

Devotions – October 8-14, 2017

By Pastor John Kuziej
Pioneer Lake Lutheran Church, Conover, WI

Sunday, October 8

Text: Matthew 21:33-46

Verse: **“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people that produces the fruit of the kingdom.”**

The reading for today is Sunday’s gospel text. As you listen carefully to this reading in church you will hear that Jesus is giving a parable. This is a difficult parable full of violence. A landowner has tenants working his vineyard. The tenants went rogue and beat the servants sent to collect the owner’s share of the produce. The owner thought if I send my son he will be respected and all this trouble will cease. But the tenants had another idea: kill the son and make a claim for the vineyard. Those who heard the parable, the Temple leadership in Jerusalem were shocked by what they heard and offered their opinion: the murderous tenants should be put to a miserable death. But Jesus made it clear that he was talking about them and uttered the warning that the kingdom of God will be taken away from them.

This is the kind of reading that can create pew palpitations—the gospel reading is uncomfortable. Where is the ‘gospel’ or good news? Maybe the good news is found in Jesus’ courage, not afraid to tell the Temple leadership what he thought. The good news can be found in Jesus’ determination to face his death on the cross because the Temple leadership is also determined to arrest Jesus. But I like to think the good news is the kingdom of God given to those who produce the fruits of the kingdom. Who are the recipients of the kingdom? To find out we must go back one parable in the 21st chapter of Matthew. Jesus shocked his hearers (he was good at that) by saying the tax-collectors are going into the kingdom of God ahead of the Temple leadership, important people like chief priests and elders of the people. The tax-collectors and prostitutes have produced the fruit of the kingdom, namely faith and repentance. They believed the preaching of John the Baptist and repented, rejoicing that the way of righteousness, the way of new life from the forgiveness of sins was not closed to them.

In this anniversary year of the Reformation we understand that the Holy Spirit produces faith within us, the Holy Spirit using the means of Word and Sacrament so we know Jesus Christ not in some historical way, but Jesus is always *for me, for us*. One time Luther compared faith with marriage: “faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom... Accordingly The believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death and damnation will be Christ’s, while grace, life, and salvation will be the souls.”

Let us Pray: Guide us, Lord Jesus, to ever cling to you for forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation. Thank you for your faithful and steadfast love, nurturing and renewing faith within us. Amen.



Monday, October 9

Text: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Verse: “**...be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.**”

I wonder how many times we hear the good news of forgiveness during a Sunday service. We hear it during the opening prayer of confession. The power of God’s pardon is certainly praised in our hymns. And then there is Holy Communion and the blessed assurance “this cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins.” We need forgiveness-finders and not fault-finders. And we find forgiveness in the Scriptures “As far as east is from the west, so far does God remove our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103). Jesus was determined to proclaim forgiveness along with repentance since repentance is the gift of ever turning to God not for condemnation but salvation. As Luther said “where there is forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation.” Today’s text encourages us to be a people of forgiveness made graciously possible by the forgiveness given through Jesus Christ. The word translated “forgiving” is actually grace used as a verb. Interesting, grace is an action word, God active forgiving, Jesus living the forgiveness of God which the powers of sin and death could not stop, and as followers of Jesus we are to imitate such active grace, forgiving one another.

Luther wrote that God has “filled every corner of Creation with forgiveness, so we may not find forgiveness in the congregation alone but also at home, in the fields, in the garden, or wherever one comes to another, there shall be found consolation and rescue.” As brothers and sisters in Christ, we have the privilege of pronouncing forgiveness of sins to anyone with a troubled conscience looking for comfort. Luther wrote “There is need of the sister or brother who will comfort such a person, oppressed and bruised by the Law, with the Word of God.” It is indeed a great witness to the grace of God when we seek to be tenderhearted, and forgive one another from the heart.

Let us Pray: Heavenly Father we know we have sinned and fallen short of your glory, and that the wages of sin is death. But thank you for your constantly active grace: sending Jesus to this troubled world with the word of forgiveness, sending the Holy Spirit into our hearts to heal and make new. Give us attentive ears and tender hearts, so we hear confessions in whatever forms they take, and respond with Jesus, his words of pardon and peace. In his name we pray. Amen.



Tuesday October 10

Text: 1 John 4:1-8

Verse: **“Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them, for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”**

More than once people have told me that they are weary of listening to the news. The news reports severe famine in countries embroiled with civil strife or insurgency such as Yemen, Nigeria and South Sudan. The sight of suffering children breaks your heart. The news reports racial tension in our country and the rise of groups committed to spouting bigotry. The news reports debilitating partisanship in Congress causing needed legislation to stall. Even our local news troubles us with stories of the latest arrests. So maybe for the sanity of our souls we should turn off the programs that report the constant strife in the world.

It would be easy to dismiss the world as going to “hell in a hand basket”, turn off the news, and avoid any interest in the world altogether. But the Holy Spirit has other ideas. The Holy Spirit calls us through the gospel, and part of that message is the coming of Jesus to this world in the flesh. Jesus shared in the

suffering of this world to assure that God hasn't given up or abandoned this place. In the gospel of Matthew we are told that Jesus came to bear all our infirmity and grief. The living Lord and Savior still dwells within us, the power of love that is greater than any negative force in the world.

