waiting a very long time, waiting there in the Temple in Jerusalem. They were old, old even for our day, but *especially old* in a culture where 40 was a ripe old age. Anna and Simeon, waiting hopefully year after year for God's promised one to appear. I'm sure there were stretches of time when they didn't feel very hopeful. But they were faithful and they were *there*, in the Temple, waiting and watching for the breakthrough blessing from God.

How do we know where to look for God at work? The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in her poem "*Aurora Leigh*," draws on the image of the prophet Moses encountering God in the burning bush:

*"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes."*

No doubt there were *many* others in the Temple; it was a very busy place-- law court, bank, marketplace, tourist attraction, as well as a center of worship. What did Anna and Simeon see? A young mother, a father, a small infant 40 days old. Routine, the ritual as usual. But Simeon and then Anna saw the "*common bush afire with God*," and they receive the gift to see that this child was special, holy. Time to "*take off your shoes*," because you know you are standing on holy ground. Time to see the gift of "heaven come to earth," time to praise and thank God. They were faithful, and the wait was worth it. Perhaps they saw just a glimmer of God, or caught a whisper of the divine. They were given the knowledge that they would be blessed by the life of this infant Jesus; so they gave their blessing.

God can reach out to *us* in many ways-- through the voice of friends and family or others around us, through circumstances, or through the persistent nudging of a holy hunch. But we have to trust God's guidance to distinguish *these* signs from all the many other possibilities. Simeon and Anna received that discernment. Long years of listening and praying, of watching and waiting - meant that when the moment came, they could recognize *God*, even though this little family appeared to be no different from the *thousands* of others crowded into the Temple. When God showed up, they saw the promise, and when God spoke up, they heard the message.

Because they were attentive to God's Spirit, opened to God's new and surprising ways, they saw in Jesus the spark of light for a world trapped in darkness. They blessed God for the answer to their prayers, the cure for their longing to see things finally set right in the world.

Simeon and Anna give their blessings. They see the truth, they *speak* it, they *share* it, and they *celebrate where it comes from*. They are blessers, and such blessings are powerful. I attended the installation of a new pastor at a congregation near my parish in Detroit. There was an old woman who "*gave her blessing*" to the new pastor at that service. She looked to be maybe about 90, tap-tapping ever so slowly with her cane up to the front. She shared that her family was one of the founding families of the parish. Then she blessed him and the congregation as they began their ministry together there. And she got a standing ovation for having done it. I think we are all hungry for blessing, and we need those "*blessers*."

Have you had some “*blessers*” in your life? I bet you have. At a pastor’s retreat, participants were asked “*who really ordained you? Who blessed you, sent you out, gave you permission and direction? It probably wasn’t the person who presided at the actual Ordination service.*” My own Grandpa, Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor for 72 years, many years after I was ordained, told me “*I looked like a Pastor*” . . .?” Many years after I was ordained. He had not opposed my ordination, but he hadn’t exactly blessed it either back in 1981. I’m not sure where his comment came from at that moment, *but I took it as a blessing.*

It can be difficult to recognize a blessing when you see it. It will likely *not* be apparent to everyone. Some things simply *must be believed to be seen*. Faith can be facilitated by seeing, by touching—we have the sacraments, you know-- but the faith we are called to goes further. Many years ago, in France, a famous astronomer concluded a lecture, saying, “*I have swept the universe with my telescope, and I find no God.*” Whereupon, a famous musician replied from the audience: “*That statement is as unreasonable as for me to say, I have taken this violin apart. I have examined each piece with a microscope, and I find no music.*”

Old Simeon and Anna had faith and waited expectantly for God. Anna gave thanks, and spoke about the child Jesus to those who were looking for their nation to be released from oppression. Simeon blessed God, as he sang those familiar words: “*Lord, now you let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people. A light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel.*” Blessers echo God’s grace as they joyfully lift up the promise of God’s favor, here and now.

I think Anna and Simeon wanted the same sorts of things as we all want. They longed for painful and broken things to be put back together. They looked at a world torn apart by relentless lies, jagged divisions, wars and rumors of wars, a world in which so many suffer so much injustice and pain. They wanted transformation, hope for a life made new-- just as so many cry out for today. Simeon, we are told, was “*looking forward to the consolation of Israel.*” Anna longed for her nation to be redeemed from the foreign powers who subjugated it. They were not alone in this. Then as now, people wanted God to act; and now God *was* acting, in the little child Jesus. Not at what folks expect to see.

Simeon blessed God for the gift of Jesus, God’s in-person presence in the world. Some will see the gift and bless the Giver. Some will see the burning bush, and a holy God blazing within it. Others see nothing remarkable. In fact, some do not bless but take it upon themselves to wield that sword that pierces the soul, Simeon’s warning to Mary.

The prophets who gave their blessing could now be at peace, having seen that child; the peace of God’s servant Simeon was not shaken, even though Simeon saw that the sword would come. He could tell the whole truth, and still bless God in the midst of it. Only the Truth can really bless--so Simeon told the other side of the story, *the sword side*, too. But we know with Simeon, that with Jesus, the sword is not the last word. The promise of Resurrection life is the last word; the promise of life for us is the last word, and so Simeon can be at peace. And so can we.

The thoughts of many hearts will be revealed, and though the result will be pain—"*the sword through the heart of Mary*," the Light of the World takes on the shadows. Those who live in darkness are eventually exposed one way or another. In response to the Light of Christ, we can *Bless* or we can *Curse*; we can *watch for God* or we can *walk away*. We can *be amazed* to see the holy fire, or we can *yawn and settle* seeing only the common bush.

Where does the Spirit call *us* to be, in order to encounter the Living Lord on this new year coming? Surely, those places include the ones where God has promised to meet us: Within the community of God's people, the Body of Christ. Where the Good News of Jesus is preached, where we bless and confess and encourage, pray and practice our Christ-directed love, where we meet Christ in a welcomed stranger. Even as we watch and wait together in *this* place of worship, we know we can experience the Lord at the table, give thanks, and bless the Lord who is present, as promised, among us now.

The Holy Spirit brought faithful Anna and Simeon to the place where they could encounter the Christ Child as he was presented in the Temple. The Holy Spirit, as *we* watch and listen, will also bring us to places where we can encounter the Christ, where we can bless and be blessed. And so, Lord, *you let your servants go in peace*, to grow in grace, and share your love in our world.

“The Innkeeper”
(Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*)

Luke 2

Christmas Eve 2023

“That was a long, long time ago,” said the Innkeeper, “and a long, long way away. But the memories of people are also long, and nobody has forgotten anything about my own sad part in it all, unless maybe they have forgotten the *truth* about it. But you can never blame people for forgetting the truth because it is, after all, such a subtle and evasive commodity. In fact, all that distinguishes a truth from a lie may finally be no more than just the *flutter of an eyelid* or the *tone of a voice*. If I were to say, “I BELIEVE!” that would be a lie, but if I were to say, “I believe . . .” that *might* be the truth. So, I do not blame posterity for forgetting the subtleties and making me out to be the *villain* of the piece --the heartless one who said, ‘*No room! No room!*’ I’ll even grant you that a kind of villainy may be part of the truth. But if you want to speak the whole truth, then you will have to call me a villain with a catch in your voice, at least a tremor, a hesitation maybe, with even the glitter of almost a tear in your eye. Because nothing is *entirely* bad, you know. *Not even the human heart.*

“I speak to you as people of the world,” said the Innkeeper. “Not as idealists but as realists. Do you know what it is like to run an inn--to run a business, a family, to run *anything* in this world for that matter, even your own life? It is like being lost in a forest of a million trees,” said the Innkeeper, “and each tree is a thing to be done. Is there fresh linen on all the beds? Did the children put on their coats before they went out? Has the letter been written, the book read? Is there money enough left in the bank?” *Today* we have food in our bellies and clothes on our backs, but what can we do to make sure that we will have them still tomorrow? A million *trees*, A million *things*.

“Until finally we have eyes for nothing else, and whatever we see turns into a thing. The sparrow lying in the dust at your feet--just a *thing* to kicked out of the way, not the mystery of death. The calling of children outside your window--just a distraction, an irrelevance; not life, not the wildest miracle of them all. That whispering in the air that comes sudden and soft from nowhere--only the wind, *the wind*. . .

“Of course, I remember very well the evening they arrived. I was working on my accounts and looked up just in time to see the woman coming through the door. She walked in that slow, heavy-footed way that women have in the last months, as though they are walking in a dream or at the bottom of the sea. Her husband stood a little behind her-- a tongue-tied, helpless kind of man, I thought. I cannot remember either of them saying anything, although I suppose some words must have passed. But at least it was mostly silence. The clumsy silence of the poor. *You know what I mean.* It was clear enough what they wanted.

“The stars had come out. I remember the stars perfectly though I don’t know why I should, sitting inside as I was. And my kid’s cat jumped up on the table where I was sitting. I had not stood up, of course. There was mainly just silence. Then it happened much in the way that you have heard. I did not lie about there being no room left--there really was none--though perhaps if there had been a room, I *might* have lied. As much for their sakes as for the sake of the inn. Their kind would have felt more at home in a stable, that’s all, and I do not mean that unkindly either. *God knows.*

“Later that night, when the baby came, I was not there,” the Innkeeper said. “I was *lost in the forest somewhere, the unenchanted forest of a million trees*. Fifteen steps to the cellar, and watch out for your head going down. Firewood to the left. If the fire goes out, the heart freezes. *Only the wind, the wind*. I speak to you as people of the world. So, when the baby came, I was not around, and I saw none of it. As for what I heard--just at that moment itself of birth when ‘*nobody*’ turns into ‘*somebody*’--I do not rightly know what I heard.

“But this I do know. *My own true love*. All your life long, you wait for your own true love to come--we all of us do--our destiny, our joy, our heart’s desire. So how am I to say it, my friends? *When he came, I missed him*.

“Pray for me, brothers and sisters. Pray for the Innkeeper. Pray for me, and for us all, . . . *my own true love*.”

“*Lost in the forest somewhere, in the unenchanted forest of a million trees. Lost the chance, after waiting your life long, to encounter your own true love--your destiny, your joy, your heart’s desire.*”

Tonight we stop in our own forest, in the dark night of the weary places we wander through, long enough to make out the form of a tree. The tree of life, which grew in the beginning in the enchanted garden of human life, before the garden became the unenchanted place of sweat and tears and fears. The tree, used to make the simple, work-a-day feeding trough manger, which cradled a tiny newborn baby. The tree, which became the cross upon which that child would, in time, be nailed. That tree of death transformed in God’s love into a tree of new life. A tree in our own forest-- stop, wait and listen, watch and wonder at your own true love--your destiny, your joy, your heart’s desire. Let your eyes focus in the dim light, until your heart sees the gift of love that lies there in the manger.

The Innkeeper defends the role of “business as usual,” the way of the world, don’t you know. After all, this fellow had his work to do; nothing would get in the way of those busy tasks, no bother, no surprise, no gift, no amazing grace.

So the tragedy becomes painfully clear--in the dense forest of daily details, the Innkeeper was unable to see the *one thing* most precious: that underneath every busy heart resigned to the grown-up accumulation of details that weigh us down, that weigh us down until the death we have been attempting to avoid finally, finally catches up with us—that underneath every such heavy heart, there dwells a hope, a yearning for innocence regained, for *life that is more than making a living*, and for *Truth with a capital T*. A longing for *our* own true love.

The good news for us and for the Innkeeper, is this: *it is not too late*. Our own true love

is here. We do not have to scurry around and somehow scrape it up. We do not have to hurry, hurry and “shape up or ship out.” *God has come to us!* Emanuel. The gift is still given, and we can still receive it. God continues to come to us, even when we have been lost in *a forest of a million trees*.

So, on this Holy Night, *listen, wait and watch and wonder* at your own true love:

How silently, how silently
 The wondrous gift is giv’n!
 So God imparts to human hearts
 The blessing of his heav’n.
 No ear may hear his coming;
 But, in this world of sin,
 Where meek souls will receive him, still
 The dear Christ enters in.

Lord Jesus, help us to see the precious tree of your abundant life amid the dense forest of our anxious lives. Enter into our hearts anew, and fill them with your patience and your peace, with your humor and your holiness, with your light and your everlasting love. Our own true love.

“Greetings, favored one. The Lord is With You.” This morning we hear God’s call to Mary to become the mother of Jesus. Mary is the first believer and a prototype of all believers throughout history. Martin Luther loved the Christmas story, and wrote a long work on the song of Mary in Luke chapter 1, called the “Magnificat” – “my soul *magnifies* the Lord,” the psalm for today. As you listened to the Gospel reading today perhaps you could appreciate Luther’s comment: the greatest miracle of Christmas was not the birth, or the angels, but that Mary *believed* what Gabriel told her, and said *yes to God*.

That “Yes” made all the difference. “Yes, let it be so.” And it was. The title of the sermon today could be “Mary’s Fiat.” Mary’s fiat is *not* an Italian automobile; Fiat is, in Latin, “*so be it*.” Mary said yes to God. That YES, that fiat, certainly did take her places. Her “yes” took her to Bethlehem’s manger. It took her to the hillside with the other disciples listening to Jesus teach. Her “fiat” drove her to the foot of the cruel cross, and, along with others who “Said *Yes!*” to God, it took her into a new family of believers who celebrated Life when Jesus rose again.

Mary said YES . . . but not right away. The text says she was “much perplexed” and “pondered” those words of the angel: “*Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.*” I don’t know about you, but this just isn’t what I’d ever expect to hear. The angel understood Mary’s immediate gut reaction, and addresses it: “Do not be afraid.” Before she could say that *fiat* --that “yes” to God-- Mary was, well, *just plain scared*.

Why would Mary be afraid? Suddenly face to face with Gabriel, the shining messenger of God! How *would* you respond to Gabriel showing up in the middle of an ordinary day, and greeting you as Mary was greeted? “*Greetings, favored one, the Lord is With You.*” What, who? You talking to me?! We might even feel like Tevye in “*Fiddler on the Roof*” who has a conversation with God about the persecution and pain that his Jewish villagers were suffering in Russia; and then pleads with God: “I know we’re your chosen people, but why do you have to choose us so often?”

Most of the time, God calls to us *indirectly*, through other people or through bumping us up against our own unmet needs *again and again* until we get the Gabriel message that God wants in. We can miss seeing God at work—and if you are anything like me, I *do* fail to see it, more often than I could ever know. But to *know in the moment* that, *here I am facing God’s total claim on me*—well, that is an awesome thing. And scary. In the presence of God’s shining messenger, suddenly we become acutely aware of our failures, swamped by our limitations; our guilt over what we have done or failed to do, our shame over not measuring up to the expectations of ourselves or others. It *can* be very hard indeed for us to face our Gabriels.

Yet, Mary meets God’s love as Gabriel responds, “Do not be afraid.” The angel assures Mary that she is part of God’s good plan; she has found favor with God. OK -- so far --but then the angel *goes on* to announce the most amazing and incredible news to Mary. She, unmarried girl, a nobody from the sticks, is to become the mother of the Messiah, the one for whom the entire history of her people, of all the people, had been preparing--the ruler whose kingdom will have no end. Whoa! *That’s pretty heady stuff*. Mary’s reply is so wonderfully straightforward. *How can I be a mother when I’m still a virgin?* So, the angel goes on---“God will take care of that. Let me help you wrap your heart around this—go check out your relative Elizabeth. It’s her sixth month, and *nobody expected that either.*”

Mary had reason to be afraid. She risked losing everything: her reputation--*Did you hear about Mary? For shame, and we thought she was such a nice girl. I wonder who the father is? Poor Joseph.* She risked losing her future--surely Joseph and even her own family would *never* believe her story of this strange visitation. Would they throw her out? She even risked her life, for if Joseph had publicly accused her of adultery, she could have been put to death by public stoning. At the very least, she could become damaged goods, probably unmarriageable, left to fend for herself in an economy and a society that had no place for unwed mothers. Yet she said “*Fiat.*” That took trust and courage.

Mary says *yes* with the simple dignity of one who serves God without worldly status or a wealth of resources. God keeps surprising us, choosing to act through lowly characters. Mary the teenager, unwed, from a backwater town in the boondocks, becomes the Mother of God. David, the youngest son, stuck with tending the sheep, the dirtiest, smelliest job around, becomes the greatest King in Israelite history. Later, in those same hills outside of David’s city Bethlehem, humble working-stiffs tending sheep heard the amazing message, this time not *just* from Gabriel, but from a sky full of angel voices.

Mary’s song, the psalm for today, celebrates the scandalously upside down ways of God. People expected pomp and imperial power with the coming of the longed-for Messiah. But those expectations got totally turned upside down. As St. Paul said, *God chooses the lowly and despised to shame the wise and strong, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.* Guided by *our* world’s assumptions, we may look for him in a gold-plated palace, yet Jesus comes to us as a newborn asleep in a humble wooden feeding trough.

We may neither see nor even expect his coming, *but he does.* This Christmas good news assures us that God’s commitment to us is undiminished by our failures to see it or to say yes to it. God proves faithful even in times of greatest crisis: when individuals and whole communities face the attacks of deeply-rooted hatred, the threat of destruction, collapse, or exile, the promise of the Messiah assures us that we still have a future. Luther said, when the enemy attacks you, “*Run to the manger*”--for here we have proof that God does come to us in the person of Jesus, and makes it possible for us to respond to him with our “*fiat.*”

So, where will your “*fiat*” take you? For God’s message also comes to us, now, today. The Lord is with us! We have found favor with God! We are full of grace! And, as Mary was called, God also calls us to share the Good News of God’s love at work in us, enabling the grace to be unafraid as we respond: “*yes, God, I’ll go where you lead me.*”

Our “*fiat*” makes it possible to go down surprising and sometimes scary new roads, because the Promised One has come to us, and God gives us the grace to trust. We have seen the baby in the manger. Our God is with us, amid wars and rumors of wars, unspeakable horrors and devastating losses. Our God is with us, amid unrelentingly dangerous work or not enough work. God is with us when hatred is on the march, amid the darkness of our fears, the anxiety of our uncertainties, the weight of our failures. Our God is with us, amid the loneliness of families who cannot gather in this Christmas season; God is with us when grief engulfs us. God is here, beside us, among us.

With Mary, we may well ask, “how can God work through *me*?” The Holy Spirit came upon us in the waters of Holy Baptism. We are called by a God who is able to strengthen us for living with courage in God’s amazing grace, the same grace that favored Mary, to which she *said yes* so long ago.

It’s hard to say YES to what is still a mystery, trusting God’s favor despite so much evidence to the contrary. It is hard to wait for God’s timing, to sense God’s movement. But, as with Mary, this “yes” makes the rest of the story possible. Our “fiat” matters too, for living into God’s vision of a world renewed.

We pray, “O Come, O Come Emanuel,” and Jesus comes-- in seeing and hearing, in tasting and sharing the promise. So, let us respond in faith: “*let it be to me according to your Word.*” Fiat. And just see where that fiat takes us!

Called to Carry the Light Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11; 1 Thess. 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28
Advent 3B December 17, 2023

A few years ago, someone asked the comedian Flip Wilson about what church he belonged to, and Flip said, “*I’m a Jehovah’s Bystander.*” “*They asked me,*” he said, “*to be a Jehovah’s Witness, but I didn’t want to get involved.*” In this season of Advent, we are waiting; but God doesn’t want us to just hang around on the sidelines. God sends us out onto the field with important work to do while we are waiting. God calls us to carry the light of *this* hopeful, joyful Good News into the world: *God is with us*. God’s up to something good, and God wants us to be a part of it.

In today’s Gospel reading there’s a lot of talk about being SENT. We hear that John was “*sent from God*” – a voice crying in the wilderness, the forerunner pointing beyond himself to Jesus. He preaches, “*I’m the lamp, but I’m not the light. I am the voice, but I am not the Word. It’s not about me. I carry the news of someone far greater than I am.*”

John’s not the only sent one, however. The official investigators from the temple authorities in Jerusalem (the folks who are called “the Jews” in the gospel of John) were also “sent” to check out John’s message. Some heard and responded to the call to turn their lives around. But I suspect that a good number of them were at best curious bystanders, or perhaps were already becoming enemies of God’s pushy new plan to turn this world’s ideas about power and greatness upside down.

As John the baptizer turns our attention to Jesus, he’s giving testimony. God has sent him as a witness in a kind of trial that will show whether Jesus is indeed the true “*light of the world.*” In this trial, Satan plays the role of the prosecuting attorney, and the Holy Spirit stands as an Advocate alongside the defendant. The word here for “witness” in Greek is *martyria*--as in *martyr*. A “martyria” is a truth you speak that just might put you in the lion’s den. Or paint a target on your back. Or you might get strung up by the authorities on the cross piece tied to a tall pole of wood.

God sends *us* out as well, to carry the light of Christ. We are called to be carriers, but not just any old kind of carrier. After witnessing an angry outburst by her friend’s boss, the victim of the tirade was asked, “Does your boss have ulcers?” “No,” the worker replied, “But he *is* a carrier!” We’re called to be carriers, but not like that. Spread the healing light of love and caring, and not the virus of hate and abuse. Our witness to the light of Christ might take the form of a kind and patient ear, or a heartfelt and healing hug. It doesn’t have to be a monumental thing.

