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Spirit and Life

(Aand og Liv)

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"I see my record of debt nailed fast to the cross."

Hvorhen skal jeg dog fly
Fra Lovens Tordensky
Med mine Synder mange,
Hvor skal jeg Trøsten fange?
Thi hele Verden vide
Ei lette kan min Kvide.

O Jesus, naaderig!
Med Hjertens Sorg til dig
Jeg paa dit Ord fremtræder,
Mig ved din Naade glæder,
Og tror, hvad du forjætter,
Dit Blod min Synd udsletter.

Jeg arme Dødsens Barn,
Omsnært af Syndens Garn,
Til dig i Troen haster,
Og i din Favn mig kaster,
I Naadens Dyb jeg sænker
Den Kval, som Hjertet krænker.

Jeg ser, mit Skyld-Brev
Til Korset naglet blev,
Og i din Grav i Haven,
Der er min Synd begravet
Til evig Skjul og Gjemme,
Hvi vil jeg mig da gremme?

Jeg meget har behov,
Men Gud ske evig Lov!
Alt, hvad jeg kan begjære,
Hos dig jeg faar, ja mere;
Min Kraft i dig jeg finder,
Hos dig min Sorg forsvinder.

Om Satans hele Magt
Sig hade mod mig lagt,
For mig fra dig at skille,
De faa ei, hvad de ville,
Thi du mig Seier giver,
Dit Blod min Frelse bliver.

Men bøi, o Sjæleven,
Min Hjertens Hu derhen,
At jeg maa alt modstride,
Som mig fra dig vil slide,
Og altid her i Live
Dit Legems Lem forblive.

Where shall I flee
From the thundercloud of the Law?
With my many sins,
Where shall I find consolation?
For all the world together
Cannot relieve my anguish.

O Jesus, rich in grace!
With heartfelt sorrow I come to you;
Upon your word I stand,
Rejoicing in your mercy,
And trust what you promise:
Your blood blots out my sin.

I, a poor child of death,
Ensnared by sin's net,
Hasten to you in faith,
And cast myself into your arms;
Into the depths of grace I sink
The torment that wounds the heart.

I see my record of debt
Nailed fast to the cross,
And in your grave in the garden
There my sin lies buried,
Hidden away forever—
Why then should I grieve?

I have great need indeed,
Yet God be praised forever!
All that I could desire
I find in you—and more;
In you I find my strength,
In you my sorrow fades.

Though Satan's every power
Should set itself against me,
To tear me away from you,
They shall not have their will;
For you grant me the victory,
Your blood becomes my salvation.

Now bend, O Prince of souls,
My heart's desire toward this:
That I may resist all
Which would tear me from you,
And always here in life
Remain a member of your body.

Contents

1	First Sunday in Advent: The Year of the Lord's Favor	1
2	Second Sunday in Advent: The Kingdom of God Comes	4
3	Third Sunday of Advent: The Way of the Lord	7
4	Fourth Sunday in Advent: Four Witnesses	10
5	First Day of Christmas: A Great Joy	13
6	Second Day of Christmas: The Pain of Christmas and the Joy of Christmas	16
7	Sunday after Christmas: The Fulfillment of the Promises	19
8	New Year's Day: And so this year as well	22
9	Sunday after New Year: A Treasure in Heaven	26
10	Epiphany: Not by might and not by power, but by my Spirit	30
11	First Sunday after Epiphany: Let the little children come to me	34
12	Second Sunday after Epiphany: Zacchaeus	38
13	Third Sunday after Epiphany: A Teaching with Authority	41
14	Fourth Sunday after Epiphany: In Faith and in Doubt	44
15	Fifth Sunday after Epiphany: The Seed that Grows	48
16	Sixth Sunday after Epiphany: From Tabor to Golgotha	52
17	Septuagesima Sunday: Talents and Interest	56
18	Sunday Sexagesima: The Harvest and the Laborers	59
19	Quinquagesima Sunday: God's Lamb — God's Son	62
20	First Sunday in Lent: Overcoming the Devil	64
21	Second Sunday in Lent: Father and Son	67
22	Third Sunday in Lent: A Man with an Unclean Spirit in the Synagogue	70
23	Mid-Lent Sunday: Life from God's Life	73
24	Mary's Annunciation Day: The Wonderful Ways of God	75