Luther one time wrote that the surprising, enterprising, and all-encompassing love of God as revealed by Jesus relieves the stress we may feel about the world like a good joke lightens the heart. Based on the text that love is from God Luther wrote, "With these words God makes the heart of the whole world to laugh and rejoice and flows through every creature with pure divine sweetness and consolation....Now, how could God pour himself out more or give himself more lovingly or sweetly than by saying that it pleases him from the heart that his Son Christ should speak so kindly with me, think of me so feelingly, and suffer, die and do everything for me with such great love. Do you not think that when a human heart truly feels how God takes such pleasure in Christ when he serves us in this way it must explode into a hundred thousand pieces for sheer joy? For then one would see into the infinite depths of the fatherly heart, indeed into the fathomless and eternal goodness and love of God that he has for us and has had for all eternity."

Let us Pray: Loving and merciful God, may we keep you and your love for the world in our hearts when we listen to the news. And keep us steadfast in your Word, telling us that your presence within guards and guides us through troubled times. By your Holy Spirit keep our minds alert and hearts ready to comfort those who despair because of their burdens. We pray thankfully in the name of Jesus, Lord and Savior. Amen.



Wednesday October 11

Text: Proverbs 14:31

“He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.”

When I served as a pastor in Alberta, Canada, I would often get calls to help some solitary traveler on a trip to who-knows-where. The call would usually come from a worker at the downtown bus station which was open 24 hours. Sometimes they needed money so to travel further by bus. Sometimes they

wanted a room at the local hotel. Did I go to help? Yes but reluctantly. Did I have kind thoughts about the person? Not usually. Was I ready to joyfully serve my neighbor or assist the stranger? Most often I was annoyed with being pestered. I did not want to be a pestered pastor. In the few minutes it took for me to drive to the bus station I thought I better do a quick change of attitude. The Holy Spirit must have been worried about my natural crabbiness. Over time I came up with a strategy. I would invite the person seeking assistance to a meal. They always accepted. So we went to the Chinese place across the street and ate. Sharing a meal was also sharing the gift of time. Sitting across a booth from someone helped me to see the other's humanity as we discussed various topics. I would not interrogate as if to make plain any suspicion. By sharing a meal with someone my attitude changed. The person with me was no longer a pest but a fellow human being loved by God. I would not attempt any pressure regarding evangelism and often my guests were surprisingly familiar with Scripture. So in a sense I was being 'evangelized' or encouraged with the gospel shared with me. We read in the gospels that Jesus shared meal fellowship with people often disparaged and judged as "sinners" who should be avoided. But Jesus, who came to reveal the mercy of God, had other plans. He wanted sinners to hear what had been so often denied them, the good news of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness. In the Large Catechism Luther wrote, "Beware of how you deal with the poor—there are many of them now—who must live from hand to mouth...if you arrogantly turn away those who need your aid, they will go away wretched and dejected, and, because they can complain to no one else, they will cry out heaven....For they will reach God, who watches over poor, troubled hearts, and he will not leave them unavenged."

Let us Pray: Gracious God, you call your church to be a servant church. Thank you for churches faithfully collecting food and making meals for those who are poor. By your Holy Spirit help us to have a Christ-like attitude when we serve, looking upon others as your precious children equally loved. In the name of Jesus who calls us to serve with mercy and faith, Amen.



Thursday, October 12

Text: Romans 8:12-17

Verse: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.”

Many of us have favorite Bible texts. The texts we enjoy are upbeat, encouraging and hopeful. Today’s text from Romans is one of my favorites. I love it when St. Paul said we have the Holy Spirit instead of a spirit of slavery. I love it when it the Holy Spirit bears witness to our spirits reminding us that we are children of God. This is most encouraging when we have those days when we have to deal with failure, guilt, or grief.

But then there is a part of Paul’s train of thought that causes me to pause. As children of God we are also joint-heirs with Christ. (Late in the chapter Paul will say those who trust in Christ have everything with him. But then Paul added “provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.) The apostle Paul felt suffering with Christ was a reality for the Christian faith. In another letter Paul wrote “For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ but of suffering for him as well.” That can be a tough thought for God not only gives us the gift of faith but suffering goes along with it. As we read of Paul’s missionary journeys and descriptions from his own letters to the churches, suffering involved persecution, deprivations and dangers of every kind, and he also mentioned the anxiety he felt over the churches. The apostle Paul had this habit of throwing suffering into my favorite verses; did he think that the Christian faith must be painful? Of course not. Paul was being humble, honest and human. As a person of faith and servant of Christ, Paul did not expect God to do him big favors like an exemption from suffering. Paul did not ‘enjoy’ hardships and even confessed times of despair. Paul knew suffering was part of life where there is sinful human behavior, sickness, and eventually death. Through times of suffering the apostle Paul discovered he was not alone. Paul talked about suffering with Christ, but he very well could have written of Christ suffering with him. This is indeed our hope that with Christ we can face difficult trials. The apostle one time said he could boast in his sufferings not in the sense of pride in his endurance, but because through suffering Christ was present to strengthen him and give him hope. Maybe that comment of Paul’s boasting in suffering was done to tweak the devil’s nose: suffering would not result in a loss of faith because nothing would ever separate the Christian from the love of Christ.