When Jesus first began his preaching, he quoted today’s text from the prophet Isaiah: “The Lord has *sent* me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim release to the captives, to comfort those who mourn and to bring joy.” His mother Mary remembered that promised work of God in the hymn she sang when she found out she was going to give birth to the Christ Child. Jesus also sends us here and now to give witness to God’s healing and transforming work.

We are carriers, but *what kind* of carriers are we? John’s testimony sets out a clear choice. Witness or bystander? Daylight or dark night? Service to others or self-preservation?

John pointed to the servant savior Jesus, not to his *own* power or privilege. Unfortunately, there continues to be so much selfishness in our world. Folks keep falling short of God's vision of abundant life for all. We find ourselves needing God's forgiveness to live into that vision for life.

Being a witness has high stakes. We can't hold our own when our flawed or failed witness turns us into the defendant in God's courtroom. We fool ourselves if we think we can just be innocent bystanders in this game. We are carriers, and we give some kind of witness whether we intend to or not, as others see how we live. Well, that's a challenge, and I know most days it doesn't take much for the prosecuting attorney to nail me, or any of us.

There's Good News here though: Jesus has stood *in our place* for us in the courtroom. The Holy Spirit stands by us as our Advocate. God has given us a new identity in a kind of *witness protection plan*—but not so that we can disappear into some strange and lonely place we hope against hope will be secure enough to save us from our enemies. As witnesses reflecting the light of Christ, God gives us this new identity: “saved and sent ones” for whom the Lord has done great things. Our witness protection is this: “*the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this,*” as Paul tells us in our second lesson for today. John, as he was baptizing, pointed to this new identity, and we receive that “saved and sent” identity as beloved children of God in baptism. We witness to that new identity as we baptize Kiki today.

In the midst of this our calling to witness as John witnessed, God doesn't grimly shake an accusing finger at us-- booting us out the door, demanding that we prove ourselves by doing our solemn and scary duty. The Apostle Paul reminds the believers in Thessalonica about the promises of God. Paul was *sent*— that's what the word *apostle* means-- and he offers guidance for witnessing to the light: *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances!*

Rejoice always! What causes us to get so excited we can hardly contain ourselves? Consider those photos of VJ Day, when World War II finally came to an end--and strangers were kissing each other on the streets of *Times Square* in New York City. Or if your high school makes it to the state basketball tournament. Or maybe just wins the big game. When my high school played the team from Moorhead, *four or five times* the size of our school, we just hoped that we wouldn't lose by an embarrassingly wide margin. When Moorhead won, they were happy; but when *we* won, we whooped it up because no one ever expected it. *We rejoiced.*

In our spiritual lives, what causes us to rejoice, to whoop it up, or perhaps to stand silenced in holy awe, swept up in a sense of wonder? Paul uses a Greek word for “rejoice” that is related to *charis*, the word for “grace.” Grace, receiving something you need that you neither deserve nor expect-- Grace gives us plenty to reasons to rejoice. We give witness to Jesus Christ, God *with* us and God *for* us. We are lamps for carrying *this* light, and in this light, we rejoice and give thanks.

Rejoice and give thanks in all circumstances! The days are getting colder, the nights are getting longer, the darkness deepens. The winter solstice is coming, bringing the shortest day, the longest night, the beginning, officially, of winter. Rejoice and give thanks! While it is still winter to celebrate the spring? Well, yes! To celebrate the victory of God over all that oppresses; to proclaim, even now, that fear, poverty, despair, and hatred will not prevail, to hope and trust that the *arc of the moral universe does indeed bend toward justice.*

Notice, just as the winter begins, the days begin to get longer, and we know that winter will give way to spring. We can give thanks even in the deepest darkness, because we know that, in the Christ Child we await, God has fully entered our darkness, and we can trust the light of Easter.

In Psalm 126, which we sang together today, echoes that hope that keeps us happening:

“⁵Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy.”

Even though we come on the scene centuries after the earthly ministry of Jesus, John’s witness helps *us* to walk in the footsteps of Jesus--for Jesus still wants to enter our lives and those around us in new and deeper ways. Our witness to the Light, borne out in our prayer-filled, watchfully waiting lives, *is* cause for rejoicing. God’s power is stirred up in us as we give thanks for all that we have been given. Rejoicing in Christ’s hope, we are sent to share in the ministry of unbinding and healing and sharing the Story, where the Light of God’s goodness can cause others to rejoice as well.

The one who calls you is faithful, and will work through you to finish God’s work. Rejoice in God’s Good News, give thanks to God in everything, and wherever you are sent, always carry the Light of Christ. Gracious God, stir us and strengthen us to carry your light.

A Word of Hope in the Wilderness Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8 December 10, 2023
Advent 2B

On this second Sunday of the “getting ready” season of Advent, God calls on us to receive, yet again, the “*beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.*” We hear the promise of peace with God and peace within a world where, as our Psalm invites us to envision: “*Steadfast love and faithfulness have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.*”

Preaching and baptizing out in the wilderness, dressed like the ancient prophet Elijah, John quotes today’s hope-filled passage from Isaiah chapter 40: “*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.*”

Isaiah spoke to God’s people trapped in a wilderness of exile in far-away Babylon, collateral damage from that empire’s cruel ambitions, hopelessly cut off from their Promised Land, a treacherous 900 miles away. Into this bleak wilderness, precisely into *this* grief and hopelessness, Isaiah speaks a word of promise: Hang in there. God *will* make a way in the wilderness for the exiles to return home.

God will make a way, but it is *God’s* highway and often *not* what we expect. A few years ago, the rangers at Bridger Wilderness Area in Wyoming compiled a list of some of the comments made by visitors to this area who had filled out comment cards. “Please avoid building trails that go uphill” demanded one wilderness enthusiast. “Chair lifts need to be installed,” wrote another, “so that we can get to wonderful views without having to *hike* to them.” And then this gem: “A McDonald’s would be nice at the trailhead.” Often not what we expect.

John, advance man for Jesus, doesn’t have anybody’s convenience in mind when he quotes Isaiah. It was the custom in those days for kings to send messengers ahead of them on their journeys--to check out the roads and warn the locals to get to work patching up the pot-holes--because the king was on his way. Just so, John says, this new holy highway for God is paved by the tough task of repentance, the spiritual U-turn which helps to prepare the way for Jesus.

Sometimes, folks resist this call to face and fess up to their failures before God. They hear the condemnation clearly, but not the *rest* of the message: the invitation to trust the good news--to believe that sins, having been confessed, really are forgiven, that following along God’s path can make a new life unfold. The accusations have more power in our hearts than the promise of forgiveness. In those wilderness lands are stark mountains of guilt and dark valleys of shame. We need to hear and claim the good news that God will forgive a repentant heart for Jesus’ sake. We can dare to turn toward God’s Road only when we trust that the Good News is good news for each one of us, here and now. *Today*, in whatever exile wilderness we are enduring.

We know about John’s wilderness. We wander around there more often than we care to admit to ourselves or others, more often than we dare to confess to God, although God surely knows it better than we do. Our lessons today tell us that God is patient, not wanting to turn away any wandering children. Listen to a loving God continue to plead with us: “*Repent, turn back; let me work in you to level the high hills of pride, and fill in the deep valleys of despair.*”

Even now, John's voice cries "in the wilderness" – where we have come to know our own exiles, hopes mangled, trust tested and betrayed. Dry places refuse to sustain life; fear and anxiety lurk in every heart. We need to hear that message of peace in the wilderness of loneliness, isolation, grief, cruelty, and confusion, where we have lost our bearings and it seems we've lost our ability to speak clear truth to each other and before God. In a world where self-giving love and faithfulness seem to have fled into hiding, and peace and righteousness have stalked off in opposite directions.

In that wilderness we know first-hand the fragility of life – "*all flesh is grass*" Isaiah reminds us. We know the fragility of life where vulnerable children are dying every day of starvation, and children of affluence are overweight with cholesterol problems before they finish grade school. We know the despair of a world that feeds on fear and force and falsehoods, escalating cycles of violence with no road to peace or righteousness in sight.

Or perhaps we just stop and wonder if it's all worth it. In the darkness, we are straining to adjust our eyes, aching to see "*righteousness and peace embrace each other.*" And into the wilderness comes *this* unexpected good news: *the wilderness is precisely where we hear the promising Word of God's comfort.* In the wilderness. There. We dare to embrace what God offers us as we hear John's message, as we acknowledge our need for God's forgiveness. When we clear ourselves out of the center of our own lives, we find space for a patient and loving God to be at work turning our lives around.

Isaiah's soaring poetry spoke to a nation in exile, hopeless, up against the wall, wondering if this God of theirs could make any difference at all. "*Give comfort to my people,*" says your God. Speak tenderly of peace, of hope, of possibility. Preparing can be a gentle process. Like a Shepherd, God feeds and leads this flock, the people of God. Like a Mother with a small, frightened child, God speaks comfort to the broken-hearted, hope to the despairing, home to the exiles. Speaks forgiveness, the gentle binding up of ancient gaping wounds. God carefully repairs the broken threads of hope for the future, reweaves the pattern of peace in the present, and brings to mind God's grace in the past.

We sometimes think of the repentance preached by John the baptizer as a lot of old-fashioned "*hellfire and brimstone.*" But the Gospel of Mark does not include all that harsh language. Mark dives right into the central focus – the good news of Jesus Christ. Now John *did* tell people a truth about where they were falling short of God's vision of "*peace embracing righteousness.*" Harry Truman was called "Give 'em hell Harry," but he once said, "*I never give Congress hell. I just tell the truth and they think it's hell.*" There at the Jordan, John preaches a message that can prepare folks to welcome Jesus as God's Word of peace and steadfast love, a love that takes on the *hellfire* and all of the *brimstone* that the powers of evil could dish out. With Jesus, at Easter, we see that God is paving the way to peace and joy.

God makes a way in the wilderness, giving us the eyes to see, even dimly, a vision of newness, with ears to hear, even faintly, the promise of life abundant. The *true* glory of God is the triumph over the powers of hatred and betrayal, unrighteousness and hopeless alienation from God and from each other. *This* is the power of God that the Gospel of Mark intends to tell: it is the good news of Jesus Christ. Like a new highway through the desert, it leads to the power of

the cross reaching us in our wilderness, and the wonder of an empty tomb giving us power for each new tomorrow.

God promises to give us the strength to encounter whatever rough places, whatever seemingly insurmountable mountains, whatever dreary, swampy, impassible valleys, whatever crookedness we face on our uncertain paths. The call to repent helps to make us ready for God's work of living into a place saturated with steadfast love and faithfulness, alive in God's righteousness and peace. When people look at God's people, we hope that they see our God at work. God calls on us to share the same love and patient forgiveness that God has so gracefully lavished on us. This Good News through Jesus Christ beckons us –*“let me fill your valleys and level your mountains. Let me be your God, and transform your world.”* Lord, give us your Spirit to hear your Word in the Wilderness and trust it, and respond to it faithfully with courage and patience, as we share your love in this world.

Today it could be appropriate for me to wish you all a happy New Year. No, I’m not trying to rush the season. Today is the first Sunday of a new Church year. There are the Advent candles, and the blue color of hope; and our gospel lessons for this year will be drawn mostly from the Gospel of Mark.

This First Sunday in Advent is a bit like reading the last chapter of the story first. At this new beginning, we look ahead to the end--when Jesus comes again, not as a fragile Christmas baby, but as awesome ruler of all. The refrain of Advent is not “*Christ the Savior is born;*” it’s “*Even so, come, Lord Jesus!*” In the midst of frightening and powerful signs, the shaking of the very foundations, we are encouraged-- not to run around frantic like Chicken Little, but also not to press the spiritual snooze button. Instead, we hear “*hey, wake up! Up and at ‘em! Be on the look-out for God.*”

When Yogi Berra, who was famous for saying things that made people do a double-take, was asked what time it was, he said: “You mean *now*?” In today’s gospel Jesus warns us to be alert *now*, to be watchful because we don’t know what time it is. So, what does being watchful mean? Being watchful, we lock doors, we install yard lights that come on when the sun goes down and alert our smartphones when someone walks by. We buy weather radios; we pay our insurance premiums. Jesus says, NOW is always the right time to be paying attention to what God is up to. To be “watchful.”

Yes, there is watching and waiting that we must do, just as that first generation after Jesus had to watch and wait for his return. Wait patiently– but not passively. A kid waiting for the bus on an ordinary morning may just stand there. That same kid on the *same* corner, hearing the sound of a parade, will also wait, but on tiptoe, full of expectation. God calls us to “*Up and at ‘em*” *waiting*, for we often miss what we are not watching out for. So Jesus warns, Pay attention! Keep awake! Stay focused on God’s call and promise.

It can be pretty hard to stay focused on God’s work in the world. [Here is a joke from Fr. William Bausch’s book *A World of Stories for Preacher and Teachers*:]

“A husband and wife in their late eighties were both becoming extremely forgetful. He would forget where he put his eyeglasses. Then as he went from room to room, he would forget what he was looking for. She would announce that she was going to the store for butter, but when she got there, she would forget what she was shopping for.

One evening, as they watched TV, the husband stood up and this dialogue took place:

She: Where are you going?

He: To get a snack; it’s my turn.

She: I want a hot fudge sundae. Write it down!

He: I don’t have to write it down!

She: And put nuts on it. Write it down!

He: I don’t have to write it down!

She: And whipped cream on top. Write it down!

He: I don’t have to write it down!

“Up and at ‘Em” Watching

So, the husband left to get the snacks. When he returned, he presented his wife with a plate of bacon and eggs. She scolded him: *I told you to write it down.*” *You forgot the toast.*” I’ve discovered it is true that you don’t have to be in your late eighties to have problems with focus!

The “*up and at ‘em*” *watching* of Advent calls on us to look around--to see the truth about ourselves and the world. It seems that some new crisis emerges daily, even hourly! *God, we plead, where are you anyway?* Advent can be in some ways a very difficult season--people sing about joy and peace and goodwill, but the glitz can’t really hide the pain. As the days get shorter, sometimes we find the darkness growing inside of us as well. Bright expectations can make bleak prospects seem, well, *bleaker*. We might want to plead with God, as the prophet Isaiah cried out in a desolate time for the Israelites: “*You, God! Why don’t you just rip open the heavens and come on down here and save us?*” Indeed!

As we wait and watch for God, we have work to do. The church is challenged to be alert to the continuing signs of God at work around us: “*It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work.*” (Mark 13:34). Living shaped by our trust in Christ, we can share in his work of calming the fears and forebodings, not feeding them; compassionately hearing out the other person, countering the prejudices and the greed, and caring for the creation.

The world might ask us, why watch and wait and hope? Why do that— *if* what matters is getting and keeping *what* I want and *when* I want it? The world would have us believe that we get our worth and power from what we already have. Perhaps that’s why so much energy goes into protecting it, no matter what the cost to ourselves or others. We assume that we are energized by certainties, when in fact our energy often comes from possibilities.

Think about how much delight children experience waiting to open presents on Christmas. By New Year’s, some of those gifts will be entirely forgotten. It is dreams that drive us, and hope that makes us happen. It is the experience of not yet being fulfilled that keeps us leaning into the future, looking for what God will be doing. None of us knows when our lives will be called to account, but we can trust that God has hopes and expectations for us in the meantime.

When we discover that our own resources turn out to be woefully inadequate, then we can begin to encounter true HOPE; not a glib Pollyanna optimism, not blind denial—“*fiddling while Rome burns.*” But hope is faith, informed by the past, charting a way into the future. Hope takes in all the brokenness of the situation, and IN SPITE OF what is seen, relies on this Promise: God loves us and forgives us for Jesus’ sake, and God’s Spirit will be with us in the midst of it all.

What are we getting ourselves into with today’s Prayer of the Day: “*stir up your power, O Lord, and come?*” Why do people stir things? Perhaps to blend out the lumps, or to keep something from burning or sticking to the bottom of the pan, to keep something cooking evenly; we might beat air into egg whites so they can go from being clear and slimy to being the top of a lemon meringue pie. But no matter why it is that we stir anything up, one thing is for sure: we do it to change it from one thing into another. And when God “*stirs up power, coming among us,*” God is making us into something new.

“The Last Days” are now; for every generation encounters its own signs, its own “*wars and rumors of wars*.” (Those words come from the beginning of this 13th chapter of Mark.) All the signs of the end time in Mark chapter 13 show up again in the story of Jesus’ suffering and death in chapter 14 and 15. I think that’s an interesting bit to note. Jesus pleads with his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane – “*stay awake*”—as he prays for strength to endure the abuse and abandonment, the suffering and dying that was about to take place. With the death of Jesus, the end times have now already begun, yet we know that it is not yet completed. We live in the interim.

Our Advents are not confined to the *past*, when Jesus came as a human baby, or to the *future*, when Jesus will come as victorious Lord of all. God stirs thing up in the meantime, and we live there in the light of Easter hope.

The Kingdom of God has been left in the hands of the servants; *we* are those servants, and while we are waiting, we have watching and working to do. God has provided us with the gifts we need. Our Second Reading encourages us: “*You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end.*” These are strong promises that give us our hope, the promises that are the foundation for our witness. So, we pray: Lord, help us to be faithful, to be hopeful, to be ready always for your coming.

Today, we focus on *Christ the King*. It can seem a little strange to us, this “king” thing. When the king of Sweden was visiting in Lindstrom, the oldest Swedish city in Minnesota, there was a motorcade in which the king’s limo and several others passed by. A young child stood there watching, with her mother. After the cars passed, having seen a number of very ordinary looking men, all wearing very ordinary business suits and ties, the obviously disappointed girl said to her mother, “*But, which one of them was the King?*” It can be pretty hard to identify Jesus as a king. In today’s Gospel lesson, neither the sheep *nor* the goats recognized Christ the King in the ordinary parade of people in their lives.

Neither sheep nor goats “*know*” the true meaning of what they do or don’t do. Both are surprised at the words of the Judge. The righteous –the “sheep”-- serve others, but not for the sake of saving themselves, or marking brownie points with God or other people. They do what they *can* to meet the needs they encounter, not counting the cost or first checking the credentials of those in need. They are surprised that, in serving others, they were serving Jesus.

But what about the goats? There’s an old cartoon: under the blazing sun of the desert, two men sit, feet are propped up on a little wooden stand which has a sign saying “*Lemonade: 5 cents.*” Below the sign, there is a person clearly exhausted from crawling the last few yards; his arm reaches up and his nails scratch on the front of the lemonade stand, desperate to get what is offered there. The keepers of the lemonade stand say to each other: “*There’s that scratching sound again. It’s so annoying.*” And they sit there and do nothing.

Those clueless characters behind that lemonade stand in the desert are like the goats in today’s lesson. The desperate need was right there and they didn’t respond, as the man right there scratching for help faints from thirst. The goats miss out; “You *did not* do this for the one who needed it, and so, you turned *me* away.” The goats are *also* surprised: *Jesus, when did we see you?*

We meet our incognito King Jesus in unexpected places. We encounter him whenever someone needs our loving action and advocacy. Although the lessons for Christ the King Sunday echo “*Judgment Day-- out there in the future, distant or maybe not so distant.*” But we also find that Jesus has *already* been present among us here and now. Every time we give water, Jesus is present. Every time we share food, every time we speak up for the silenced ones in their paralyzing fear of violence, every time we reach out with hopeful words and loving actions, Jesus is present. We are called to see our King incognito in those who need what we can offer, even as *they* may also see Jesus in *us* as well, when *we* become an answer to their prayers.

One night a man walking down the street was attacked by a group of thugs. He was beaten, dragged into an alley, and left for dead. As he lay bleeding, he looked up and saw a face. He felt someone’s hands lifting his shoulder. At that moment, he lost consciousness. In the hospital, when he regained consciousness, he remembered the face in the alley and asked, “Is the one who helped me here? I want to speak to him.” “Yes,” the nurse answered, “He has been waiting to see you.” When the man walked into the room, the one who was injured said, “I want to thank you for helping me in the alley this evening, and I want to tell you something. When I looked up into that dim light and saw your face, I thought you were Jesus.” The man smiled and said, “When I heard your voice calling for help, I thought *you* were Jesus.”

We encounter Jesus not just in the needs of *others*, but also hidden in *our own* pain and weakness. Amazingly, Jesus showed us that *in the weakness of God we see God's strength*. Incognito king indeed, this Christ on a cross. It is precisely in our weakness that *we* come to know God's strength, when, struggling to make the grade we begin to discover that our own efforts have failed. Christ our King became human and vulnerable like us; even to the point of submitting to a cruel execution on a cross. We can encounter the King wherever we find ourselves *or anyone else* in need of his love and grace.

This is unexpected, but it is amazingly how God rules in and through us: God's love and grace put into action. We have been delivered *from* the ultimate power of *anything* that could separate us from God's love. We have been delivered *to* serve God as we serve our neighbors in need.

Now we can serve our neighbor without needing to try to make our activity the basis for saving ourselves. The world remains a place where it is often a struggle to stay hopeful, a challenge to enact our love for others as we would have God love us. We are still *between the times*. We confess the kingdom of *God is already here*, but we know, painfully, that *it's not yet completely here*.