25 Palm Sunday: The Grain of Wheat	78
26 Maundy Thursday: The Example of Humility	81
27 Good Friday: Your Hour and the Power of Darkness	85
28 First Day of Easter: Fear and Joy	91
29 Second Day of Easter: Faith or Hardening	94
30 First Sunday after Easter: The Risen Jesus	98
31 Second Sunday after Easter: The Shepherd and the Sheep	101
32 Third Sunday after Easter: Many Rooms in My Father's House	104
32.1 Hymn: I Know a Sleep in Jesus' Name	107
33 Fourth Sunday after Easter: The Living Church	108
34 Fifth Sunday after Easter: Our Father	112
35 Ascension Day: He opened their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures	115
36 Sixth Sunday after Easter: Fear! Fear not!	118
37 First Day of Pentecost: The Spirit of Truth	121
38 Second Day of Pentecost: The Firm Foundation of Faith	124
39 Trinity Sunday: Jesus Has the Authority	127
40 First Sunday after Trinity: Self-Denial and Renunciation of the World	131
41 Second Sunday after Trinity: On Following Christ	134
42 Third Sunday after Trinity: The Publican Matthew	138
43 Fourth Sunday after Trinity: A New Righteousness	141
44 Fifth Sunday after Trinity: Peter's Confession	145
45 ***In progress***	148
46 Twenty-fourth Sunday after Trinity: They knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.	149
47 ***In progress***	152

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Editorial Sigla.—

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1 First Sunday in Advent: The Year of the Lord's Favor

Luke 4:16–22. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and according to his custom he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him, and when he opened the book, he found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim the Gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal those who are brokenhearted, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And he closed the book and gave it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them: Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. And all bore witness to him and marveled at the gracious words that proceeded from his mouth.

Will the new church year that begins today become a year of the Lord's favor for our church?

The answer to this question depends on two things. First, whether the Lord, “according to his custom,” will come into our synagogues—that is, our congregations—and there let the Word be proclaimed. Second, whether we give the Word room in our hearts, so that the Word becomes for us a power unto salvation.

Blessed be the Lord that the year of the Lord's favor, which began with his gracious preaching in Nazareth, has not yet come to an end. From that time it has been the year of the Lord's favor, since then the Gospel has gone out across the world. From Sunday to Sunday, from year to year, from century to century, preaching with power from God and the Holy Spirit has resounded over the earth in thousands upon thousands of places.

Blessed be the Lord that it still resounds. And that it resounds with its old, simple, and life-giving message. Even if it has at times been darkened and overshadowed by human commandments and human doctrines, it has nevertheless not fallen silent; but as the sun breaks forth again from mist and clouds, so the clear radiance of the Gospel has by the Lord's grace again shone forth. Still the Lord, through his Gospel, offers the kingdom of God with all its grace and gift to the poor; still he offers healing and restoration to broken hearts; still he offers sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed; still he opens his arms and says: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” Grace for every poor sinner, free grace, unmerited grace, remains the sum of the preaching, as it always was. The same old distress that again and again afflicts and presses human hearts can still be relieved by the same old faithful remedy, the precious blood of Jesus, which blots out all our transgressions and atones for all our guilt.

Up to now it has been the year of the Lord's favor for all of us who dwell in lands that are illumined by the true light of the Gospel, where the Lord's pure Word and blessed Gospel sound forth in the congregation from the mouths of the Lord's faithful witnesses. But there are also places from which the Lord has removed the lampstand, and where the Gospel

no longer sounds. Where now are Nazareth and Capernaum? Where are Jerusalem and Bethlehem? Where are Ephesus and Antioch and Smyrna? Where are even Rome and Alexandria? Therefore, you who have the light, do not be proud, but fear. Thank the Lord, who has allowed you to keep the light; but pray in deepest humility that he will allow you to keep the light “yet this year.”

And blessed be the Lord, we dare, despite our sins and our lukewarmness, nevertheless believe that he will still, “according to his custom,” come into our synagogues every Sunday and let the Word be read and preached for us. We dare say that the Lord will still spare us, that he will let the new church year be “the year of the Lord’s favor.” He has not forgotten to show mercy, and he will not close the door of grace. Therefore we still proclaim, in faith and in the Spirit of Christ, the year of the Lord’s favor with Word and Baptism and Holy Supper, and with the blessed preaching of Jesus’ witnesses.