Let us Pray: Thank you, Lord, for the encouragement we receive from the Scriptures. During times of suffering, Lord, when life is hard, grant the assurance of Christ’s presence to share the suffering and replace despair with hope, hope based on your undeniable and steadfast love. We pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.



Friday, October 13

Text: James 4:4-10

Verse: **“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, ‘God yearns jealously for the spirit he has made to dwell in us’? But God gives all the more grace; therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’”.**

The language of today’s text is truly strong. It must have been a shock to be called “Adulterers”, a common expression meaning ‘unfaithful’. This text gave a reminder of the preaching of John the Baptist who addressed fine, upstanding religious leaders as a “brood of vipers”. The text is a stern warning of replacing friendship with God with friendship with the world. The text from James said you cannot have both for that would be “double minded”. Holding nothing back the text said friendship with the world made you an enemy of God. The ‘world’ here means all that weakens faith, steals you from the Word of God, and distracts one from living out your discipleship. The reading from James gave a rapid succession of imperatives meaning urgent action was needed immediately if not sooner, such as “cleanse your hands, you sinners”. This text would not be a good choice for a special Sunday welcoming new members, they might be scared away! Who wants to be told to “turn your joy into dejection”?

From our Lutheran perspective this is powerful preaching of Law, full of accusation and the immediate demand for reform. We are told we are sinners at enmity with God. There is an echo of the Ten Commandments which warned of complete obedience because God is a jealous God and will not tolerate any idolatry. But through all this wrath and accusation of failure, we did read the word ‘grace’. As troubling as this text is, the promise was given: God gives all the more grace. So the command was given ‘submit to God’, ‘humble yourselves before the Lord, and God will exalt you.’ The Law stops all excuses and distractions reminding sinners of their helplessness to resist the idolatrous attractions of the world. The word of the Law, as we read today humbles us and that is not bad. It is like a saying a member of AA told me once, ‘When you hit rock bottom, you meet the Rock at the bottom’. The Rock is Jesus who comes to sinners with the solid assurance of forgiveness of sins. The Rock is

Jesus who is strong with grace to raise the fallen with new life. The Rock is Jesus who is with us to guide and guard us as we journey through this world.

Let us Pray: *Lord God, the words of the hymn sure apply: “Oh, let me feel you near me; the world is ever near”. Thank you for coming near to us with Jesus who came to seek and save the lost, who came to save the world and not condemn it, and who loves us without measure or condition. Lord God, we submit ourselves to you, grant us the grace to keep faithful. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*



Saturday, October 14

Text: Mark 2:18-22

Verse: **“The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them”**

Over the years I have officiated at weddings with full churches or other venues full of guests, and one time a wedding consisted only of the bride, groom and two witnesses. No matter the size, after the wedding there was always a good meal and I enjoyed that part immensely.

With our text today Jesus fielded a question about fasting. The disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees were fasting but Jesus’ disciples were not. Jesus did not want them to, and to explain he gave the illustration of a wedding. No one fasts at weddings; people are welcomed to participate in the joy of the celebration and not be party-poopers. Jesus is the bridegroom and that means the disciples are to participate in the joy of his presence. Earlier Jesus was seen eating with ‘tax-collectors and sinners’, a reference to people who were not known to follow the commandments of God or the teachings of the elders. The question was raised why was Jesus not careful about the company he kept; sharing a meal meant friendship. Jesus told them to think of him as a doctor making house calls. Jesus said “I have come not to call the righteous but sinners.” Whether Jesus compared himself to a doctor or a bridegroom the meaning is his message is one of joy: sinners called to repentance; sinners hearing their sins are forgiven, Jesus was going from place to place not fasting but ever reaching out to sinners with the friendship of God. Jesus was bringing his doctor’s clinic and wedding celebration from village to village for as he said earlier in Mark, “that is what I came out to do.”

Jesus was sharing the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, and this Gospel could not be sewn on an old garment or poured into old wineskins. The Gospel of the Kingdom ever stretches to reach and clothe sinners of all descriptions with forgiveness. The gospel of the Kingdom of God brought ferment and foment into the world. When we were baptized we were clothed with Jesus Christ. When we come to Holy Communion, we drink the new wine of Jesus himself for healing and joy.

Let us Pray: *Thank you, gracious God for sending Jesus among us to accomplish our salvation by grace. The joy of faith is to be invited to the wedding feast of the Kingdom of God. We pray your Spirit ever renew within us the joy of knowing and trusting Jesus. Bless our congregations with renewed joy as you call us together to hear the Gospel of the Kingdom, and as you send us out to share the good news of all Jesus has done to reveal your love. In His name we pray. Amen.*