There is a story of a child, Jan, in Holland in World War Two. Occupied by the Nazis for many months, the people were very discouraged and fearful. In Jan's attic, a short-wave radio was carefully hidden well enough to avoid being found in three different searches. Each evening, Jan's parents would quietly huddle around it to hear news of the war. On a certain evening in early June, everything changed. Allied troops had successfully landed on the beaches of Normandy, and were beginning to make their way toward the enemy stronghold. This, the boy's father explained, was the beginning of the end of the war. Even though many fierce battles remained, they could trust that freedom would finally come.

Out on the streets of the city, nothing changed. Soldiers were still seen in their trucks, on the street corners, in the stores and cafes. Food was still rationed, blackouts and drills still disturbed everyday routines, and propaganda still cluttered the papers and local radio. But for the boy and his family, *everything had changed*. He believed the long siege would soon be over. Nothing had changed, but everything had changed. The war was, in a sense, already won--although it was not yet over. Months of hard fighting would remain. Yet he could hope again, and all who had heard the good news were able to hope again as well.

In Jesus, God has already landed on *our* war-torn beach. The decisive Good Friday battle has been fought and won. This is our Easter Good News. Yet we also know that the daily struggles are by no means done--the enemy, the powers of death and evil, hatred and fear, rage on. The closer the enemy is to losing ground, the fiercer the fight. God invites us always to trust, like the Dutch family, that the *decisive battle has been fought and won*. God rules by *loving and dying*, not by *forcing and killing*. The incognito Christ works *through* us to herald the beginning of the end for all that hinders God's healing and hope.

The decisive battle has already been fought and won, but sometimes we forget. When we act *as if* things are hopeless, as if what we might have to offer couldn't really matter, we are acting like the goats. *It matters how we treat each other and how we serve with what we are given.* It's just that simple. In the Church year calendar, this is the Last Sunday before we begin again with Advent and Christmas. What is one thing that could change, over the next year, with Jesus at the center of your life?

Our *King incognito* is our model for authority, and the source of our spiritual energy. God's surprising grace keeps offering us forgiveness for where we fall short, and, day after day, a renewed life as God's heart and hands. Let us pray for grace and courage to trust Jesus as we share Christ's love with our neighbor. Let us live as citizens of God's new dominion, until we hear those words: "*Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*"

“Thanks Living in the Meantime” Matthew 25:14-30; I Thessalonians 5:1-11 Nov. 19, 2023

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, Matthew tells us that Jesus, just days before the end of his own earthly life, is teaching his disciples. What should we make of what God has given us, in the interval between the *now* of following the Jesus who *has* come, and the day when Jesus *comes again*? We live between the giving and the accounting. How do we live as children of the light in the meantime? How do we daily live out our thanks for the light of God’s love and hope and healing that we have been given?

Each servant in the story is entrusted with enormous resources by the Master before he goes away. Although the amounts vary, we should be aware that even one talent was a staggeringly large amount of money--15 years of wages for a day laborer. What will these stewards, servants entrusted with someone else’s resources, do with them?

As we prepare for the Thanksgiving holiday, it is good to remember and give thanks that we have been given a treasure beyond measure by our Lord. We are invited to trust that God is up to something – even when it is difficult to know yet just what that will be -- and God has a role for each one of us.

Christian faith is more than nodding *yes* to some old words on a page. Martin Luther’s explanation of the Apostles’ Creed in his *Small Catechism* can help us focus on reflecting the light of Christ through what we do with what we have been given. We say “I believe” in God the Creator, who has, in Luther’s words of the explanation, “*given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property, and all those blessings which God has entrusted to us; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil.*” We will never know the full scope of these gifts from God, and we literally could not live without them. We walk in Christ-light as we live out our gratitude, sustained and strengthened through our “trust connection” with Jesus.

In the parable, the servants are told to take care of the Master’s business until he comes back. *And we are called to do that as well.* There is work to be attempted, needs to be attended to, risks to be taken, a world to be tended, a message to be told. The first two servants were rewarded by that Master for their work. “*Well done!*” the Master exclaims when he returns. But the third servant was *afraid*, and so he buried what he had been given. He hears the owner’s verdict at the accounting time: “*You wicked slave!*” His gift was not meant to be buried—*seeds* may grow in the ground, but *coins* do not. Fear turns us in on ourselves. If we do not invest our lives in reflecting the true light of the Gospel, we miss out on the joy that God envisions for us.

The author of the book *Gods, Graves and Scholars* has written of the excavation of the city of Pompeii in Italy, which was buried in the sudden volcanic lava flow from Mt. Vesuvius. “*The first body uncovered was a skeleton, with gold and silver coins that rolled out of both hands, still seeking, it seemed, to clutch them fast.*” The parable tells us that the one who clung to the gift, fearful of losing it and reluctant to be using it, ends up losing it all anyway.

Luther's explanation of the second part of the Creed includes the example of the kind of obedience God looks for, and how we can dare to risk it: *"I believe that Jesus Christ . . . is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, in order that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him."* Jesus emptied his treasury for us, and he promises to see us through. The Apostle Paul in our second lesson reminds us that, because we are alive in the light of Christ, we are not destined for God's wrath. Fear does *not* have to rule our lives.

We pray "Come Lord Jesus," but in the meantime, how do we keep the faith when the time drags on, and the problems seem so relentlessly big and the resources so alarmingly small, and God really can seem so far away? Someone has said: *God will never give me more than I handle – but sometimes I wish God didn't trust me so much.* Yet we *do* have the promise that we will never get more than *God* can handle.

The Holy Spirit eases our fretful worries, lighting our dark night like first rays of the morning sun. The toughest times of trial may bring the grace-filled treasure of relaxing into the arms of God, knowing that the weight of the moment is too heavy for us to bear, and trusting the Spirit to get us through.

In your own history, think back on those times of trial when you discovered that God was indeed bearing you up, giving you the strength to endure and to share a witness to the power of God's love. When you experienced the love of God in the community of people gathered around you with prayers and casseroles. When you were nourished at God's table. When you were, as a congregation, given the grace to make it through difficult times, and still be God's people gathered in this place.

These times are examples God at work, which the third part of the Apostles' Creed details: *"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."* Luther unpacks this: *The Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth."*

With the presence of this Holy Spirit, *unlike* the servants of the master in the parable, we are not pushed out into the frightening and unforgiving marketplace of the world on our own. God has provided these spiritual resources for becoming and remaining faithful, responding to God's generosity through giving and living out our thanks. We are empowered to join in what God is doing in the world, changing and challenging people to be enlightened by the transforming grace of God.

Trust the Giver as you pray about how to use your gifts. It's worth it to be steadfast, to hang in there, to hope and fight faithfully against the powerful influences that keep us in the dark. Serving God requires endurance and trust, the investment of your whole self. Now, in the meantime, it is evident that God's enemies will not be going away anytime soon, unless the Second Coming of Jesus is indeed *right* around the corner. Yet, we can trust the one who wins the final battle; and who promises to remain with us.

We are loved by God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. We are loved by God who provides what we need for *thanks-living in the meantime*, before we see the final victory. *Therefore*--and that's a pregnant, powerful THEREFORE-- therefore because we have, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the victory over all those forces that would make us shrink away and shrivel up, we can be "*steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord.*"

Our work is not in vain, even when we cannot see the results that we hope for. When the power of evil seems so overwhelming, we can think that surely our meager efforts are not worth the risk. But in the light of Christ, we are not left hopeless; for our God – *and this is important for understanding this parable*-- is *not* like that distant harsh taskmaster in the parable. Our Master goes all the way *with* us and *for* us, even to the outer darkness of death. We pray for God's grace to live and give as faithful stewards, in thankful response to God's gifts, trusting God to bless our investment in God's work, until we hear "*well done, enter into the joy of your master.*"

Ready or Not Amos 5:18-24; 1 Thess 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13
Pentecost 24

November 12, 2023

When kids play hide and seek, the seeker will call out “*ready or not, here I come.*” Ready or not. Ready or not, winter is coming. Ready or not, the final test is scheduled. Ready or not, you gotta get up and go to work. Ready or not, retirement is on the horizon. Ready or not, *stuff happens*. Today’s lessons all point to being ready for God to come and set things right, and learning how to live in the meantime.

I once saw a cartoon in the *New Yorker* magazine: A man had just walked past a person holding a sign that read: “*Prepare to meet thy God!*” The next frame shows the man stopping before the mirror on a vending machine to comb his hair and straighten his tie. *Um, no.* I don’t think *that’ll* do it.

Today’s 2nd lesson and Gospel reading both reflect the early church wrestling with the problem of the delay in Jesus’ return. They had thought Jesus would come back in weeks, maybe months, after he left them. But Jesus had not come back right away; some of the faithful were dying, and among the *living*, some of the fervor was dying and the focus of their faith was blurring. The followers of Jesus had to figure out how to be faithful while they had to keep waiting for his return. Jesus is generous with tips for *waiters*. “Ready or not, I am coming and you will not know when.” Stay awake spiritually; keep an eye out for God at work, around you and within you.

For us too, waiting is difficult. When is God going to get it together and mend this broken world? “*How long, O Lord?*” we are aching to know. When evil lurks all around and God seems nowhere to be found, when the accidents and incidents pile up, senseless and relentless, then we can easily find ourselves weary, confused, disappointed or angry, increasingly anxious and afraid, ill-equipped spiritually to deal with the mess. So, there’s another cartoon: a fellow with the sign “*the world is not ending tomorrow; you have to learn to cope.*” Yeah, well, what is that coping supposed to look like? If the decisive Day when God makes all things right *doesn’t come and doesn’t come*, maybe we find ourselves living as if it won’t ever come at all, or wouldn’t matter much anyway if it did. What can fill our lamps, and light our lives with the oil of hopeful expectation?

In this world where Christ may return unexpectedly, the parable of the bridesmaids warns we must be ready. So how do we become ready for the return? In this world where we are waiting, how do we hang in there? It helps to keep our eyes on Jesus, and his ways and his vision.

As we wait for a world set right, as we work for a world set right, what is it that we are longing and hoping for? There’s a difference between *waiting* and *loitering*. Our first lesson from the prophet Amos includes that often-quoted verse that tells us what *God* is hoping for: “*Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*” The Biblical understanding of justice goes deep: it is “*the external state of affairs in which all life can thrive.*” Amos sees Israel just going through the motions of worship, but not living faithful to their covenant with God. They had cheered when Amos proclaimed that God would punish their enemies, but then Amos *kept on going*, to announce God’s judgement on *their* own lives too: for

they “*sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.*” No justice there, in that callous greed. Amos warns that God’s Day of returning for them will be a difficult day of reckoning unless they change their ways. In the Gospel parable, the unprepared ones must meet their day of reckoning; they were left out of the wedding feast, in the cold and dark.

The story of the waiting bridesmaids concludes with the warning to “*keep awake,*” yet *all* of them, the foolish *and* the wise, were sleeping when the word came that the bridegroom was approaching. The *only* distinction between the two groups is the level of preparation for an unanticipated delay. We can sympathize with the ones who ran short of their oil, I think. You may think you are prepared enough, but then you find that, well, stuff happens, ready or not--unanticipated and out of our control. And the prospect of that can make a person pretty anxious.

How can we live in the meantime, to tame our anxieties about what will happen? We can remember the oil that marked our foreheads with the cross of Jesus Christ, the forever promise of our baptism. We can pay attention to looking for where and how God may be showing up, and be prepared to respond as the Spirit stirs the pot. The prophet Amos and Jesus both warn us, urgently -- *don’t take God for granted.*

It isn’t wise to neglect being ready to meet our maker—God wants better for us and is offering us a place at the banquet of abundant life, life shaped by God’s vision of a world set right--reconciled relationships, and respect for God as we respect our neighbor and the created world in which we live. We don’t have to wait until the end of our lives to encounter our Lord. God comes to us *each day*, offering us, again and again, hope, encouragement, love, compassion and understanding. *The door to grace is still open.* In times of heart-rending challenge or profound grief, the cross of Christ reminds us that Jesus has already been there, and promises to remain with us in the midst of it all. God’s love and guidance is there every day just waiting for us to trust it and put it into action.

The parable of the bridesmaids warns that if we are not prepared, we can miss the boat--or the door. People may miss the coming of the Lord now, in the present. But we can fill our lamps with spiritual oil that lights our way: Sharing prayer and encouragement with others, hearing and studying the Word, identifying together how and where God is showing up in our lives and in our world. We can taste God’s forgiveness and love as we receive the Lord’s body and blood, experienced within the community of believers who will uphold each other as they share the love of Christ, no matter what. God’s presence is often hidden while we are waiting, but God still promises to be here. If we are inattentive to God, and neglect the spiritual oil that keeps us in the light of Christ, we may in fact miss opportunities to experience the sustaining blessing of God’s love and forgiveness.

We put our hope in the promise of resurrection life through Christ Jesus. Jesus died and Jesus rose again, and we have the promise that *we shall always be with that Risen Lord.* Even when stuff happens. This blessed hope gives power to deal with grief of all kinds, a way to battle the power of death-dealing no matter where we find it. The Church bears this gift of hope now in the long delay, the span of waiting for the healing waters to flow, holding on for a time when the warfare will be no more and God will indeed wipe away every tear.

It is helpful, I believe, to acknowledge that the whole church is a *mixture* of the *wise and the foolish*, in each congregation, and at times within each Christian. And yet, our Lord promises to redeem EVERY moment of every life. A feast awaits us, don't miss out. You are invited, don't walk away from the invitation. Come, expect to be forgiven and renewed, to be challenged and changed. This "foretaste of the feast to come" helps prepare for when the Lord comes on the *last day*, and it can guide what you will do for the rest of *this day*. The door to the wedding feast is still open today. Whether God comes *to us* or comes *for us*, the theme song is the same: "*Watch, therefore, for you do not know the day nor the hour.*" And our trust is ever in that merciful promise: "*we shall always be with the Lord.*"

Saints and Siblings 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12 All Saints Sunday, November 5, 2023

For centuries, this first Sunday in November has offered the church an occasion to remember and give thanks to God for those who have lived and died in the faith. We carry our memories of the saints who have helped show us the way on our own spiritual journeys.

Yet, *not all* of the saints that we recall on this day have passed over to their heavenly homes. Our lesson from 1 John reminds us that we are, even *now*, saints and siblings in God's holy family: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called *children of God*; and that is what we are."

A classic comment on the saints was made by a small boy who went to church on Sunday with his parents. He asked them who the people were on the colorful stained-glass windows there. His parents told him they were the saints. A few weeks later, his Sunday School teacher asked the class if anyone knew who "the saints" were. The boy replied, "The saints are people who let the light shine through." Pretty good.

How is the light of Christ shining through your life? Our gospel lesson from Matthew lifts up God's light that shines through our lives, even in situations where the world would only see darkness and despair. *Blessed are you* – over and over again we hear the promise in this famous section of Matthew called the Beatitudes. The "blessing things." God *blesses* those who have lost hope of having an adequate share of the world's resources – the *poor in spirit*. God stands alongside those who have a ragged hole in their heart because of overwhelming loss—those who *mourn*. God gives honor to those who won't ever hang out in the halls of power—the *meek*. God makes a promise to those who see *where things are not as God would have them* and ache with hunger to see the *world put right*—God promises that they will have their fill at the abundant table of God's healing transformation.

The light of Christ shines through in behaviors and attitudes that the world around us finds foolish and misguided, even dangerous or scandalous. Show mercy even to those we fear? Hold onto integrity even when it doesn't promote our own advantage? Take the risk of insisting on the things that truly make for peace, and resisting the things that stand in the way of a world set right? Jesus teaches us that God blesses these actions and encourages us to hang on together, trusting the promise of God's "yes" to God's children in the midst of it all.

On this All Saints Day, I'd like to talk a bit more about one of these promises of God's favor: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Mourning is really hard work. Hard work, to feel and share the wrenching pain of loss, to trust that God is leading into a new future, a new future that has not yet appeared on the horizon. Doing the work of mourning can help us prepare for the blessings of new possibilities, which may look quite different from what used to be.

Mourning takes many forms: yes, we mourn the people who are no longer here with us—including all those people whose memorials helped us to fund this organ -- that's one reason this text is appointed for All Saint's Sunday. But, awash in the wake of political and social dissention and disruption, we mourn. We mourn for those who have lost everything because of catastrophes. We

mourn those who have grown up and gone away. We mourn for when the churches were filled with people and the Sunday School classes had to hunt for space to meet. Sometimes though what we mourn haunts our hearts--not simply as memories of the past, but as competitors for the future. In the midst of this aching pain, God invites us to hang on and remember; to hang in there and trust the improbable promise: Blessed are they who mourn, for they *shall* be comforted.

God doesn't want the past to crowd out the future. God wants us to hope, trusting God's continuing love and presence, not just crossing our fingers and whistling in the dark. Hope for the future affects the way we live now. God's promised future can make a powerful difference in *our* present. And trusting those promises—that's the key that unlocks the powerful grace of that blessing.

The 1 John reading has a wonderful statement of God's grace-filled promise to us: "*Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*" It's an ongoing process, this life together as children of God. I really appreciate the little plaque that says: "*Be patient; God isn't finished with me yet.*" In the midst of waves of change, we can hold on: "*Be patient, God isn't finished with us yet.*"

This Good News isn't "fake news." Hold onto the promise that Christ's life, death, and resurrection is *the real deal* and is *for us*. Surely, we see plenty of evidence to the contrary. The difficulty seeing evidence of the light of Christ isn't just *out there*—somebody else, somewhere. If we are truly honest, we can see evidence *within us* that sometimes the light doesn't shine through us very well. God is not finished with us, and even when that isn't a comfortable feeling, we can still give thanks for God's faithfulness to us!

Just because we are God's children now, just because we are together siblings in the family of Christ, just because we have been included among the saints, does not mean that we get it right all the time. -- Or even *most* of the time. Martin Luther had a vivid comment on a life in need of forgiving grace: "a saint is a person who climbs on his donkey, falls off; climbs back on, and falls off on the other side." Here, in the midst of the messiness of life, saintliness generally doesn't look like a stunning stained-glass window. But the siblings in God's family are *family* even when we're falling off our donkeys left and right.

How do we tap the power of the future to work now, in the present? The promises of God work through *us* when we trust them and live accordingly. But if we turn in on ourselves, then the light of Christ doesn't shine through us. When faith tries to operate only as an escape into self-protection or maybe self-promotion in the midst of an uncertain world, it turns toward maintaining and protecting itself. That's a wall, not a window. Not much light gets through that way. We are called into caring service, in Jesus' name, in the world, in our community, in our neighborhoods and families and places where we work and play.

We are a called-out people who are MADE holy, not by what we do or don't do, but as we are in the process of living out our trust in the Lord who claims us. Sisters and brothers in Christ live within an intricate network of needs and blessings. We are all saints and siblings in God's family, sustained by the promise of God's healing and hope, and sealed by the Baptismal cross

on our foreheads. It is a covenant renewed over and over again in water, wine, and bread. Saints are those who trust *not in themselves* but in *God's* promises of new life, secured for us on a cross, and revealed by Easter's empty tomb. God can use all who are called "children of God" to help make God's holy future happen, and God's Spirit will lead God's children along that path.

At the table of the Lord's Supper, God joins us with the saints of every time and place, and gives us a foretaste of the feast to come. Standing before the throne of God, with angels and archangels; praising God with the great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, joining together as siblings with all the saints that we remember today. With all those who have gone before us, with all those who are here in our midst, and with all those who will follow--we anticipate today, as we come to God's table, eating together the great and promised feast; where God's children "*will hunger no more, and thirst no more, for God will be their shepherd and guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*"

Saints and siblings together in the family of God, we can hold onto hope and joy, because we know God holds onto us, with a love truly more powerful than death. God's light can shine through us, as we make our way through our uncertain and unfinished lives, forgiving and forgiven, trusting our Lord, and praying for the Spirit to work powerfully through us, living out our thanksgiving for God's blessings wherever we find ourselves. And remember, brothers and sisters in Christ, that God loves us no matter what happens, and that matters.

It's the last Sunday in October, which means it's Reformation Sunday. On this day, we remember that a bit more than 500 years ago, an earnest young German monk named Martin Luther pounded a list of 95 topics for public debate onto the heavy wooden door of the castle church in the German city of Wittenberg. Posted onto what served as a public bulletin board, they outlined his concerns about some practices and teachings of the Church in his day. He thought he might get debate, but what he got instead was transformation, the Protestant Reformation.

Our Gospel text appointed for Reformation Sunday promises, "*You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*" Well, there's a lot of talk about truth these days. What *truth* are we talking about here? It's *not* the old fighting words: "*we do it and teach it right, so we've got the truth and you're just wrong.*" I remember standing as a kid in my neighborhood, having our grade-school version of theological debate with the kids who went to the Catholic parochial school. We knew we were *Lutherans* because we *weren't Catholics*, and we were prepared to defend it, in our grade-school sort of way. We knew who we *weren't*, and *that* was how we defined ourselves. But I've come to see that if we focus on who we *are not*, then we can miss out on claiming and celebrating who we *are*. We reflect God's truth by being open to sharing with others *who* we are and *whose* we are, and by asking how we can develop ways to live that out each day.