But will it also become the year of the Lord’s favor for you? Dear soul, consider this question carefully. There are so many—so many—who are part of God’s congregation and who take part in its work, but who do not share in its joy and blessedness. Why should this be so? If you bear the congregation’s burdens, then also take its goods and joys, and so it will become the year of the Lord’s favor for you.

How can this come to pass? Perhaps you could learn something by simply following our text. Jesus went, “according to his custom, on the Sabbath day into the synagogue.” You should begin with the same custom; perhaps you do not yet have this custom. One often speaks so contemptuously of habitual Christianity, and it is indeed true that it is a poor Christianity. But there are habits that are useful for the Christian life. Among them is this custom of Jesus Christ, to go into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Follow it in full earnestness in the new church year, and do not let laziness or sluggishness or bad weather hinder you from gathering with God’s congregation in the Lord’s house. And even if the pastor cannot be present in the congregation’s assembly every Sunday, let that not hinder the congregation from gathering for its edification. The Word can indeed be read and work nonetheless.

But it is not accomplished with a good habit alone. If this year is to become the Lord’s year of favor for you, then the question is whether you will become one of the poor and brokenhearted, for whom the Gospel offers peace for the heart. If you go rich and satisfied and cheerful through the new church year, then it will not become better for you than all the other years. If your heart is great and strong and hard and whole, so that the Word finds no room in it, then it will not become otherwise than it has been; for with every day that passes, and with every word you hear without repentance and faith, you are storing up wrath for the day when God’s judgment is revealed. If the new church year is to become for you a year of the Lord’s favor, then bow, you proud heart, under the Lord’s law that judges your sin; then let Christ’s love melt the ice around the heart, so that you flee broken and poor to the cross and the blood.

“Can a sinner do anything for his salvation?” you ask. Must he wait until the Spirit of the Lord seizes him so powerfully that he cannot resist? Must he wait until a storm of awakening sweeps over land and people? — But have you not heard of him who stands at the door and knocks? Shall he stand outside even longer? He brings salvation with him; he brings

healing with him; he brings peace for the heart and blessedness with him; you can take nothing—absolutely nothing—but you can receive everything from him; oh, open up, open up, that he may come in. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear. And if you hear rightly, then the Word gives faith and peace and life.

A man stands in the shade and freezes and trembles; a friend comes and says to him: “On the other side there is sunshine and warmth—go there.” And the man goes; he may not feel the warmth at once; but if he waits a little while, then the warmth of the sun begins to do him good. Have you tried the same with God’s Gospel? You go to church a single time; you leaf casually through your Bible; you perceive nothing. But remain standing in the light; give the Word time; hear it diligently and read it yet more diligently, and it shall itself plow the ground and break the stone crust and lay living seed down in the field of the heart. Let it be watered with tears and weeping over your own hardness, and the seed shall grow the better. Pray, and wait in faith and hope, and the year of the Lord’s favor shall become your own year of favor, your day of salvation and the times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.

May the Lord grant us a blessed church year with new glad tidings for our sorrowing and wounded hearts.

2 Second Sunday in Advent: The Kingdom of God Comes

Luke 17:20–30 But when he was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God would come, he answered them and said: The Kingdom of God does not come in such a way that one can point to it. Neither will they say, See here, or see there! For behold, the Kingdom of God is within you. But he said to the disciples: The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, See here, or see there! Do not go out, and do not follow them. For just as the lightning flashes from one end of heaven to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must suffer much and be rejected by this generation. And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will also be in the days of the Son of Man: they ate, they drank, they married and were given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise also, as it was in the days of Lot: they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all; so it will be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

Few things are as deeply misunderstood—or as thoroughly filled with alien, carnal content shaped by human sinful desire—as this word: the Kingdom of God.

The pope seized both spiritual and temporal power over all Europe and called it “the Kingdom of God.” The Mormons in our own days have founded a society in which outward power, the Word of God, and sensual desire are shamefully mingled together, and they do not hesitate to call it the Kingdom of God. The individual often pursues honor and power by means of the Word and the congregation, and yet seeks to persuade both himself and others that he does it for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

No wonder, then, that the Pharisees also had their concept of “the Kingdom of God.” By this they meant a kingdom at once spiritual and earthly, like that of David, only far greater in extent, power, and glory—a kingdom such as the papal church later attempted to realize: a world-kingdom in which the Jews would sit upon the thrones of dominion with all nations under their feet. And this kingdom, they thought, would come fully completed with the Messiah.