As Lutherans, we shape our witness around sharing God's generous love for us: We are saved, as our second lesson today reminds us, "*by our faith in Jesus Christ, as a free gift from God.*" Such faith is more than "*nodding yes to a checklist of all the right answers.*" Saving faith is placing our trust in God, because we have come to know and trust Jesus. This trusting faith happens in relationship. In the process of living out our lives, listening *to* and listening *for* God's promises encountered in the person of Jesus, we begin to discover God's truth and find our true freedom. The readings for this Reformation Sunday help us to zoom in on this witness.

"*If you abide in me,*" Jesus says, "*you shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*" The Apostle Paul, in Galatians 5:1, reminds us that "*For freedom Christ has set us free.*" But we need to remember that this freedom in the Christian life is not like the "*freedom*" of this world. We often hear about the "*don't tread on me*" kind of freedom, you know "*freedom from having anyone* ever tell us what to do or stand in the way of our getting *what* we want, *when* we want it." That's *not* the kind of freedom that Jesus is talking about.

Here's a Reformation Day truth: There's a *new* kind of freedom afoot, a surprising and challenging freedom. God is doing a new thing through the cross of Jesus. We heard the newness promised in our first lesson from Jeremiah 31. "*I will forgive your iniquity, and I will remember your sin no more.*" This loving gift of forgiveness is *still* how God puts the broken pieces of our lives and relationships back together again. And *again*. And *again*, each day.

Jeremiah announced God's promise, a promise still offered to us: *"I will be their God, and they shall be my people. I will write my law on their hearts, and they will know me."* This relationship with God is a *heart* thing: We are God's people and ultimately nothing can separate us from that love. Christian freedom, rooted in relationship, is freedom *for* serving the neighbor, who we are called on to *"love as we love ourselves."* Christian freedom includes the freedom to fail, to acknowledge where we need to change and grow. This freedom is ours because of God's forgiveness—this forgiveness is the gift of the on-going presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Trusting that we are forgiven and loved unconditionally by God allows us to be freed *from* fearing our neighbor, freed from the urge to define ourselves over against the "other." You know, "I am because I'm not that." But it doesn't take much looking around to realize that there continues to be an *already/not yet* connected to the promise of this text. The book of Romans reminds us that we should give up on judging others because we're all in the same boat anyway: *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* John's Gospel also levels that playing field: *"Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."*

But we are *"now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"* - the Reformation jewel that Martin Luther treasured. That means that we are freed from being defined by how much stuff we have, or how much money we make, or whether we are red or blue or purple or green or polka-dot, or how successful we are in our business, or whether our kid's on the honor roll or in the starting lineup. We don't have to be defined by where we have failed, or where we have harmed others or been hurt by them. Our identity comes from what we've been given and who *God* has made us to be. Our identity comes not from what we've done – or not done – but because of what God has done for us, and what God calls us to do with our gift of a re-formed life. We are freed to acknowledge the amazing gifts of grace around us, and to receive and share them freely as we live out of our gratitude, open to the future, rooted in God's love.

We are freed to love God and God's world, even in the midst of the fear-filled chaos which is always and ever there: wars and rumors of wars-- do you dare turn your TV on these days? -- hatred and ancient fault lines flaring, the tinderbox of violence in the streets and in the public places where we gather and even our in homes. This God anchors us in the midst of chaos, and calls us again and again to *"be still and know that I am God."* When we remember to do that, we may *begin* to name and tame the chaos as we respond with calmer trust and less anxiety.

The tangled grip of disorder, disease and disaster does *not* have the last word. At the cross, Jesus took it all on, and now God's last word is Easter life that abides in us as we stay connected to the risen Jesus.

Faith is about trust. Faithfulness is not about defending some abstract *idea* of rightness. It is about connecting with those who need to experience the mercy and hope that we have ourselves have known in the cross and resurrection of Christ. We are called to hang our hearts on Jesus, and pass along God's love for the sake of the world that *"God so loved that he gave his only Son Jesus to save it."*

As Lutherans, of course Reformation Day helps us focus on our identity. For our opening hymn today, we sang what some folks have jokingly referred to as the Lutheran Fight Song, *A Mighty Fortress*; based on today's appointed Psalm 46, it is one of the many hymns Luther wrote.

That "Mighty Fortress" Psalm 46 encourages us: "*Therefore we will not fear.*" Knowing the truth about ourselves, and about Jesus, allows us to be free of fear because we trust we are truly forgiven and loved by God for Jesus' sake. We hear that God "remembers our sin no more," but how often do we give and receive forgiveness with strings attached. What does this "*not remembering*" imply for our own lives? What might it mean for us if we truly "*remember sin no more?*"

It might mean that we can let go of defining ourselves by grievances in our past. It flows from the Holy Spirit's "re-formation" of our hearts and minds. How might this work in your life? Can you imagine how letting go of the weight of old wounds could give you more freedom to love God as you share your gifts in a world of need?

The Reformation truth is that God's grace frees us to live into the future, forgiven, released from our feelings of futility. Jesus frees us *for* a life of faithful service and celebration of God's love. This is what God calls us to do and be.

Here, where our crucified and risen Savior meets us, we can begin again and see how God can re-form each day anew. Here we can "*be still*" in God's presence, no matter what tempests rage around us. Here we can remember our true identity: *child of God, marked by the cross of Christ forever*. Guided and sustained by the Spirit of the living God forever. Trusting God's truth, we live in faith, not fear. Love one another as God has loved us; seek out ways to serve and share. And always give thanks to God.

Treasure “First Things First” - Third Stewardship Sunday, October 22, 2023

Today we have the third and final message in our stewardship series *Bearing Fruit for Jesus! His Grace and Power at Work within You*. We’ve heard how God’s power can work *through us* when, together, we offer our time and our talent to the tasks of following Jesus. Today, we turn our attention to how we use our treasure, our financial resources. The text is from Matthew 6:33: *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

Some evening when you have a few moments, take a look at your old checkbook registers—if you still keep those-- and credit card statements, or pull up a report of your spending history on your computer’s financial tracking program. You may find it interesting, and maybe somewhat startling, to discover just how the money you’ve earned has been spent.

The entries serve as a kind of journal. They record major events, vacations, visits to the mall or the on-line shopping portal, how you choose to dress, housing costs and transportation. The total spent in each category will pinpoint the things that make the greatest demands on your income – either because of need or by choice. The entries can reflect what you value, what you *“put first”* in your life. What things come first for us?

Someone has said that your calendar and your bank statement *can* say as much about your life as a disciple of Jesus as your prayer book does. These might give some clues to our spiritual priorities, if we compare the contributions given to the work of the Lord with the many expenditures for the things of everyday life. Stewardship is what we DO after we SAY we believe. We all can benefit from examining our values related to our treasure. For Jesus tells us, *“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”* (Matthew 6:21). And God cares very much where your heart is.

What does it mean to put first things first? In Matthew 22:37-39: “Jesus answers a question about summing up the Law of God: ‘*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘*Love your neighbor as yourself.*’” Your giving is one measure of your love. Do you give as an outcome of loving the Lord your God with *all your heart, soul, and mind*? Is your giving about *loving your neighbor as yourself*? When I try to answer those questions, I’m thankful for God’s forgiveness.

Many Christians hesitate to invest in the kingdom of God, so they end up giving little or nothing in proportion to what they have received. It can be useful to ask yourself what percentage of your income you are investing in God’s mission. Are you growing in your giving? We say: *First things first*. What is coming first in what you do with your treasures, beyond the basics? Your financial commitment is an important way that you live out your relationship with Jesus. If you are growing in your faith, it will be showing in your generosity.

Jesus nails it when he says you can’t serve two masters. You CAN’T split up your ultimate loyalty. If God’s vision and sharing God’s gifts are not priorities, then something else will be our master, something else *will* be playing God in our life. And here’s the spiritual bottom-line. Those other loyalties cannot maintain us through the hardest trials.

So often when we worry, specifically it is *wealth*—and the security we think it produces-- that becomes the “*other master*.” What happens when you focus on the material stuff? A bit earlier in Matthew chapter 6, we hear in our lesson today about the problem with trusting in our stuff: well, *stuff happens* -- moths eat, rust consumes, thieves take it away, monster floods or raging winds or devastating bomb blasts reduce it all to rubble.

Where we place our trust is a First Commandment issue. Seek ye *first* the kingdom of God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind. So, what do we “seek first?” That’s a First Commandment question that affects our whole lives. The root cause of worry is trusting a false god, which boxes us into personal survival mode and turns us against our neighbors. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, which includes our Gospel lesson, God’s righteousness is described as something that God gives us *as a gift*, for Jesus’ sake, along with everything else we need. Trusting in the promise of *that* reality can take the air out of the worry balloon, and help us to trust God, to trust God enough to be generous.

Paul wrote in Philippians 3:8-11: “*What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him ...*” If we are connected to the vine which is Jesus Christ, the promised fruits will come, love and joy and peace and all those other fruits of the Spirit listed on the new wooden art hanging near the door.

Happiness in today’s world is a very fickle thing. Our world often measures it by possessions or power or influence. But even when we get what we want, it often feels like it is not enough. Rather than gratefully *receive* what God gives us, we greedily *grasp* what we want. In both cases, what happens may *look* similar, yet one makes us happy and the other does not. Jesus calls us to trust God to provide enough for us.

Trust God, because God knows what you need and God cares about each of us. And God promises to provide for each of us. Your *needs*-- perhaps not all your *wants*, however, and sometimes certainly not in the ways that we might expect. But God is faithful.

Too much energy gets tied up into fearful self-absorbed worry, turning in on ourselves and tuning out those around us. Yet, Jesus addresses us using the plural form – not “*you*” but “*you all*” – the whole community of the church working together. The gifts – *time, talents, treasure* – of the people whom God has called together, produce much more spirit-fruit than individuals just acting alone.

Rather than borrowing troubles from tomorrow, Jesus invites us to stay focused on God’s purposes today, paying careful attention to the present moment and the presence of God. Prayer, study, sharing, worship – these help us focus on *giving* thanks and *living out* our thanks. God is *with us* with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. God came to be *with us* in the life and death of Jesus; with us even in the nail scars in the palms of the risen Christ.

We are engraved forever in the heart of God. Seek first to live out God's love in this blessedness and celebrate God's gifts. Share this good news of God's peace with the people God sends to us.

Our church is putting "*first things first*" church when God's Word is shared faithfully and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are administered in light of God's promised grace. Our church is putting "*first things first*" when it is shaped by a vision for reaching out and *sharing Christ's love in the world*. Our church is putting "*first things first*" when, in our ministry, we serve and work together in Christ with our time, talents and treasure and all that God has given. Our church is putting "*first things first*" when our *neighbors* are cared for, when *families* are nourished, when friendships are enriched, when *young and old* are encouraged and empowered to live fruitful lives. Putting *first things first* begins in your heart; it informs your daily life and extends to your fruitful use of what God has given to you.

Bearing fruit as stewards of time, talents, and treasures is the harvest of faith that seeks to love God and serve our neighbor, that puts God's purposes and God's way of working first. Then, everything else, we are promised, will fall into place. It means you are connected to Christ, the true vine; each one is a branch of that vine, so connected as to take your life from him, and to bear fruit.

Jesus promises us this: "*I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me and I in them will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*" (John 15:5). Connected to the Christ of the cross and empty tomb, we are enlivened by the Holy Spirit who calls us and equips us for caring. In Christ, you are called to be fruitful stewards of time, talent, and treasure. God, give us grace to put our trust entirely in you, and bear much fruit for you, as we share Christ's love with our whole lives.

Adapted from Bearing Fruit for Jesus!

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Today, we continue our stewardship program, **Bearing Fruit for Jesus: God's Grace and Power at Work Within You.** For *this* week, our focus is on being fruitful with our *talents*: "Using What You've Got".

We've been reflecting on **Bearing Fruit for Jesus!** – how we live, what we *do* after we say "I believe." Last week, we talked about how we use our time. Today we are talking about using our talents. I expect we all know someone who is more talented or who has more skills and abilities than we do. Thomas Jefferson was a lawyer, scientific farmer, politician, and statesman. Martin Luther's teachings spread quickly throughout Europe; he also translated the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into German and wrote many hymns. It seems as if some people have lots of talents, and, well, *we don't*.

And yet a generous God has given each one of us talents and gifts. God doesn't *overload* or *overlook* us. We have been given the unique talents and gifts that can help accomplish God's purposes. Through the eyes of faith, we see that whatever we are and whatever we have, these are all generous gifts from God.

We say "*I believe*" in God the Creator, who, in Luther's words, "*provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil.*" These blessings are vast; we literally could not live without them, and they all come from God. So, how do we live out our thanks for the gifts we have been given?

In today's Gospel lesson, the Master gives each servant enormous resources – the word talent here referred to a measure of money. Although the gifts vary, five for one, two for another-- even *one* talent was a staggeringly large amount of money—over 15 years of wages for a day laborer. What will these stewards do with the master's resources? The servants are told to "*trade with this until I come back.*" Use the gifts, for there are needs to be attended to, risks to be taken, a world to be cared for, a message to be spread.

The Master commends the two servants who put their gifts to work: "*Well done, good and faithful servant!*" The third servant was afraid he would lose his money, so he hid it and didn't use it at all. The Master accuses him: "*You wicked, lazy servant.*" Thus, the parable shows the one who clutched the gift to himself, rejecting the giver, afraid of losing and unwilling to share, ends up losing it all anyway because of his fearful, self-absorbed stewardship.

Our God-given gifts are *not* just for serving ourselves. They are not given to us just so that we can make more money or be more powerful or popular. We have a choice in how we respond to God's generosity. Will we be *self-centered* or *God-centered*? St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:2, "*It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.*" Faithful-- to God.

God gives many different kinds of talents: *leadership, creativity, mechanical ability, housekeeping, encouragement, caring*, etc. Maybe you can't sing solos, but you can "make a joyful noise" to the glory of God in worship. Maybe you aren't a teacher, but you can write encouraging letters or notes or send a card or make a telephone call to someone who needs to be lifted up. Maybe you can't make flowers grow, but you can help *others* see how *they* can grow in their ability to put their faith into action.

We each have different talents and gifts and abilities. What do you love to do, and do well? What gives you joy, while serving the needs of those around you? Do you have unused abilities? We can help *each other* name the assets and gifts for ministry that folks might not see for themselves. God wants each of us, and the congregation as a whole, to "use what we've got."

When we look at our own God-given gifts, we may respond like Moses did. He had lots of excuses. "Who am I? I don't fit in anywhere. You want me to lead the Israelites out of Egypt? Seriously!? I could never do that. I can't talk in front of a group. I don't have any experience. The people won't trust me. I'm too young. Ask somebody else who's more capable and more qualified." Any of these sound familiar? In spite of all of these excuses, God had plans for Moses and used him to accomplish God's mighty purpose. Scripture is full of examples where God used ordinary people like you and me to accomplish great things for the Lord.

God blesses us and gives us talents for a reason: *to equip us for service*. God has given us eyes and ears, hands and feet so that our bodies function effectively. In the same way God has given us talents and skills and abilities as members of the body of Christ, for the good of our community and our church.

If you invest money in stocks or mutual funds or bonds, you hope to get a good return on your investment. God also looks for a good return, even though our Creator uses imperfect people to put love into action. St. Thomas often doubted Jesus, but he learned to follow with commitment and dedication. St. Paul resented Christians and was determined to destroy them, but became the first great missionary of the Christian church.

When you think that you are unimportant, then it's time for you to *hear the Gospel again* – the Good News that God cares for you. Jesus considered you so important that he laid down his life for you. He redeemed you from the power of sin, and he will love you forever. When we offer our gifts for God's mission, God will take our uncertain talents and bless them and use them to reach lost people and restore broken relationships. In the process, we can become helpful examples for others around us.

Each one of us has received at least one gift to be part of God's purpose in touching lives with the Gospel. If you have the gift of mercy, then use it to help the hurting and comfort the grieving. If you have the gift of leadership, then volunteer to run for Church Council or take on a new project, and use that gift to help accomplish great things for God. If you have the gift of giving, then use it to support the church and other special needs and causes.

What interests and skills and abilities has God given you to use or develop as a member of the body of Christ in this congregation? Do you have the gift of hospitality? Are you good at visiting new people or shut-ins? Perhaps you are good at plumbing, electrical work, painting, ushering, praying, and helping. Maybe you are good at listening, organizing, mentoring, teaching, singing, or writing. Perhaps you have good office skills. Some of you may have been using your gifts a lot, and feel tired and burned out. St. Peter reminds us that God will provide the strength for us to serve in the most helpful way.

We do not venture out into the harsh marketplace of the world on our own. God has provided the resources for becoming and remaining good stewards, responding to God's generosity as we live out our gratitude. Jesus gave us a perfect example of serving. He wasn't interested in getting credit or in getting ahead. He came not to be served, but to serve. He wasn't even thinking of what it would cost him. He gave his life for his enemies and for his friends. He gave himself for the faults and failures of each person--past, present, and future.

The concept of serving as Jesus served doesn't come naturally. Our inborn desire is to serve ourselves and to take care of our own needs. Christ-inspired serving is contrary to what our society promotes: recognition, achievement, success, power, revenge, and control. True servanthood isn't self-serving.

Hearing the Word of God in worship, Bible study and in our devotions, in conversations with each other, encourages and strengthens us. As we receive the body and blood of Christ Jesus at the Lord's Table, we are equipped for serving. God's promises give us strength and power to become fruitful stewards of our talents.

Connected to Christ, we produce fruit. If we offer our service to the glory of God, God will bless our efforts. Use the talents that you've got. Trust the giver of the gift by offering your abilities. You will be a blessing to God, to the church, to the community, and to your family. Bear good fruit, Spirit-fruit!

Even if we may find ourselves like that third servant, we do not need to be hopeless, for our God is *not* like that distant, harsh master in the parable. Our Master goes all the way *with* us and *for* us, even to death. "*Your work will not in vain when you are doing my work,*" says God, "*for you have the victory, even when you cannot see it yet.*" We pray for God's grace to live and give as faithful stewards, as a thankful response to God's gifts, trusting God to bless our sharing, until we hear "*well done, enter into the joy of your master.*"

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Bearing Fruit for Jesus - First Sunday, October 8, 2023

“Begin With the End in Mind: Living as Fruitful Stewards in Time”

Today, we begin our stewardship program, **Bearing Fruit for Jesus: God’s Grace and Power at Work Within You.** For *this* week, our focus is on being fruitful with our *time*.

The text is from that familiar text that Gordy read, Ecclesiastes 3:1: *“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven...”*

Imagine this activity: you see yourself going to the funeral of a loved one. You arrive at the church and look in at the folks in the pews, waiting for the service to begin. You see friends and family and you can sense the grief that fills their hearts. You walk up to the casket and come face-to-face with ... *yourself*. This is your funeral. All these people have come to honor *you*, and you hear them expressing feelings of love and appreciation for your life. As you take a seat, you look at the service folder in your hand. There are four speakers listed. The first is a family member, the second is a friend, the third is a co-worker or maybe a neighbor, and the fourth is your pastor.

Now think about this: What would you like each of these speakers to say about you and your life? What kind of husband, wife, father, or mother would you like their words to reflect? What kind of son or daughter, sister or brother will they talk about? What kind of friend have you been? How did you share your life with those who worked and lived alongside of you? And how would your pastor describe your life as a follower of Christ? How would those who know you best remember your relationship to them? Bottom line: *how would you like to be remembered when you die?* (And don’t say, *“I don’t care; I’ll be dead anyway.”*)

As you think through your answers to these questions, you will begin to identify what makes your life tick: some of your deep, foundational values, principles, and beliefs.

We live our lives within the tick-tock frame of time. Time is an amazing gift from God, and God has some wisdom for us about living in time. If Christians practice beginning each day with the end in mind, it could change lives.

Every day is given to us afresh and we live each of them under God’s grace. If we live each day trusting in the love of Jesus Christ who entered human time for our sake, it could change lives. He died and the power of evil rejoiced, thinking the time of Jesus had come to an end. Yet now he lives and has all our times in his gracious hands. Trusting the promise of that resurrected life, we are freed to live abundantly as fruitful stewards of our time.

To begin with the end in mind shouldn’t just be about answering the question, *“What will others think of me when I’m dead and gone?”* Rather, it can help us reflect on the best way to use the time God has given us, the gift of time to bear witness to God’s grace, at work bearing fruit in and through our lives. We all in fact have a “dead-line” to deal with. When we consider how we will be remembered upon our death, it can awaken our sense of urgency for living a life that bears the fruits of God’s love and care.

Connected to Jesus Christ, the true life-giving vine, we are, each of us, branches; we draw our life from him and therefore bear fruit. *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Remain in me and I in you, and you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."* As branches, we can bear fruit as long as we stay connected to Jesus, the Vine.

In order for us to be fruitful with the time God gives us, we need to stay focused on Jesus, and rely on him. In my connection to Jesus, my time and life has meaning and value from beginning to end. And even at that point, the end, we believe, isn't the end, but only the beginning of an eternity beyond all time. Jesus the Christ empowers us to be fruitful stewards of our time.

When people in their eighties were asked, *"What would you do differently if you had life to live over?"* their response was threefold: Risk more, reflect more, and leave a legacy (something that would last beyond their time on earth).

What did they mean by "risk more?" Play the *quarter* slots at the casino instead of the *penny* ones? Invest the rent money in the stock market or crypto-currency or something? Just go ahead and live with utter reckless abandon? No, but Christians can take the risk of using our time -- boldly, confidently, and openly sharing the love of Christ, even if that means taking the risk of going outside of our comfort zone.

In Colossians 1:6 we read that *"All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth."* It was because those early Christians were willing to risk it all for the sake of following Christ that the church bore fruit, rooted in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Because of them, we're here today.

"Reflect more." What does this mean? It has a two-fold meaning here: first—reflect, to pause and ponder, looking for God's working in the past, and paying attention to God in the present as we "stop and smell the roses." It could *also* mean that we reflect, as the moon reflects the sun in the night sky, or a mirror reflects the image before it. A Christ-connected life that bears spiritual fruit reflects the face of Christ, and invigorates the power of God's grace and forgiveness in our midst.

Use your time to reflect on God's grace you have encountered in Jesus; use your gift of time to reflect on the promise and presence of God's forgiveness and renewal in Baptism and the Lord's Supper, that we hear in the Word preached. Reflect the Light of the World, as the fruits of the Spirit shine in you, through you into the world. Jesus doesn't want us to hide out. He wants the world to see *his* light shine *through us*.

"Leave a lasting legacy." *Begin with the end in mind.* It matters where you put your priorities and how you choose to live your life, because your use of time each day sends a powerful message *to others* regarding what you value the most, showed those who follow you, and it sends a message *to God* about what it is that you are actually worshipping.

Talking about leaving a legacy, toward the end of the 19th century, it is said that Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel awoke one morning to read his own obituary in the local newspaper. It read: “*Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who died yesterday, devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before, and he died a very rich man.*” Actually, it was Alfred’s *older brother* who had died. But the article may have had a profound effect on Nobel. He decided he wanted to be known for something other than developing the means to kill people efficiently and for amassing a fortune in the process.

So, he initiated the Nobel Prize, the award for scientists and others who foster peace and the advancement of knowledge. Some of those prizes for this year have been announced in the past week. Nobel said, “*Every man ought to have the chance to correct his epitaph in midstream and write a new one.*” Few things will change us as much as looking at our life as if it is completed, or as in the classic old movie “*It’s a Wonderful Life*,” as if it had never happened at all. And that is a wonderful movie.

There is a time for everything under heaven. Your time is a gracious gift from God. For such a time as this, the Lord has appointed you to live as a fruitful steward of the days and years that God will give. The Holy Spirit is our powerful source of strength for living as fruitful stewards of time. Trust that the Spirit wants to nurture those fruits in us; even though we may come up barren or put out sour apples, a forgiving God stays with us, continuing to renew in us the gift of time. Not unlimited time, but grace-filled time each new day.

As you leave church today, you will be given an apple. Let this apple remind you that Jesus, in John Chapter 15, told us to “*go and bear fruit.*” Even though we can’t ultimately rely on our own resources, God’s grace has been poured into us as we realize that *we don’t have to*. God’s forgiveness has sustained our past, God’s love empowers our present, and God’s hope-filled promise of life eternal moves us into the future. So, we can say, “Thanks be to God.”

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The tension was building there in Jerusalem. Jesus had been cheered on as a king by the crowds as he entered the city, riding on a donkey. Jesus had overturned the tables of the merchants on the Temple grounds, recalling the words of the prophet reclaiming the Temple as “*a place of prayer for all people, not a den of thieves.*” Now, he was teaching again, right there in the Temple, at the very heart of religious and political power in the nation. The men in charge come to Jesus and challenge him. What did Jesus do when he was surrounded by his enemies?

Today’s reading from Matthew gives an example of *strength through weakness*. Jesus turns the tables on his powerful accusers, who, in that last week of Jesus’ life, were already actively plotting against him. They demanded to know, just who was Jesus to insist that they (*of all people!*) need to repent? John the Baptist, and now Jesus, challenged them to change their lives. Jesus does not explain his authority—but he *uses* it. First, very rabbi-like, he answers their question with another well-crafted question, and then he tells a story to drive home his point. And suddenly *the accusers become the accused*.

Now, I have no direct experience with any of the martial arts-- I know you’re not too surprised about that -- but I am told that you do not oppose strength with strength. Instead, you keep your own balanced center, use your opponent’s strength *against them*, and they fall. And this is what Jesus does. The temple authorities challenge his authority. He doesn’t fight them directly. He asks them about John the Baptist’s authority, and they are caught between their arrogance and their fear. They don’t want to give any credit to John, *and* they are scared of the crowd. Suddenly their “strength” is exposed as a weakness. The teachers don’t have the answer to the test. So, Jesus refuses to give them a direct answer to their question. He nails them with a story instead.

Those accusers, the chief priests and elders-- the “powers-that-be” -- were already trying to come up with a way to silence Jesus forever. They were the ones who walked the political tightrope, keeping Rome off their backs while trying to maintain order among the various competing factions in the nation. They knew that chisellers and hookers were bad, and that the crooks and the no-accounts had to be kept at bay. They were quite certain that they had the obligation to exclude, in God’s name, all who didn’t fit their religious and political expectations. But surprisingly, it turns out that they come up short. They seem to know nothing of God’s promise of welcome, God’s apple-cart-upset grace. No compassion, little imagination, no faith in God’s healing transformation and reconciliation; just their grim power plays. They were at that very moment plotting to silence Jesus. The level of conflict is rising; the cross is coming-- just a few short days away.

People's lives were being turned away from evil and toward the good, because of the work of John the Baptist and Jesus. Yet, the honchos fought that. They despised the lowly, but the lowly were listening to Jesus, and their lives were being turned around. The leaders in the temple were *intending* to be righteous, but Jesus said they were just *pretending*. They claimed to speak for God, but they turned their back on what God was doing through John and Jesus. They didn't see it.

The parable of the two sons can remind us that a person doesn't need to be a defiant rebellious enemy of Jesus to be exposed by this story. Even though that sweet-tongued son said all the right words, *he didn't actually go* to work in the vineyard. Perhaps he even had every intention of going, but something else came up and he never made it.

The road to hell, they say, is paved with good intentions. God is saying "I'm not necessarily impressed that you said, *yes, I'll go*. But neither am I ready to toss you out if you didn't. I am not weighing how much you did or did not do in the past. I am inviting you to get on board with your life now. I want you to know that yesterday's refusal is not nearly as important as today's willingness. Last year's closed mindedness is not nearly as important as this year's openness. The crooks and the no-accounts who repent, we are told, enter heaven "ahead of" others, but not "instead of" others. The invitation remains for all to work for God.

What kind of action does God call us to? The kind that takes care to look out for the interests of others. In one of his cartoons, Garfield, America's most famous fat cat, is relaxed in a comfortable chair. He sees his friend Odie at the window, looking wistfully in at the warmth and comfort. Garfield says, "*Poor Odie. I just can't bear to see him locked out in the cold. I gotta do something.*" Then he gets up out of his chair and closes the curtains in Odie's face. When we "do something," does it address the real problems "out there," or do we "pull the drapes," lock the doors and hide the things we do not wish to address? If we don't put our faith into action, then our intending becomes pretending. Yet, God keeps on calling us back.

What does putting faith in Christ into action look like? In our second lesson, Paul quotes a hymn which is often called "*the Christ Hymn*." The hymn celebrates Christ coming down to earth, taking the form of a servant, God's own Suffering Servant heralded in Isaiah chapter 53, humbling himself even to the point of death by crucifixion -- the execution reserved for slaves and traitors in the Roman Empire.

The first verse of Philippians Chapter 2 says, "If there is any encouragement in Christ, consolation from love, sharing in the Spirit, compassion and sympathy" then make my joy complete—and then he goes on to tell them what he is looking for to complete his joy in their life in Jesus Christ together. When he says "if," he isn't scolding them for *not* having these qualities, but he starts with assuming that they *do* have them, because they are in Christ.

Paul urges us all to be “*of same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*” Is this some kind of mind control, with everybody needing to agree on everything? Full accord on all the fine points of doctrine? On, heaven help us, political views? On preferences for food or fashion or musical tastes? Is he saying, not only do you have to repeat all the statements of dogma word for word, but you need to quote the correct proof texts too? No, that’s not what he envisions. Paul is encouraging a mind-set thoroughly shaped by love, sharing in the Spirit, compassion and sympathy.

It isn’t necessary to agree on everything in order to be together as God’s people. In the midst of disagreements, how do we nurture the fellowship we share together as brothers and sisters in Christ? I believe the church can foster unity without demanding uniformity by keeping Christ at the center and living within the love of Christ, who, bearing the cross, became servant to us, for us.

We can follow his example of embracing humility. *Humility* is not the same as *humiliation*; it takes “self-interest” out of the center of one’s life and puts Christ-shaped and Christ-powered care for the neighbor there instead. Paul moves into applying the Christ Hymn. *Therefore, you who are loved* . . . listen well, *open up the drapes*. Our “faith” is more than just a head thing – it is life thing. The Christ hymn is a reminder of what fruits—we’ll be talking about “fruits” this month—what fruits the “mind of Christ” produces in those who follow Jesus.

That phrase “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*” can seem to fly in the face of what Paul has to say about receiving our salvation as a gift of grace from God and not of our own doing. And what’s with the “*fear and trembling*?” Doesn’t “*perfect love cast out fear*?” Well, it helps to look more closely at the original Greek. The word for “*work out*” in verse 12 can mean “*to make use of*” -- fields, for example, are “worked” to make them ready for harvest. Our life in Christ is a kind of paradox: do it, and by the way, God is already doing it in, through and for, you. We follow Jesus, not just because it’s nice or more effective, but because we keep on trusting the promise of healing and forgiveness that comes to us through Jesus.

Both sons in the story are still in the family. Both children are called into service, and both missed the mark in the process, each in his own way. Yet only one is found faithfully working, doing what their father asked them to work on. Perhaps we have at first refused, like that first son, but then ventured out to do the right thing. Or maybe we have good intentions that are threatened and thwarted by the many distractions and assumptions that compete for our attention, our time, our trust. And so we are, again and again, invited back into service, forgiven when we confess to falling short, and upheld by the love and care of communities that walk this road with us. For this, we give thanks, for this pray that we may be part of what God is up to, investing ourselves in caring for a broken world.

This week, our country remembered the attack on 9/11, 22 years ago. “*We will never forget, and we will never forgive.*” Those words from that time continue to echo now. How does the call that we hear in today’s lessons to “*forgive as we have been forgiven*” speak to a gravely fractured and wounded world? What do *we* do about these lessons that challenge us to forgive?

In our world, it’s important to keep the accounts straight: bank accounts, charge accounts, retirement accounts. Well, because there’s only so much money, a budget helps us plan our spending to accomplish the things we value. If I run a business, I want to know who owes me, and how much I need to pay and when. If I don’t keep my accounts carefully, I may lose out to the competition. So, account-keeping does indeed have its place.

But sometimes we keep accounts *on each other*, keeping careful track of who did what to whom and when, clutching a compulsion to even-up every score, or to restore our own shaky pride by putting the other guy down. Or, if we move to forgive at all, we try to put careful transactional fences around our forgiveness. The lessons today remind us that fenced-in forgiveness does not heal broken relationships; it does not free the spirit from the deadening weight of guilt and debilitating rage. The amazing grace of God doesn’t come through our careful lists and ledger books.

In today’s gospel reading, Peter asks how many times a person ought to be required to forgive. He figures he’s stretching it to say “*seven times.*” The rabbis taught that 3 times in a day was enough, so seven seems to Peter to be very generous. Jesus blows Peter away--not seven, he says, but seventy-seven – some translations make that seventy *times* seven! Not carefully-calculated, fenced-in forgiveness, but forgiveness from the heart, no strings attached.

Forgiveness *from the heart* doesn’t count to 77. *It doesn’t even count to 78.* It’s not that we move from keeping track on our fingers to keeping our grudge accounts with a calculator. We are talking about the *quality* of the forgiveness, and not the *quantity*. So, here’s the deal. If you are counting *at all*, you’ve already missed the point.

It’s the human default setting to feel a need to spiff up our self-justification accounts to impress God, *but* -- God would *rather reconcile people than profit and loss statements*. Now if we *insist* on keeping spiritual accounts, God *can* keep accounts on us. And actually, that is NOT good news, if God keeps accounts on us, and it’s not the way God wants to do it.

As he often does, Jesus tells a story to teach about forgiveness. Just how much was the debt of the first servant? 10,000 talents was an enormous amount. That is the largest numerical unit and the largest unit of weight in the language at that time. It would be impossible for anyone to amass a debt as large as 10,000 talents in 10 lifetimes. That was enough money to hire, for two whole years, the entire imperial Roman army occupying Palestine.

And the second servant's debt? A denarius was one day's wage for a common day laborer. 10,000 talents was well over 500,000 times the debt of 100 denarii. This servant was forgiven a hundred million dollars, and now he turns around and is fighting dirty to get a measly 200 bucks. Jesus exaggerates the story to make a point. Those figures certainly *do* get our attention--but in the long run, the amounts don't really matter. The quantity doesn't matter, because our debt to God—*like the debt of the servant in the parable*—will always be stamped “*unpayable*.” We've got our own spiritual debt crisis. When we disregard God's goodness to us while we grouse about others, we are keeping company with that ungrateful, wicked servant.

To flourish in God's “*no-account*” economy, first we need to accept that we owe God more than we could ever pay. Even though it is so difficult, when we acknowledge our own crushing need for forgiveness, we then experience God wiping clean our own hopeless slate of debts. Only then will we be freed to forgive others from the heart.

We can look at the Old Testament story about Joseph and his brothers to see how we CAN be freed enough to forgive from the heart. *How did Joseph forgive his brothers?* How was he able to overcome the terrible evil they had done to him? Jealous, they had mocked their pampered little brother, beat him, and sold him off into slavery. And *then* they went home to lie to their father Jacob, saying that his most favorite son had been killed by wild animals. After some time, Joseph, who had been enslaved, is now the head *FEMA* guy for the Egyptian government in a time of horrible famine, managing all the food distribution. Joseph now looks at his hungry, terrified, guilt-ridden brothers cowering at his feet, and says an amazing thing. “*Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?*”

Now here the action could take two different turns. Perhaps the long-held and well-deserved guilt of these brothers would *stop up their ears* as it *amped up their fears*. They might think Joseph means: “*Am I in the place of God-- Hah! Only God can forgive, so don't come asking me to do it?*” They could hear it that way.

But Joseph, the steward of the Egyptian Pharaoh's grain bins, Joseph the master keeper of accounts for the entire kingdom of Egypt, Joseph let go of keeping accounts on his brothers' wrongs, for Joseph the dreamer saw God's hand at work, offering new healing for a festering old wound. Because Joseph kept remembering the saving dream that God had given him, he trusted God through the ups and downs of his life. He could see now that God had been working for good, *in spite of* what his brothers had intended all those years ago. Joseph saved the brothers who had wanted to kill him, even as Joseph himself had been saved in order to save the nations from starvation. So, Joseph says, “*If God has acted with such amazing and powerful grace, who am I to cling to those old accounts?*” Released from the webs of guilt and resentment, Joseph and his brothers are reconciled. And they all weep for joy.

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray "forgive us *as we forgive* others." When we try to cling to our own self-serving account-keeping, we crowd out the full power of God's forgiveness *for* us, and that also cripples forgiveness for others than comes *through* us. The word *forgiveness* can also be said *forgiven-ness*. We no longer need to keep those accounts when we are forgiven by God. When we hold onto grudges, when we *insist* on clinging to those old accounts, God *can* oblige by keeping accounts on us. But that's *not* what God wants. In Jesus, God reconciles the spiritual books of this world by *tearing up the tyranny* of that old way of keeping spiritual accounts, and replacing it with an economy of abundant self-giving, life-transforming forgiving love.

We pray for forgiveness not because we have a right to receive it, but because we dare to depend on the promise of God's mercy. God's mercy toward us calls for us, in turn, to be merciful toward others. It's a variation on the Golden Rule: "do onto others as we would have *God* do onto us." Yes.

When we do our remembering, let us "remember the events of 2000 years ago when God's own Son, surveying a field of broken lives and desolate hearts, chose to call down from heaven forgiveness, not vengeance, and in this way opened a future marked not by judgment but by mercy, not by calculations but trust, not by despair but hope, not by fear but courage, not by violence but healing, not by scarcity but abundance, not by hate but love, and not by death but by new life."* Today we are invited into a future where we are called to share our gifts freely in loving service to our neighbors, where we are called to give and forgive without keeping score.

What is it that allows us to let God's forgiveness work in and through us? Our second lesson names it; a radical trust that clings to this promise: "*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again.*" Romans 14:7–9 NRSV

Today we rely on the promise of healing and wholeness, as we share this meal, as we hear the Word, remembering our Lord Jesus, "*who on this day overcame death and the grave and by his glorious resurrection opened to us the way of everlasting life.*" That's the only accounting that really counts. So, we give thanks to God for the sheer grace of forgiveness.

*"Faith, Forgiveness, and 9-11", David J. Lose, WorkingPreacher.org. Posted 9/04/11.

Mending the Net Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 13: 8-14 Pentecost 15 September 10, 2023

Our lessons for today remind us that conflict and broken relationships exist everywhere, even in the church --from the very beginning. There's an old story about a man who was stranded alone for years on the proverbial "deserted island." Finally, one day a boat comes sailing by and the man frantically waves his hands and gets the skipper's attention. The boat comes to the island and the sailor gets out and greets the stranded man. And he notices that there are three straw huts built there on the beach. And so, the sailor asks, "*What are those three huts you have here?*" "*Well, one's my house,*" the man said. "*Well, what's that next hut for?*" the sailor asks. "*That's the church I built while I was here,*" the man says. "*So, what's the third one for?*" the sailor asked. "*Oh, that's where I used to go to church,*" the man said.

There once was a small boy who described a net as being a bunch of holes tied together with a string. Pretty clever, I guess, and quite accurate. The key is "*tied together.*" A tied-together net can do useful things that it can't do when strings are dangling loose. When we are "tied together" in God's love as God's people, when we are about the business of giving and receiving forgiveness, the congregation has power and effectiveness that members do not have as separate individuals. But tears in the net happen, and they do affect the whole net. God gives us a method to mend the nets of our relationships that cares about the spiritual welfare of the community—it's a method that cares for the well-being of the individuals within the community.

The second lesson from Romans also deals with sustaining and repairing our relationships to each other. "⁸*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.* ⁹*The commandments, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."* ¹⁰*Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

Earlier in Chapter 13, Paul has been telling his hearers to pay what they owe in all their various roles in life. But then he shifts gears, and he goes on to explain, as Jesus had also taught, that what they owe in God's economy can be distilled down to the Golden Rule: "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" All of the others laws are contained within that one, and *this* is what can tie God's people together, no matter what.

Some conflict within the church is bound to happen, because, well, the church is made up of people. The church is a network of people relating with their differing gifts and limitations, and perspectives, adjusting to an ever-changing environment. Someone has said that a totally conflict-free church just may not be doing anything worth doing. When it comes to the normal stresses and challenges of life together, generally it is not the conflict itself that causes the thorniest problems, but how we respond to each other in the middle of it all.

Sometimes our conflicts come because we have violated God's command to love one another. There will be times when we are sinned against, and times when we are also the ones who have done the sinning. This "*sinning and being sinned against*" tears at the net of Christian community. People can end up feeling cut off from God, cut off from fellow members and from the church at large. Healing can be hard and long and painful.

God's conflict resolution plan shows great care for individuals: so the first step is a one-on-one, heart-to-heart airing of the grievance. This is difficult at times, but it can make a big difference. The number one predictor of divorce is the habitual avoidance of conflict. Yet folks avoid conflict precisely because they believe it will cause divorce. It's like the cartoon where the couple is at the marriage counselor saying, "*It's true, we never talk anymore. We figured out that's when we have all our fights.*"

Much of the stress on the net of relationships comes in ordinary settings that are all too common. For example, it feels a whole lot easier to talk *about* someone than it is to speak *to* them directly. It's good to keep in mind that if you spend more time praying for people than talking about them, you'll get better results.

Not facing the brokenness can cause a lot of problems in the long run. For example, families of drug or alcohol abusers may go on, year after year, not tending to the tears in the net—they mean well, yet the harmful behavior continues to burden everyone involved.

God's conflict resolution plan recognizes how tough this can be. If the person will not hear you one-on-one, then take others with you. This may work like a family intervention or intervention of other significant ones, where each person respectfully lays out the abusing behavior they are concerned about and how it has affected them. It is harder to deny the problem in such a setting.

Sometimes an accusation is made unfairly or wrongly. In this case, the other members invited to witness may help to judge whether the *accuser* is off the mark. In all of this, everyone involved is called to remember that Christ is there among them. Jesus Christ promises to be present with those gathered in his name, even when they don't agree about some things, maybe especially when they don't agree about some things.

The third step in God's conflict resolution plan is to "tell it to the church." Eugene Peterson's language in his Bible paraphrase *The Message* is helpful for understanding this last step. Instead of a focus on the *people to be excluded* (Gentiles and tax collectors) he writes, "*If [the sinner] won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront [them] with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.*" After all, remember who it was that Jesus chose to hang out with: the excluded ones, the tax collectors, the Samaritan woman, even a thief on a cross. Jesus did not write them off.

Sometimes these passages have been used as a legalistic blueprint for "nailing our enemies, with God's blessing"-- not loving steps toward reconciliation, but hoops that need to be jumped through to justify driving out those who are not welcome.

Using these steps as a club to exclude or drive people out is the *last thing* that Jesus has in mind. This can be seen clearly in Matthew's placement of this section. The verse immediately before this lesson is the conclusion of the story of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to hunt for that one lost one: "*It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.*" And in the story immediately after today's lesson, Jesus tells Peter to forgive freely, without counting—even 70 X 7.

The concern is not primarily to “preserve a pure community” but to mend the net when it has become torn.

What we truly need is the power to live out the Golden Rule, loving others as we love ourselves. Yet, drawing only on our *own* resources, we discover again and again that we don’t keep the Golden Rule, we just *can’t* do it. That’s why we start our worship service with our confession of sin and the hearing of God’s net-mending word of forgiveness. We all need it, and it is offered freely.

Jesus’ death and resurrection takes what is torn and mends it whole again. Jesus took what was hopeless, and showed us a promise of a *world beyond despair--not beyond repair*. It’s a challenging tall order to “*owe no one anything except to love one another*.” But we can rejoice that Jesus has promised to be with us, and to work in and through us, whenever we gather in this name. At the end of Matthew’s gospel Jesus promises that he will be with us to the close of the age (28:20). The ongoing promise to the church is that “*where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*” (18:20). This is an incredible promise to the people of God, wherever they are.

God is at work in many ways in this world. When we gather in Jesus’ name—even just two or three--God gives us the power to seek out those who have wandered, the power to forgive and to receive forgiveness, the power to be healed and strengthened, the power to be the love of Jesus in our world. Jesus, loving Savior and faithful friend, seeks us out when we are lost. Jesus is among us, going the distance, *all the way to the cross*, to woo us back to God. Jesus is here, giving us the Holy Spirit tools to mend the nets of human community, day by day, even when we don’t know how it will end up.

It isn’t easy to “*owe no one anything except to love one another*,” and to mend the nets that tie us together in mission. Let the example of Jesus guide you, and rejoice that whenever we gather in his name, Jesus has promised to be with us to work through us, and love us no matter what transitions and challenges we face. God, mend our life together, and empower us with the blessings of your love.

Simon Peter, hero of the faith, super-disciple, has just made a bold confession about Jesus. “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*” Jesus gives him an A+ -- he’s right on the money. Star pupil.

Ah, but today we hear the rest of the story—the part that, unfortunately, I expect we all can relate to. *Peter the Rock becomes Peter the stumbling block.* He had gotten the words right, but he had no idea what they meant. Peter takes Jesus aside and scolds him for having such a crazy idea about a cross in his future. He’s an example of that old saying: “*when some say they want to serve God, they mean in an advisory capacity.*” Peter, bold spokesman for the followers of Jesus, did not have a clue about this “*taking up the cross.*”

Of course, it’s difficult for *us* to understand cross-bearing too. There is nothing wrong with wearing a cross as a symbol of your faith; but cross-wearing isn’t cross-bearing. Sometimes people wear crosses as decorations, without the slightest idea what Jesus means about cross-bearing. I read once about a woman who took a tour into China. While she was there, she bought an old medallion. She liked it very much and she wore it often. It was quite a conversation piece, even though neither the one who wore it, nor those who commented on it, knew *anything* about it.

One evening, however, she was invited to a dinner where one of her fellow guests was a man who had spent a great deal of time in China, and knew the language. She asked him if he was familiar with the medallion. “Yes,” he said. He had seen some of them in China. “Good,” she said. “Will you translate the inscription on it?” The man hesitated, but she kept asking. Finally, he gave in, a bit red-faced. “It says, ‘*Licensed Prostitute, City of Shanghai.*’” Oops. So, the now embarrassed woman had been wearing that medallion, but she didn’t have the slightest idea what it meant. I suspect she had second thoughts about wearing it after that. Peter had second thoughts about following Jesus, once Jesus told him that those who follow would have their world turned *upside down and inside out.*

Two comments about some possible misunderstanding that could come from this cross-bearing text. First, about “cross-bearing”: not every burden that life lays on us is a cross. A true “cross” comes as part of the cost of following Jesus. A man once said to his friend, “*I have a fierce temper, but I suppose that is my cross to bear.*” His friend replied, “ah no, that is not your *cross*. It may be *your* burden, but I think it is your *wife’s* cross.”

Secondly, to “deny yourself” doesn’t mean you should hate yourself, believing that you are just so much junk, like Woody Allen who once said he wouldn’t want to join any club that would stoop to having *him* as a member. To “deny yourself” means getting your self out of the controlling center of your life, to stop just “*looking out for number one.*” It means getting our priorities straight, putting *God’s* first things first in our life.

Peter the Rock had become Peter the stumbling block. I expect that we might find ourselves agreeing with Peter. Surely a good and powerful God would *not* allow Jesus to suffer such a devastating defeat, to be tortured and die so brutally. And, here's the part that really causes us to stumble: Jesus would not be telling *us* to follow him down such a painful path, right? Surely this *could not* be God's plan. Yet, God does indeed love us enough to become vulnerable to evil in our world. Jesus speaks out strongly against our all-too-human self-protective schemes-- *precisely* I believe because they seem so *self-evident* to us, and so hard to give up.

Jesus calls *Peter* a stumbling block, but the real battle is not between Jesus and Peter, but a clash between the ways of Jesus and the ways that fight God, the power of "Satan." The accuser, the tempter. The last time we heard Jesus use such strong words, he was wrestling with Satan in the wilderness about what kind of Messiah he would be. Peter also was tempting Jesus with the world's way of doing things: "*Jesus, you're the Messiah, not a weak loser; no cross for you!*"

We may think if we are smart enough, or strong enough, if we just work harder at self-improvement strategies - we'll come out on top. Or, maybe we get more "*religious*" about it: we think if we are good enough, or believe in God enough "that nothing bad will ever happen to us. Then when our lives get *turned upside down and inside out*, we worry that we've failed God, that we've flunked the God test and now we're out of luck. Or maybe we suspect that God has failed us and isn't worthy of our trust after all.

Jesus rejects Peter's assumptions about his Messiah ministry, and turns our world's values and expectations upside down. Jesus turned himself inside out for us, exposing a heart of love for all. That's how he lived; that's what brought him to the cross, and when the world expected that his death on that awful cross would put an end to him and his followers, well, the world got turned upside down. Easter turned the power of death *upside down and inside out*.

And what energizes our new life into which our baptism calls and connects us, on this other side of Easter? This morning's reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans echoes what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, giving guidance for living faithfully in a world turned upside down and inside out.

Our "Peter" sort of world is driven by competition. But St. Paul says if you must compete, turn it on its head. Outdo one another --- *here's the upside down expectation*— in showing honor to *others*. When Peter tried to get Jesus to straighten up and be a "proper Messiah," he was buying into "human" expectations. But, following Jesus changes what we think "winning" looks like, changes our view of greatness, so now grasping to save your life means you lose it, but a willingness to lose your life for Christ's sake results in finding your true life.

There are good surprises when we serve the Lord Jesus in a world where there are lots of other lords. There's one phrase in this Romans lesson that really stands out for me. Rejoice in hope. What? With Jesus, we get a life that enables us to rejoice in *hope*. This one upends our usual expectations. Usually, we rejoice in *results* in this world. But with hope rooted in trusting the promises of a faithful, loving Jesus, we can rejoice, no matter what.

Living in a world turned upside down means being patient in suffering, aided by persistence in prayer. It means loving with mutual affection -- and not just the selected insiders: Paul tells us to extend hospitality to strangers as well. We're encourage to live peaceably with all, though we know sometimes that can be difficult because of other people's choices. But we can always pay attention to our own reactions.

How can we "live peaceably?" Well, *don't repay evil for evil*. All of our lessons today encourage us to overturn the urge for vengeance, in spite of the temptation to simmer in our plans for retribution. The call to "*leave room for the wrath of God*" trusts that God will do the sorting out in due time, and that nothing is going to cut us off from God's love. God knows vengeance makes you resemble your enemy, and perpetuates the cycle of violence. Instead, Jesus teaches us to be kind and care for the immediate needs, even of the enemy. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." That's what Jesus was doing, even as it took him to a cross, for our sake. God turned the world upside down, and now, on the Easter side of Good Friday's suffering and death, we receive new life in Jesus.

When we take up the cross of Christ, we rejoice in the hope of lives turned heart-side out. Because God has called and claimed us, we can be Christ's hands working toward healing a fractured world. We can be sustained by the promise given to the prophet Jeremiah: "*I am with you to save you and deliver you.*" Give us courage and wisdom to trust your promise at work in and through us, always sharing the surprising power of your love that turns the world upside down and inside out, and gives us life.

There's an old story about the hen and the pig who approached a church and read the sermon topic posted on the sign out front: "*What can we do to help the poor?*" Immediately the HEN suggested they feed them bacon and eggs. The pig thought for a moment and said, "There is only one thing wrong with feeding bacon and eggs to the poor. For YOU it requires only a *contribution*, but for me it *requires total commitment!*"

The difference between the hen's situation and the pig's predicament is a little like the difference between the two questions asked in today's gospel lesson. "*Who do people say that I am?*" requires only a contribution: we can drop clever comments into idle conversation; we can even pour out our pearls of wisdom in earnest theological debates. But, in the long run, it's really just talk. We can walk away from it, like the hen can waddle away from that morning's egg.

But the other question, "*Who do YOU say that I am?*"-- now *that's* something else altogether. That question calls for a commitment, more like the pig's commitment in providing bacon for breakfast. "*Who do YOU say that I am?*" That gets to the heart of *our* lives. As we wrestle with this question, we begin to put ourselves on the line. And that answer matters, for it makes a claim on us and has power to transform our lives.

The Apostle Paul *nails* this change in today's second lesson from the letter to the Romans: "*present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*" Whoa! *Sacrifice?* Suddenly, the situation changes. This is not a head-trip. *Peter and the pig are in the same puddle*, facing the question that brings with it the challenge of commitment. The confession Peter makes in today's lesson entails a call to give his all, responding with trusting Jesus who gave his all for us. Loyalty to our Lord Jesus demands no less than turning our whole selves over to God, each day anew, a commitment that honors God as we serve our neighbor.

This commitment brings with it real temptations to trust and worship some *other* Lords. Caesarea Philippi, where today's Gospel lesson takes place, had been rebuilt by King Herod and his son Philip—hence Caesaria PHILIPPI. Here, where Peter confesses that *Jesus* is Lord, there were a great many other gods in evidence; this newly rebuilt city was a bustling Greek and Roman -- *not Jewish* -- area, but also had roots closely connected with the worship of the ancient Canaanite fertility god Baal. ("*Baal*," by the way, translates as "*lord*.") Also in that city was an impressive statue to Caesar who claimed to be a god, who called himself Lord of the vast Roman Empire. And there you have it. Those two eternally tempting sources of false loyalty. The ancient world called them Baal and Caesar. We have other names for those forces. Like prosperity and power. Success and control. Rewards and respect. Wealth and winning. Real idols then, and *now* too.

Like Peter and the pig, and the apostle Paul's Church in Rome, we are *also* called to answer that question "*who do you say that I am?*" If we confess Jesus as Lord, "*God's love in action for our sake,*" we're also challenged to confess where we have trusted other lords. We're called to respond, recommitting our lives each day to God's way, in the midst of these wily and ever-present competitors for lordship.

How often do we sacrifice ourselves at the altar of our stuff; buying into a world that measures our worth by our pocketbook and our portfolio, by how many gizmos on our car or apps on our smart phone—I've got some I haven't figured out how to use yet -- or whether we're wearing the "right" brand of shoes? How much of our energy goes to getting and keeping as much as possible, no matter what? And even if we aren't into that, the world all around us says, "Why Not?" This is just a modern form of the prosperity cults of that old idol Baal. In an ancient economy based on agriculture and livestock, wealth was measured by the fertility of one's herds, or the yield of one's fields. They thought Baal granted them prosperity and security. So, it was Baal they worshipped. But if we put our ultimate trust in material wealth, we discover that this idol can't actually deliver when the going really gets tough.

Baal and Caesar. We live in the midst of a culture where it seems the bottom line rules, but the bottom line *doesn't go all the way down*, to include consideration of how our decisions will impact our grandchildren *tomorrow*, or the children halfway around the globe *today*. The dazzle of short-term profits too often blinds our view of the long-term effects of our policies. We can get cynical, wondering whether we can trust *any* of it; if everyone is just in it to make a buck, why shouldn't I grab whatever I can get and hold on tight? Our worried world builds itself around getting and keeping wealth: in the midst of the worship of a modern Baal, *who do we say that Jesus is?*

We may not have a statue to Caesar Augustus in the town square, but the political talking heads dominate our 24-hour cable news cycle, and the demands of power politics overwhelm the decisions that are weighed by those in charge. We live in a world of unspeakable atrocities, broken promises and cynical maneuvers, suicide bombers aiming and maiming for maximum damage. We see the anarchy of endless wars, declared and undeclared--age-old bitterness bled out from the barrel of a gun. We have battles for power and control fought in the homes of our neighborhoods, raising up yet another generation of children captive to the cycle of violence. Our world pays reverent attention to the power to mount armies and wield the sword, to "wheel and deal" with people's lives. In the midst of this worship of these modern Caesars, *who do we say that Jesus is?*

Caesar and Baal. The people in Jesus' day expected a deliverer sent by God, a Messiah who would overpower their enemies in order to secure for them a glorious victory. They expected Messiah to use Caesar's weapons to transfer Caesar's power over to *their* control. Like the old idol Baal promised, they expected this Messiah to "*take care of number one.*" You can bet they didn't expect the "*living sacrifice*" part. Who would? We don't either.

What God does often confuses and troubles us. The disciples were told *not* to tell the whole story of Jesus' identity until *after his death and resurrection*. Why would Jesus say that? I think it is because *those* events made it possible for people to *begin* to more fully understand what Jesus was saying. But *now* we're on the other side of Easter. We have good news to share. Pay attention to how God may be at work in your lives and in the world, and share what you see—tell people who Jesus is -- healing, forgiving and giving hope, living Christ-shaped lives, a Christ who bring life from the wreckage of death itself.

Peter confessed his faith in Jesus, and on the rock-solid foundation of that confession of faith, Jesus can build the church. (In Greek, Peter's name is *Petros* and "rock" is *petra*. English doesn't catch it all.) And, Jesus promises that not the wiles of the Evil One, not cynicism, not greed, not hopelessness, not even the powers of death itself will prevail against the work of our Lord.

God builds the Church with people who confess with their lives that Jesus is Lord, who offer back their skills, their time, and their resources to God's service. What God builds, ultimately no one, nothing, can tear down. God's many gifts to us *go live* when we recognize ourselves as part of that body headed by Jesus Christ, even when things are hopeless by the world's way of reckoning.

Where life is robbed and ruined --that's where God wants to be, where God wants us to be working. Those are the "*Gates of Hell*" now. And as we, as God's Gospel people, storm those Gates of Hell, God promises that those Gates will fall, in God's good time and manner. God's people have the hope that *we* shall stand, fully alive as the Body of Christ.

There's a legend which has a saint question the Ascended Christ: "What did you do to ensure that your message of love, grace, and forgiveness will be proclaimed?" The Lord responded, "I told Peter, James, John, Mary, and a few others to preach the Gospel and to instruct those who heard it to tell others." "Oh. But what will happen if they fail to do it? Surely you've made some contingency plans?" To which Jesus replied, "NO, that's how I will do it. There are no contingency plans."

Members of the body of Christ gathered here, present your selves; let the Spirit of God transform your lives, day by each forgiving and forgiven day. God's work is placed into our hands, and God promises can take root in our hearts. So we pray: *God, help us to show the world who you are, and be your love at work in the world around us.*

“*That Sinking Feeling*” Matthew 14:22-33; 1 Kings 19:9-18 Pentecost 11 Aug 13, 2023

In today’s Gospel reading, Peter has just finished gathering leftovers from the miracle of Jesus feeding the equivalent of a whole stadium with one hot dog vendor’s food. *A blue ribbon in miracle-making*. And Peter is his right-hand man. They don’t call him *Rocky* for nothing—which is what the name Peter means.

And in our first lesson, Elijah the mighty prophet has just come from the greatest triumph of his prophetic career. He challenged the 450 prophets of the wildly-popular local fertility god Baal to a competition with the God of Israel, up on Mount Carmel. Elijah’s God made fire to rush down from heaven, and then, finally the rains come, breaking the long crippling drought in the land of Samaria.

Peter and Elijah do have their blue ribbon moments—ah, but not in *today’s* lessons. Peter is panicked, sinking just like, well, a *Rock* into the terrifying waves. And the legendary prophet Elijah has fled, afraid for his life, hiding out in a cave. *What happens after the triumphs?* What do you do after you get home from the fantastic vacation trip, and you get that sinking feeling when it’s *the same you* reflected in the mirror, and you’re about to face the same scary world, a real let-down from the world of your photo album.

The God of the prophet Elijah has won, but that’s only the first scene. Now Elijah is in big trouble because King Ahab had made a back room deal with the neighboring king of Sidon, and married his daughter Jezebel. Ahab has joined her in bowing down to Baal, the local god of getting stuff. Queen Jezebel vows to find Elijah and “*do to him what he did to the prophets of Baal*”—namely, send him “six-feet-under.” So, Elijah’s on the lam. Talk about a let-down. His emotions have more ups and downs and hair-raising turns than a Six Flags roller-coaster.

Elijah is there, in a cave on the mountain of the Lord—Horeb is the northern Kingdom’s name for Sinai, where God gave the law to Moses and the people of Israel. There the great Elijah strains to hear the voice of God soothe his overwhelming fear and hopelessness. Elijah does NOT hear that voice in the powerful wind, nor in the pounding earthquake, nor even in the blazing fire. None of those expected places. No. What Elijah hears is “sheer silence,” what some translations have called the “*still, small voice*.” God meets Elijah in the solitary space of that profound silence. God asks Elijah “what are you **DOING** here? Hiding out? What, you don’t trust me anymore? Where’s your faith, Elijah?”

We all have those times when we get discouraged, when we want to hide out, when we get that sinking feeling, when we too can be numbered among those of “little faith.” What happens to you when, like Peter, you “get that sinking feeling? When like Elijah, you hide yourself away, afraid, alone?

Why did Elijah run away? When the waves of chaos washed over him, when the powers had painted a target on his back, he turned his focus *away from God* and *onto himself*, looking at what he could do to save *himself*—which although understandable, was frankly, not very much.

When did Peter's faith fall short? When he began to focus on the storm rather than on Jesus. *"When he saw the wind, he was afraid."* He was believing in the *waves* more than in the *Lord of the waves*. He felt the frailty of his own human failings, and forgot the power of God to work through *those very waves* and precisely *within that same frailty*, the frailty of a child in a manger, the fragility of a savior on a cross.

In the days of sailing vessels, when a new hand climbed the narrow rope ladder to the crow's nest, the old hands would cry *"look up, look up."* If the sailor looked down, he might become dizzy and fall. I saw a show about Niagara Falls and the famous Blondin who performed there, walking above the chaos of the waters on a wire. His secret? Not surprising: *Don't look down; keep your focus forward.* Faith keeps its eyes fixed on Jesus. Peter's focus wandered, and down he went.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian author, wrote powerfully about his experience of being imprisoned in a labor camp in the Soviet Union. He said that only once during his long imprisonment did he become so discouraged that he contemplated suicide. He was outdoors on a work detail, and he had reached the point where he didn't care whether or not the guards killed him. When he had a break, he sat down, and a stranger sat beside him--someone he had never seen before and never saw again. For no explainable reason this stranger took a stick and drew a cross on the ground. Solzhenitsyn sat and stared at that cross and then said, *"I realize therein lies our freedom."* Keeping our eyes on the cross can give us new courage and a renewed vision for life and work, in a world where we get that sinking feeling all too often. God gave new life at Easter, transforming a tool of torture and death, the cross. We can hang our hopes on the promise that this same resurrected life will sustain us, no matter what.

Do we ever find ourselves moping in the dark cold cave, angry at God for not rewarding our faithful work, discouraged because we think God may have flat-out forgotten us? Just as God connects with Elijah, God invites us out into the light, reminds us that there are others out there who are *also* part of God's plan, and that they will help carry on God's mission. We are reminded that we are *called* to follow Jesus, and Jesus will provide what we need, when we need it—the assets we will discover more about next week in talking with Pastor Nancy-- and we discover those things often in surprising and unexpected ways.

We need the quiet voice that whispers into the silence, the gentle outreach of Jesus' hand. We know that God has promised to always be with us, so we can be encouraged to trust that we are not alone. We don't have to let our fears stop us cold. We can remember that it only takes faith the size of a mustard seed when God is at work in it. When we feel alone or afraid, we can remember God's promises. Remember Elijah, hiding in the cave, who has to pay attention to hear the unexpectedly quiet voice of God. Remember Peter, sinking into the sea, who called out for help and was upheld by the hand of Jesus.

When we are hiding out, God asks more than “what are you DOING here?” God also wants to know, “What are you doing HERE?” I need you to go back to where you have been called. For Elijah, that was to Samaria where the power-brokers are plotting to take his life. For Peter, it was to climb back into the storm-battered boat and head for shore. For Jesus, that was Jerusalem, where the cross and tomb awaited him. For us, it is to our neighborhood, to our homes, to our own places where we live and work and play, where we endure and struggle and risk ourselves for the sake of faithfully, courageously, and tenaciously being the witnesses and agents of God’s redeeming love for the world.

Robert Louis Stevenson captures the attitude of trusting God in the stormy times in one of his stories. A ship was being tossed around by a storm. One of the sailors defied the captain’s orders and made his way across the deck and up to the pilot’s wheel.

The pilot had been tied to the mast there because the fury of the wind was so strong. Strapped to the pole behind him and with confident grasp on the wheel, the pilot turned for a moment and smiled at the frightened sailor.

The sailor returned to the fearful crew and assured them that everything would be okay. When they asked how he knew, he said, “*I have seen the pilot’s face and he was smiling.*”

In the midst of life’s frightening situations, we have that promise, “I have seen the pilot’s face and he is smiling.” The voice of God is saying, “Don’t be afraid. I’ve got this. I’ve got *you*.” With the disciples, there in the storm-tossed boat, we can recognize our pilot, Jesus the Christ. We can join them in worshipping him. We can, like Elijah, return again to our work, to our life, reminded again that we will never be left on our own.

When they needed so much to hear it, Jesus came to his disciples and said, “I’m here. Trust me. Be brave. Don’t let fear take over.” This is of course the enduring promise for us as well. Pray for it. Watch for it. Welcome it. Yes, the storms will rage and the winds will howl. You don’t have to go very far to encounter *that*. But in the midst of all of that, our pilot is smiling. Lord, give us the grace and courage to follow and to trust, even when we have that *sinking feeling* amid the storms of life. God’s got this.

More Than Enough Matthew 14:13-21 Pentecost 10 August 6, 2023

Some children were once asked what their favorite story was in the Bible. One little boy piped up, “The one where everybody loafs and fishes.” Apparently, the early church appreciated that story too; it’s the only miracle of Jesus that’s found in *all four* Gospels.

Today’s Gospel reading invites us to trust that God can provide *enough and more than enough*. Our loving Creator gives us what we need. Jesus says, “*You feed them. I’ll provide the food.*” And then God uses what we give back, as insignificant as *we* may think those resources are.

One place that I lived in South Minneapolis was a parsonage of Christ Lutheran Church. It was wonderful to have a house provided with my part-time call. And a great benefit of living there was having some amazing raspberry bushes in the backyard. I didn’t plant them, God watered them, and all I had to do was take a large enough bucket out there, often enough, and pick them. Sure, I got scratches, and I had to prune. But God gave the rain and the sun, and those raspberries were beautiful, free, and abundant. Almost too abundant some days. Enough and more than enough. My friends liked it that I shared.

There’s an old corny joke based on this story of Jesus feeding the crowd: As the preacher got into the pulpit, he realized that he forgot his glasses. He was a bit flustered, but pressed on, figuring he could preach his sermon without being able to see his notes. He started out, “Jesus fed five people with 5,000 loaves and 2,000 fish.”

A voice called out from the back of the church: “Well, I could do *that!*” He was puzzled and a little flustered, but he found his train of thought again and continued. Later, someone told him what he had *actually* said. Oops.

So the next Sunday, decided to get set the record straight. “*Jesus fed 5,000 people with just 5 loaves and two fish.*” He shot a look at the man in the back who had interrupted him the previous week: “Could you do *that?*”

“Sure, it’d be easy!”

“How could you possibly do that?” “Well, with all the food left over from *last* Sunday!”

The crowd-catering miracle happens right after Jesus got the news that his cousin John the Baptist had been beheaded by King Herod. I could understand Jesus wanting to get away by himself, to grieve, to pray, to consider what might be ahead for him; for if the *messenger* is killed in such a way, what would they do to the *Messiah*?

Jesus wants his space by himself, but still the crowds find him. How should he respond to a world saturated with Herod's cruelty and fear-mongering? Jesus sees so many needs; the text tells us Jesus has compassion on the crowds-- it's very strong word, it's a gut-grabbing feeling -- and he gives enough and more than enough. All day he responds to the crowd, and then it was suppertime, *past* suppertime. And taking care of that was a tall order: 5000, counting only the men (now *why* do they do that?) -- perhaps as many as 10,000 or more people. Imagine making fish sandwiches for a whole stadium when you have only a simple lunch pail of fish and bread.

The disciples say, "Ah, Jesus, it's late; these folks have been here all day, and we don't exactly have a contract with any caterers." They've done the math, they've scoped out the scene. "We don't have enough; we can't deal with them; just have them go away. It may already be too late to find enough to really satisfy them, but they might find a little something just to hold them over until they get home."

How do you suppose the disciples felt when Jesus told them, "*You do it*"? "What now--has he actually lost touch with reality, grieving over Cousin John?" They probably weren't exactly feeling wonderful about the Herod news either. "What does Jesus want with us *now*? We don't have anything; they just have to go away." Then they discover, well, we do have these five little loaves and two dried fish. How could that even begin to feed the crowd? It wouldn't even feed us!"

Jesus told the disciples to go ahead and take that food and give it to the hungry crowd. Well, um, OK Jesus. The disciples had to trust Jesus that there would be enough. Enough, so that they would not despair and just do nothing; enough so they would not be tempted to hoard it. Enough, like the manna that miraculously kept feeding God's people in their wilderness wandering--except that *now* they would be gathering up left-overs too. Enough, like the prophet Elijah and the poor widow's oil and flour that didn't run out, even though, because of the famine, she had only enough left for one last meal when Elijah asked her to feed him. Miraculously, they all "*eat and have some left*." This is beyond just getting by; it's the stunning extravagance of God, enough for everyone, with no scarcity ceiling imposed on responding with gracious and generous compassion.

There's a story about a ministerial association concert in the town of Union Springs, Alabama that had invited a gospel choir from the state penitentiary to come sing. The ministers had been told that the prisoners would not be allowed to go outside the concert area to get food. So, the clergy had gotten people to fry some chicken, and cook some beans, and make some home-baked bread for the choir. The concert was wonderful. After it was over, the prisoners lined up to get the food; and then some of the children who had come to the concert began to line up behind them. Then one or two of the children's parents got in line behind them, and before long the *entire crowd* lined up to be fed. "Uh oh. What are we going to do now?" Yet, somehow miraculously there was exactly enough food to feed everyone, to the ministers' amazement. A piece of chicken and some beans were actually left over. Awed, one of the ministers observed: "*We've gotten a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.*"

God delights in blessing what little we have, if we offer it for God's use. As I was wrestling with whether to go to seminary, I told myself that I didn't have enough money, which was true. I went anyway – and amazingly, two years after I graduated, with a call that paid only a half-time stipend, I had no educational debt at all.

Even if we think what we have isn't very significant – even if we say, I'm just one person; I don't have a lot of money; we don't have enough people -- the miracle of feeding the multitude with a sack lunch reminds us that God can use whatever we offer back to God's service. God can't use what we clutch to ourselves, but God can use whatever we share from our particular lunchbox: passing out the boxed lunches--or whatever ministry we take on--and gathering up the leftovers.

The disciples were hungry too; being a follower of Jesus doesn't mean that we rise above human physical needs. We still experience our daily hunger, we still need to trust God for our needs, trust God– even when things seem impossible – trust God to continue daily to answer the prayer “*give us this day our daily bread.*” God cares about the whole of our lives and the lives of those around us: Jesus has compassion and heals the people, and then, using physical bread and fish, provides the food for hungry people. Jesus has compassion on us, and offers sustenance, healing, and reconciliation to us, even when *we* have come up hopelessly short. God gets down to earth with us, and God's work uses our hands – and what's in our lunchboxes—our “assets,” another name for that.

An old comic strip Hi and Lois shows the family out with all the kids running about; a stranger approaches Lois to ask how on earth she divides her love among so many children. Lois answers, with the amazing mathematics of love, “*I don't divide it; I multiply it.*” Enough, and more than enough.

God's love is multiplied, not divided. There is enough of God's love to go around—it isn't scarce, needing to be hoarded and rationed. God's grace is more generous than we can ever imagine or deserve. There, amid the hungry crowd and the doubtful disciples, Jesus “*looked up to heaven, blessed, broke, and gave.*” And each time we gather at the Lord's Table, we are on that hillside with the hungry crowd, needing – and not deserving -- all that Jesus came to give us. As we gather at his table, we remember again that on the cross Jesus trusted God's promise would be enough, even as he suffered the very worst that the fear-filled Herods of our human existence can offer. By God's generous grace, the Easter victory now is *our* victory, which we celebrate in the overflowing abundance of this table: God's grace, God's call to *come and eat*, and God's gifts to *go and share*.

God's Hidden Treasure Matthew 13:31-33,44-52 Pentecost 9 July 30, 2023

Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, was famous for this saying: “*Winning isn’t everything. It’s the only thing.*” If we look around at our world, we have plenty of evidence to show that *a lot of* people believe “winning IS the only really important thing,” whatever the cost. But the parables of Jesus turn the world’s ideas about “*winning*” on their head.

In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray “*thy kingdom come.*” Jesus taught a lot about this realm of God at work, this “kingdom of God” – or as the gospel of Matthew calls it, “the kingdom of heaven.”

The 13th chapter of Matthew has a series of short parables, each one with this introduction: “*the kingdom of heaven is like. . .*” Today we hear the concluding section. With these little teaching stories, Jesus challenges us to discover the wisdom of God’s surprising and transforming power of love and gift of grace. And it is a challenge. At the end of the chapter, Jesus asks the disciples “Have you understood all this?” Although the disciples do venture to answer “yes,” we know that the deep wisdom of God’s working does not come through our usual way of seeing things. It is often a *hidden* treasure.

There are lots of possibilities for preaching in the collection of parables today. The dragnet of fish, good and bad, is a twin parable to the wheat and the weeds from last week, and the “*bit of leaven hidden in enough flour to fill a bakery’s shelves with bread*” is a twin to the mustard seed parable. Today I want to consider the mustard seed, and also the twin parables of discovered treasure.

The mustard seed was a traditional symbol of something small. It is used in Matt 17:20 to illustrate small faith, for example. The picture that Jesus draws of the birds nesting on the branches of a tree is a familiar old image. Several times in the Old Testament prophets, it is used to describe the mighty cedar tree, a symbol of strength and majesty.

Now hear the surprising thing that Jesus does with the story, the *twist* that makes it a *parable*, a story that upsets our ordinary apperceptions, as parables do. The mustard seed *never* grows into an actual tree. At most it might be a large shrub. And the mustard plant was considered a weed in Palestine, not one that a farmer is likely to want to be sowing --a beautiful yellow-flowered *weed*, not at all the majestic cedar tree. God is up to something new, hidden from our business-as-usual eyes.

The powerful hoped-for presence of God is *surprising*; it is very often *unsettling*, but God’s kingdom will come nevertheless. This new king Jesus rides a donkey instead of a war horse. This new king rules from a cross, he serves through *self-sacrificing* love. Not the “winner take all” of our workaday world’s notion of power.

Our lesson tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like a priceless treasure.

Here's a modern story about finding treasure:

It was Saturday in June 1989 before sunrise. Like most summer Saturdays, Harold Roper had already loaded picks into his truck and driven deep into the North Carolina mountains. With him was Rob Curshaw, his rock-hunting buddy for 25 years. They stopped and dug a little. They kidded each other, stuffing worthless rocks into their pockets, as if those rocks were priceless gems. But on this remarkable morning, Roper made a spectacular find. Two feet below a spot of earth--where the two had dug for a year and found only little chunks of rubies and sapphires, Roper pulled up a deep-blue sapphire too big to stuff into his pocket.

Uncut, it weighed 10½ pounds. Cut and polished, it was 9,719.5 carats, almost nine times larger than the world's previous largest star sapphire. Gemologists estimated the sapphire's worth in the millions of dollars. They took it to a gem cutter. "We took some others with us, but when he saw this one, he grabbed it, and didn't even want to see the others," Roper said.

That gem cutter was like the merchant in today's lesson. He came across the amazing jewel, the find of a lifetime, and, having found it, didn't want to even look at anything else. Jesus says finding the true treasure of your heart is like that. If our heart's desire is to faithfully follow Jesus, trusting the good news that Jesus died and rose again for our sake, then the treasure has already touched us.

In Jesus' day, the poor man's bank was the ground. For safe keeping, especially when an enemy army was on the march through the neighborhood, the treasure was buried. If a person who buried a treasure died or was forced to flee, it was possible that buried treasure would be forgotten. The man who ran across the treasure in the field pours his whole life into acquiring it. The merchant also sells everything to get the amazing pearl.

So, what is the message for us? Is it that we are to recognize God's Word and work as a treasure and devote ourselves to it? Well, that's not a bad outcome – even though someone has pointed out that you can't eat a pearl, and we certainly don't hear about the reaction of the man's wife to selling everything out from under her; especially because the laws of the time might not let him keep the treasure in the field anyway (if a previous owner claimed it.) I don't know how well I would do in *literally* giving it all up for the sake of the treasure of the kingdom. That's a pretty heavy challenge of the law. But try this out: look at the parable and see *God* as the one who seeks *us* out, who gives it all for us, even being executed on a shameful cross. God sees our love and obedience *in response to that love* as a treasure. In God's eyes, *we're* the pearl of great price. And, as Paul tells us in Romans, if God is for us that much, who can be against us?

Why is the kingdom compared to a buried treasure? Why is it not just right out there, in plain public view? I think the kingdom is hidden because we have a God who comes masked in the human form of Jesus, and in the needs of the neighbor. God works, hidden in the water of baptism; hidden in the ordinary bread and wine of Holy Communion. As we share the gospel's hopeful promises, God works through the loving care and forgiveness that we receive and extend to those around us.

Jesus is our treasure, our pearl of great price—we have been given this love, so we do not count the cost, for nothing else truly matters. God’s ways in this world amaze and challenge us. We trudge through life’s field expecting little and deserving less when suddenly—we stub our toes on a treasure: grace! *God loves us no matter what!* God is at work here, in ways that we often can’t see, and within a time frame that demands trust and patience and forgiveness along the way. God is at work right here, among us, and God has a place for each of us in the treasure trove.

What do you treasure in your life? A friend who understands you and reminds you how much God loves you, (even when you have not been very loveable) --there’s a treasure. True hope, rooted in the baptismal promises of God, which holds you up no matter what -- there’s a treasure. The Apostle Paul, in the second lesson today, shares a 10 pound star sapphire of a treasure: the promise that *nothing, NOTHING, can separate us from the love of Christ*. That love comes into our life again and again, as God reaches out to us. God’s care for us does not come because of sufficient worthiness on our part. God keeps loving and forgiving us, until we are daily again and again won over and renewed by this treasure.

Preachers sometimes joke about sermons always having “*three points and poem*,” and usually I smile a bit at that. But I’m going to share a poem today anyway, because it talks about the hiddenness of God’s treasure in our lives.

“How to Recognize Grace” by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre

It takes you by surprise; It comes in odd packages
 It sometimes looks like loss; Or mistakes
 It acts like rain; Or like a seed
 It’s both reliable and unpredictable; It’s not what you were aiming at
 Or what you thought you deserved;
 It supplies what you need Not necessarily what you want;
 It grows you up And lets you be a child;
 It reminds you you’re not in control
 And that not being in control is a form of freedom.

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God’s people discover the Treasure hidden in a human Jesus, the suffering servant, reconciling the broken world on the cross. So we pray: Spirit of God, give us the vision to see your power hidden in weakness, and give us the wisdom and courage to *live, share and serve* in the freedom of your love, in the complicated freedom of your grace.

What About Those Weeds? Matthew 13:24-30,36-43; Romans 8:12-25
Pentecost 8

July 23, 2023

The gardener carefully selects the seeds, envisioning a lush, green, productive garden. But then, inevitably, the pesky weeds pop up. If you carefully plant only good seed, why do those weeds always, always come? Having heard our Gospel lesson, we could also ask, if God planted such a good world, why is there so much evil growing away here? Why the terrible ongoing cycles of violence and destruction? Why do we hear yet another volley of fear-filled hate, senseless cruelty, toxic anxiety? Where do these ugly weeds of evil come from? And how should we respond?

The mystery of evil has plagued this world since the Garden of Eden. There have always been people of great faith and people of little faith, merciful ones and spiteful ones, steady saints and shameless sinners. The world is a wild and weedy place. And not just “*out there*.” If we are honest, we discover that in the garden patch of our own hearts--we ourselves are both saint and sinner, home to fruitful seed and stubborn weed, all growing together there at the same time.

Well, what should we do about the weeds? You might be able to safely deal with the crab grass in the sidewalk cracks and the poison ivy along the foundation of your house with a few well-aimed shots of “Weed-be-Gone.” But the situation in Jesus’ story wasn’t so easy.

The weeds in this parable, sometimes referred to as tares, were a pesky plant called bearded darnel. In its early stages it looked *so much* like wheat that it was hard to tell the wheat from the weeds. Later, the difference was obvious; the wheat begins to ripen while the weed is still green. By *that* time the roots had intertwined; if you pulled up the weeds, you uprooted the wheat as well.

While it was unwise to separate the weeds from the wheat while they were still growing, eventually they *had* to be separated. The darnel was bitter and slightly poisonous, causing dizziness and nausea. So, after the harvest was cut, the grain was spread out on trays and the workers picked out the weeds before dealing with the wheat. The weeds were still green after the wheat had turned a ripe golden color. God deals with evil the way those early farmers dealt with dangerous weeds in their wheat.

This parable reminds us that in the early stages it is often difficult to tell the evil from the good. For example, historians remind us that in German voting in 1933, 95 percent of those who voted approved of Hitler: “This man Hitler must be a good man. He doesn’t drink, he doesn’t smoke, the economy is picking up, the trains run on time and he builds good roads for the people; he will make our ailing country great again.” Only later did the deadly truth emerge. Not wheat. Weeds.

So, why doesn’t God just step in and stamp out evil? That’s a lot tougher than it might seem. Evil is often hard to pin down; it’s deeply rooted, it’s complicated, and whether we know it or see it, we are all caught up in it one way or another, like the entangled roots of the wheat and the weeds. So, God patiently waits it out, works it out in God’s own ways. Jesus teaches us: don’t be so quick to judge other people. It’s above your paygrade, folks. Appearances are sometimes quite deceiving.

Our “human” way of thinking is very limited, because we are limited in what we can know about the whole picture. A very old Chinese story describes a farmer in a poor country village. He was considered very well-to-do, because he owned a horse which he used for plowing and transportation. One day his horse ran away. All his neighbors exclaimed how terrible this was, but the farmer simply said, “maybe.”

A few days later, the horse returned and brought two wild horses with it. The neighbors all rejoiced at his good fortune, but the farmer just said, “maybe.”

The next day the farmer’s son tried to ride one of the wild horses, and the horse threw him and broke his leg. The neighbors all offered their sympathy for his misfortune, but the farmer again said, “maybe.”

The next week the conscription officers came to the village to take young men for the army. But they rejected the farmer’s son because of his broken leg. When the neighbors told him how lucky he was, the wise old farmer replied “maybe. . .” And so it goes.

Jesus says be careful when you want to rush to “righteous” judgment; watch out when anyone starts setting off “*our group* versus *their group*.” That’s a problem *especially* when those who *differ* from us are assigned the role of the weeds, so then, of course, *we* get to be 100% wheat. Some people think it’s possible for a person, especially someone a lot like themselves, to be all wheat and no weed. So, they start demanding immediate wholesale weed-pulling, as long as *they* get to say what gets uprooted.

Two pieces of good news show up in this parable: *God does plant good seed*; the evil in this world, the painful groaning is not what God wants for us or for this world. And, *God isn’t finished yet*. Most of us have lived long enough to see the grace of surprising good coming even out of oppressive evil. Because, ultimately, God’s got this; we are freed to face the complex absurdities of good and evil, and to live with some peace and hope while wading through lives full of *ambiguity* and *uncertainty*. When Derek Bok was President of Harvard University he was asked, what did he hope students would receive from a Harvard education? He answered, “*Tolerance for ambiguity.*” In God’s own good time, the harvest will come; the task of ultimate judging requires the wisdom belonging only to God. And I’m really glad that God isn’t done yet.

This does not mean that we simply sit passively and wait for “*pie in the sky bye and bye.*” We ARE called on to nurture the wheat AND to seek God’s guidance with the weeds in the meantime. Resist evil using the weapons of the Spirit, speak the truth in great love and full humility, and then let the Spirit of God work out the changes. In prayerful conversation and cooperation, God wants us to patiently go about the work of *doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly beside our God.*

U.S. Representative John Lewis spent most of his 80 years resisting racism. As he looked back on his life, Lewis described how he stayed true to his principles of non-violence in the face of hatred and *real* violence: *"We were determined not to let any act of violence keep us from our goal. We knew our lives could be threatened, but we had made up our minds not to turn back."*

St. Paul encourages us in today's second lesson, *"Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."* Representative Lewis once famously advised, *"Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise--his famous line-- and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."* Is this "good trouble" trying to pull up the weeds prematurely? If the struggle against evil does not use the values and strategies of evil, then maybe it's just the wheat putting down good roots and reaching up for the sun.

These struggles may seem like small and weak efforts, but God shows us that what the world thinks is insignificant, God uses with great power to bring the harvest. The stories of the powerful little mustard seed and the lowly leaven come in between the telling of today's parable and its explanation. These all seemed too lowly to matter, but the life and teaching of Jesus didn't seem like all that much either. To the world, the cross is just humiliation and final, crushing shameful defeat. This lowly, humiliated Jesus now offers all the difference between hope and despair.

It's interesting to note that in NT Greek "*permit*" and "*forgive*" are the same word. *"Permit the weeds to be there"* seems to be a parallel action to *"Forgive the evil your enemy does."* This fits with Paul's advice to the Romans for living *as* imperfect people, *with* imperfect people in a groaning world. *"Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

And so, we pray, Lord, give us wisdom and courage to live in a complex, and confusing world. Let us be rooted deeply in the love of Christ, faithfully trusting that you will use us to help bring forth your own harvest of justice, grace, and healing transformation.

As we hear the parable of the *sower, the seeds, and the soils*, we can see God as a Gardener who keeps on sowing the seed, the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ. Our divine gardener keeps on throwing the promise out to us, repeatedly and recklessly, so that the Word will take root and grow. God also wants us to share the seeds of hope in Jesus, even when it seems to us like nothing will come of it.

The seeds of hope offer the possibilities for a new beginning, words that whisper to us that things can be different. Seeds, despite their small size, have packed within them the potential to become huge plants – trees even - and to produce seed themselves. They are full of promise for the future. And God has an abundance of seed.

God the Gardener has lots of work, and God's Word, which is God's work, can seem rough at times. At the beginning of the service, we confessed our sins and received the word of God's forgiveness. This is the gardener God using the spade to turn us over, to knock the clumps out, opening up our hardness to the Word; God picking rocks and pulling weeds. We are all marginal soil sometimes, yet God just keeps on sowing the seeds, throwing love around with reckless abandon, with a boundless supply.

Some of those seeds fall onto the *path*, tough turf to break through. We can all be pretty stubborn terrain for God's growth. The beaten-down old messages play in our heads, "*don't be ridiculous, there's no point trying, you'll never manage it, you'll give up, you're no good at this sort of thing, someone else needs to do it.*" Sometimes new initiatives fail because we don't want to try doing things in new ways, reluctant to leave behind our old images of ourselves, of our world, of other people, to let go of the way we figure things *just need to be*. Sometimes things happen to us, like it or not, that force us to do things in a new way; but we *like* our clumps and boulders just the way they are. Even God has trouble breaking through to us. Yet this parable assures us that God doesn't write us off. The seeds are spread, no matter what.

Other seeds, says Jesus, shrivel and die because they fall on *rocky ground*. There's a story of the kid who thought, while picking rocks out of the field each spring, that they grew out there--mamma and papa rocks and their new crop of "*kid rocks*" each year. I lived in a house in St. Louis where each spring thaw, year after year I was told, brought up pieces of a garage foundation, the only thing left of a neighbor's place, long since torn down to build Interstate 44. Hopelessly vacant lots in too many places yield crops of broken glass and concrete; vacant hearts yield crops of broken hopes, sharp-edged violence, deadening despair. Yet God keeps on sowing the seeds of transformation.

Religions that promise glory, material success, or an infallible quick and easy fix, well, they can produce results like seeds sown in rocky soil. *Glory-only* crops aren't sufficiently rooted to face trials that come up like broken glass and busted concrete with heartbreaking regularity. When Jesus isn't walking across any swimming pools- but only hanging deserted on a cross, we too may be tempted to walk away, withered by the scorch of the blistering desert-- deserting and feeling deserted. Yet the seeds of redemption continue to be showered over us.

Well, what about the thorny soil? What gets our energy is what grows. Where do we spend our time and our resources? With the thorns that crowd God out? It's all too easy to let our relationship with God come in near the bottom of the list among the many things which fill our time. Where do we hang our hats and our hopes? If it is in getting and keeping power and wealth, walling off our neighbors, or just the old "*taking care of number one*," then God's growth is choked out as our energies are tied up in the thorny weeds of our substitute gods. And what do those thorny false gods deliver? Crippling anxiety, fears over losing money or privilege; loneliness—there's an epidemic of that-- and loss of hope; injustice as those who rely on their own power use oppression and prejudice to hold onto their privileges that they rely on. God has a lot of work to do with each of us, yet God keeps sowing the seeds.

God promises that the *seed of the Word will produce a bountiful harvest*, as we heard in our wonderful lesson from Isaiah. This parable of Jesus tells us that *some* seed falls onto good ground, and there it thrives and produces a truly staggering yield. Not 10 times, which any farmer would have delighted to see, but thirty, sixty, even *a hundred-fold*.

This good ground has been opened up - by digging, by frost, by worms. It's been broken apart, our Gardener God picking rocks and pulling weeds, so that the roots of the plants can penetrate it and the shoots finds their way up to the surface.

What does good soil have in it to feed the plants? It is full of what we might call "organic matter." You know, compost - rotted down stuff-- the broken bits of our lives, the failures, the disappointments, the rotten stuff. Who wants to admit to that? I think we would rather just scuttle all that out of sight and out of mind—don't speak of it -- and hope that people — and God! — won't find out about any of it. Hmm. Fat chance.

Yet, you know we often see God most powerfully and profoundly at work, not in the shiny, respectable, capable parts of their lives, but in scary and sad times of weakness and failure and uncertainty and loss. This is actually a *central* part of our faith, in fact. It was Christ's willingness to endure the pain, humiliation, brokenness, and defeat of the cross which amazingly broke open the abundant promise of new life of Easter. God's work sprung up strong and fruitful even in the broken soil of his body on that rubbish heap outside the walls of Jerusalem - strong enough to break even the bonds of death, strong enough to bring new life not only to him, but to us and to the whole of his creation. Strong enough to produce a harvest of a hundred-fold.

Today, I could just talk about all the ways a person can be lousy soil and what you *need to do* to make yourself better soil. I don't know about you, but I don't feel so great with that. Sermons like that are *really* good at making you feel *really* guilty. But that isn't enough to yield the gospel transformation.

The good news comes to light if we shift away from seeing this as just a story about soils that receive the seed. It's a parable about God the amazingly generous Sower. It's good news for us because we have God's PROMISE that God's Word gets the job done. That Word is directed to sinners, to us, soil always at risk for more rocks creeping up and more weeds rooting down. Because *God is the gardener*, we're promised that the growth will happen. We discover that such soil in need of *tending* is just what God *intended* for gospel seeding and new growth.

The promise took root in Jesus, God's Word to us, who shared with us all that tempts us to protect ourselves from God. Jesus knew of the temptation to let daily worries crowd God out. Most of all, Jesus knew the silence, the pain of abandonment on the Cross. And in the resurrection of Jesus, we see the first fruits of that abundant Harvest that God has in mind for each of us. We can trust that the *promise of the harvest is worth the working and the waiting*. So, God tends us-- weeding, picking rocks, turning us over, and turning us around. God works, and we can trust the Harvest, even when it feels hopeless, because *it is God's Harvest*. There will be weeds and bare spots--nobody ever said there wouldn't be any hard times or trouble. It's not that everything we work on will produce fruit quickly and in abundance. It's just that there will always be sowing, and from the sowing, there will be a harvest of love and care and grace. Even though many seeds don't take hold, God's harvest is still good, maybe even miraculous.

We are not only the *soil* for God's efforts; we are also *sowers* of God's seed. When we share our own joy and gratitude for all the ways that we have been blessed, we are spreading the gospel. When we share God's strength that gets us through the tough times, we are sharing the gospel. The way we relate to others, the offering of ourselves with compassion and respect in Jesus' name, those are seeds of the gospel.

God the generous Gardener sustains our world; God, who sees things that we do not, sows the seed of the Word with joyful, extravagant abandon, and promises the harvest. And so, we are bold to pray: God, guide us and help us to see and trust you at work among us. Give us courage and joy in receiving and sharing the abundant seed of your good news of love.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11: 28-30 NRSV).

This last week on the 4th of July, we celebrated independence. (You might have also celebrated getting the power back on too.) But today’s gospel tells us that it is *not independence* that allows us to follow Jesus faithfully; it is *dependence* --dependence on Jesus Christ. And we are not *independent contractors* when it comes to doing the work of Jesus. We are called to *interdependence* -- pulling together, tied by God’s love to all the other members of the Body of Christ, with Christ as the head.

Now, does God speak through the powerful appointed and anointed religious and political bigwigs? No, the news comes from the mouth of a peasant carpenter rabbi from the sticks. Does the message that transforms the world come to those who bear the yoke of power and influence, to the pundits and prime ministers and presidents? No--here the message doesn’t even come to the youngsters bickering about their games in the village square. God reveals these things to babbling “babies in arms.” No—*really, God?* That’s a good one! --- Well, yes; really. *The “yoke” is on us.* God keeps tearing up our scripts, and upending our all-too-human assumptions.

One of my seminary professors, Bob Bertram, shared that he had been wondering about this text, “*my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,*” especially in light of all Jesus has been saying about how *difficult* discipleship is, about taking up the cross and following, about how even within families, there will be divisions and enemies.

Professor Bertram was visiting a poor, rural section of India, where the *rich* had, not John Deere tractors, but water buffalo or oxen, to pull the plows. And the *poor* had . . . the yoke on their own shoulders to pull the plow to work the land. While reflecting on this text, he looked up across the field, and saw two men, a father and a young son, sharing the task of pulling the plow. They were connected to the plow through cords; the cords were wound around a wooden yoke which they bore together on their shoulders. The father, being older and stronger, bore most of the weight of that yoke, *his yoke*, and so for the young man at his side, the burden was light in comparison.

Professor Bertram understood, at that moment, that Jesus is saying we do not pull our plow alone, proud of our power, self-sufficient and too often self-centered, standing before God wanting to be accepted on our own merits. Or perhaps cowering in the corner because we worry, deep down inside, that our *demerits* will disqualify us from serving God. Jesus is here, pulling with us, pulling *for* us, willing and able to carry for each of us the hardest weight of our weakness, the bleak weariness of our souls. The kind of soul weariness that the Apostle Paul was lamenting in our second lesson from Romans (7: 15-25a). “I want to do what’s right; but I don’t, I can’t.”

When Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you,” we might want to resist: “Whoa! I don’t want to be yoked to anything! After all, I’m free, independent! I’m supposed to be able to pursue whatever makes me happy, on my own terms and in my own way.” *Right?*

There’s a Bob Dylan song from some years ago called “*Gonna Have to Serve Somebody*.” The lyrics start out like this – and there are many verses. I’m only sharing the first one:

You may be an ambassador to England or France
 You may like to gamble. You might like to dance.
 You may be the heavyweight champion of the world.
 You might be a socialite with a long string of pearls.

But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.
 Yes indeed, you’re gonna have to serve somebody.
 Well, it may be the *devil* or it may be the *Lord*,
 But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.

“*Gonna have to serve somebody*.” That really messes with our control issues, doesn’t it? The bad news is that when we focus on controlling, when we zero in on defending ourselves from others-- which you gotta do, you know, if you are into control-- we will always find ourselves exhausted, if not right now, then eventually. And unfortunately, we will not find the healing rest we need, because we continue to fight off being yoked to *the very one* who offers our souls relief. Jesus carried his cross, all the way to death for our sake; he bore that yoke, and offers us his everlasting life

Perhaps it was dealing with leaders who wanted to control and confine Jesus and his mission that prompted Jesus to pray “*I thank you that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babies*.” We want to see ourselves among the “*wise and understanding*,” I expect, but God turns things upside down. You know, that yoke is on us. As we take on the yoke that eases our burdens, we are learning to live and share God’s forgiveness and care.

Jesus invites us to leave behind the rat-race that leads to spiritual and emotional exhaustion. (Somebody has said that the problem with the rat race is that even if you win, you are still a rat.) Jesus connects soul-rest with the yoke of being his disciple. It seems strange at first to connect the idea of *rest* with the *yoke*, since the yoke is an instrument of labor. Yet paradoxically, this yoke *unyokes* us from those other burdens that weigh on us; with Jesus we trade the yoke of *anxious and defensive self-serving busyness* for the yoke of *trusting*; we trade the yoke of *guilty duty* for the yoke of *loving service*. We can give up “*you gotta do it*,” when we find that “*you get to do it*.” The grammar of grace. That’s a Bob Bertram phrase too.

And finding ourselves thus yoked in Christ, we become like the blessed babies Jesus speaks of at the beginning of today’s Gospel. The wise and upstanding were too sealed off, too cynical and sure of their current circumstances to see God’s new dawn. If we are yoked with Jesus, the hard shell of self-defense, self-accomplishment, and self-righteousness can crack and begin to fall away.

Yokes are made of wood, so the carpenter Jesus would presumably know a lot about yokes. He would know, for example, that each needed to be exactly fitted for its animal, like an expert tailor making a new suit. When Jesus says “*Take my yoke upon you*,” he’s saying that he knows your particular skills and talents and that he has fashioned a yoke suited for you and you alone. He’s also saying, of course, that you won’t be alone - he’ll be there alongside, easing the load.

There’s a little story that I ran across on the Internet. A little boy was helping his dad with the yard work. Dad asked him to pick up the rocks in a certain area of the yard. After a while, the dad looked over and saw the boy struggling to pull up a huge rock buried in the dirt. The little boy struggled and struggled while Dad watched.

Finally, the boy gave up and said, “*I can’t do it.*” Dad asked, “*Did you use all of your strength?*” The little boy looked hurt and said, “*Yes, sir. I tried so hard. I used every bit of strength I have.*” The father smiled and said, “*No, you didn’t. You didn’t ask me to help.*” The father walked over and then the two of them pulled the big rock out of the dirt.

At the spiritual core of things, it is not *independence* that matters--for in this life, we are never truly freed of depending on and serving someone or something. Jesus invites us to depend on his forgiveness and trust his love. Jesus calls on us to *put down* the yokes that wear us down, and *take on* the tools for service that have been fitted to us. In the resurrection of Jesus, the *joke* is on the “*yokes of selfishness, hatred, evil and death*” all around us. As hard as it may be to see at times, we trust that those powers do not and *will not* have the last word. And the disciple yoke is on us, as we are learning to live in and share the love of God that we have encountered in Jesus. So Lord, help us to rely on this connection with you, your love which heals and sustains our weary hearts, so we may faithfully live out our love for you in your world.

Welcome: Invitation and Challenge Matt. 10:40-42; Romans 6:12-23 July 2, 2023
Pentecost 5

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is sending his disciples out to spread the powerful good news: God's love is at work in the world in a new way. Jesus has just told them, "*Travel light; trust God to give you what you need.*" Jesus has also warned them that following Jesus may cause others to reject them -- even their own families.

The followers of Jesus in our time are also sent out into an often-unwelcoming world, hell-bent on ignoring, distorting, rejecting, or co-opting the invitation and challenge of faithfully following Jesus. How will God sustain *this* ministry to which we are called, in a fractured, alienated world like ours? Today we hear Jesus provide a response to those questions. Jesus assures us that God will welcome whatever we offer, and shape it by his Spirit, to contribute to healing and transformation.

Our Gospel lesson offers us this ongoing promise from Jesus: "Whoever welcomes *you* welcomes *me*, and whoever welcomes *me* welcomes the *one who sent me.*" Jesus sends his disciples to carry on in his name the work that God sent him to do.

Who are these little ones that Jesus lifts up? Those who are vulnerable, those who are *left out* and *left behind, oppressed and dispossessed.* A cup of cold water is so basic. You don't have to be rich and powerful, or some kind of a super saint to give it. In the game of life, we want to be the hero; God may call us to carry water. We are promised a reward for even the smallest contribution done to honor God.

The reward may be hard to recognize because often it doesn't look anything like what our world reckons as reward. If we are looking to pull God's strings so that we can get more for ourselves, if we are looking to press the right buttons to gain a better reputation, or grab onto more power, if we are looking to earn our own way into heaven through doing impressive things, then we may be looking the other way when God shows up to welcome, heal and save, and invite us to serve that mission.

Our second lesson today tells us that we are all servants; we do well to ask ourselves: "who or what is it that we serve?" The *Message* paraphrase of the Bible puts it so vividly: "*Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death.*" We are invited and challenged to serve God, not our own fearful and selfish aims; we do that serving through our new life in Jesus.

Each baptized child of God is included in that call to carry the message of new life in Christ. This ministry in Jesus' name does not have to be done on a grand scale in order to make a difference. In giving and receiving such acts of welcoming, we become partners with God in making ministry happen. God's grace is put into practice, but even more than that: in the grace of such ordinary giving and receiving, amazingly, we meet God.

A welcome with a cup of water is nothing notable. It's simply a cup of water given to meet a need. Such kindness may seem insignificant, but God has another idea. And there are voices out there who agree. Someone asked the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead this question: "*What was the earliest sign of civilization in any given culture?*"

You might expect the answer would be “evidence of fire, a clay pot or perhaps a tool like a fish hook or grinding stone.” But instead, Dr. Mead’s answer was “a healed femur.” The femur, of course, is the leg bone below the knee. She explained that no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle reigns, the raw “survival of the fittest” where no losers or laggards are allowed. A healed femur shows that someone cared. *Someone* had to do that injured person’s hunting and gathering until the leg healed. The evidence of compassion, she said, is the *first sign of civilization*. And compassion *continues* to be a sign of civilization, and an abiding light of God’s gospel power.

Compassionately sharing ourselves *with* others, and being open to receiving such graceful giving *from* others, is more than just a civilized way of behaving. It’s God’s way of taking care of us. And even more than that, such caring is where we may *meet God in the midst of our everyday lives*. Today’s Gospel lesson mirrors that verse the shows up later in Matthew gospel, in the 25th chapter, “*As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.*”

Recognizing Christ in those we meet becomes possible when we confess and repent of all those many self-focused and fearful diversions that block us from seeing God’s caring and curing. God wants to welcome each of us back into the light, as we trust Jesus to forgive and empower us to serve him. We may be amazed at what we discover.

There once was a little boy who decided he wanted to find God. He figured it would probably be a long trip, so he decided to pack a lunch -- four packs of Twinkies and two cans of root beer.

He set out on his journey and went a few blocks until he came to a park. On one of the *park benches* sat an old woman looking at the pigeons. The little boy sat down beside her and watched the pigeons too. When he grew hungry, he pulled out some Twinkies. As he ate, he noticed the woman watching him, so he offered her one. She accepted it gratefully and smiled at him. He thought she had the most beautiful smile in the world. Wanting to see that smile again, he opened a can of root beer and offered her the other. Once again, she smiled that beautiful smile.

For a long time, the two sat on that park bench eating Twinkies, drinking root beer, smiling at each other, and watching the pigeons. *Neither said a word*. Finally, the little boy realized that it was getting late and he needed to go home. He started to leave, took a few steps, turned back, and gave the woman a big hug. Her smile was brighter than ever before.

When he arrived home, his mother noticed that he was happy, but strangely quiet. “*What did you do today?*” she asked. “*Oh, I had lunch in the park with God,*” he said. Before his mother could reply he added, “*You know, she has the most beautiful smile in the world.*”

Meanwhile, the woman left the park and returned home. Her son noticed something different about her. “*What did you do today, Mom?*” he asked. “*Oh, I ate Twinkies and drank root beer in the park with God.*” And before her son could say anything at all, she added, “*You know, God’s a lot younger than I had imagined.*”

When we share with those around us, especially those who are most vulnerable, although it happens behind the veil of the ordinary, yet it is no less than a sharing with God. St. Matthew is trying to tell us that every act of grace, every act of caring, every act of sharing, every act of loving comes from the heart of God. We are invited to become partners with *God* as we work with *each other* in service to our neighbors.

Look for opportunities to extend a welcome invitation to others, in Christ's name. Pay attention to how God has welcomed you, and thank God's agents in your life for their kindness and support. And remember, God has given a dignity and purpose to even the littlest of things that we do to serve others in the name of Jesus. We can trust that God will work through us to bless the ministry, when we, like the first disciples, head out into our world to live and share the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ.

We hear "*Your sins have been forgiven; you are welcomed home to God's table.*" We can now turn away from being rooted in fear; the perfect love that we have seen on the cross of Christ can cast out our fear. And a faith that is not ruled by fear, nor owned by the expectations of the world, *can* reshape the world – because it is *God* working through our hands. Through the tiny mustard seeds of food and water and shelter and shoes, through advocacy and justice, through a caring welcome to the stranger and a loving embrace for the friend, God works mighty ministry through us as we live out the challenge of being disciples, forgiven and forgiving. We are in Christ, and Christ is at work in and through us. And whoever welcomes that good word and work receives God's reward: hope, joy, peace, and reconciliation. Lord, give us eyes to see you, and brave, welcoming hearts to follow you.