Naturally, then, Jesus—despite his blessed words of life and his divine miracles—was not much to the Pharisees’ liking, when in his simple, poor outward appearance there was nothing that promised them visible glory and power, but rather the opposite: mockery and affliction. If he were the Messiah, then they were disappointed in what they believed to be expectations grounded in the Word of God, concerning a king upon David’s throne; they therefore preferred to see in him a deceiver and a mocker of Israel’s rightful hope.

With such an earthly understanding of “the Kingdom of God,” they came to him and asked: “When does it come?”

He knew well that his own disciples, then as now, are only too inclined to share, to a greater

or lesser extent, the Pharisees' earthly expectations with regard to the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in the world; and he therefore directed his answer partly to the Pharisees, partly to his own disciples. We will consider them together.

In two respects, he says—and he speaks not only to them, but also to us—you **have misunderstood and overturned the concept of the Kingdom of God. First, you have forgotten that it is spiritual, and that its visible manifestation in the world is not in glory, but in lowliness. Secondly, that it indeed will one day also be revealed in outward majesty and glory, but that then it will not become dominion over the world, but judgment upon the world. This is to be considered.**

“The Kingdom of God,” he says, “does not come so that one can point to it.” The word that stands in the original text, and which cannot easily be rendered by an equivalent word, indicates that the Kingdom of God, in its proper meaning, does not have such visible boundary-marks with regard to extent or nature, that one could either with the bodily eye or with fleshly reason recognize them, point to them for others, and say: “here the Kingdom of God reaches, and no further; upon this visible thing the true Christianity depends, and upon nothing else.”

Just as little as circumcision, despite the Jews' false trust in it, set any real boundary between those who belonged to the Kingdom of God and those who were outside, just as little can anyone rightly say: “all who live in a Christian country belong to the Kingdom of God,” or “all who belong to the congregation are in the Kingdom of God,” or “all who agree with us belong to the Kingdom of God.” For the Kingdom of God has no such visible or sensible boundaries; it is rather something within us, something spiritual: a living relation between each soul and the living God through the Savior, Jesus Christ—a relation which, by its very nature, stands opposed to all that is merely sensible and perishable. Therefore the Kingdom of God, in this sense, however hard it is for flesh and blood to acknowledge it, and however gladly we would evade it by making a compromise with the world, is nevertheless always in affliction, persecution, and lowliness. And insofar as the Kingdom of God, as it is on earth, must nevertheless also appear in an earthly form, with external organizations, buildings, and the like, all this is only the accidental and the transient, which, like the human body itself, will be brought to nothing; while that which is “within”—the power of the Spirit in the Word and the Sacraments, the life and fellowship in the Son and the Father—will only then shine forth in its full heavenly splendor, when all that is perishable and external has been stripped away.

But precisely on account of this opposition between the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of God and all that is earthly and perishable, on account of the afflictions and the unceasing struggle and persecution to which the Kingdom of God is exposed, there is also in all God's children an unceasing sigh to see Christ again bodily and glorified, with majestic power in his hand to strike down the enemies and to establish his kingdom of glory here on earth.

“Guard yourselves against these voices and such temptations within you and around you,” the Lord says—and he says it especially to his disciples—“guard yourselves therefore; and when someone points to Christ here or there, then do not go out. For the Kingdom of God is always here below on earth something “within you,” not something that can be identified by

outward power or glory. Guard yourselves therefore; for this is the leaven of the Pharisees.”

The Kingdom of God must always be in lowliness, and just as Christ himself first had to suffer much and be rejected, so must his body, which is the congregation—the Kingdom of God on earth—first suffer and be rejected; and then comes the glory, then comes Jesus, the carpenter’s son from Nazareth, in his full divine majesty and power.

“Yes,” he says to the Pharisees, “the Kingdom of God, such as you expect it, will indeed in its time also come—but woe to you when it comes.” The Lord does not delay, he says to his disciples, in coming; he comes in his time. But be ready when he comes! Remember Lot’s wife. For when Christ is revealed in his glory with the hosts of angels around him, then he comes in the clouds for judgment.

For judgment.

Swiftly like the lightning that flashes from one end of the earth to the other—and terrifyingly.

Unexpected and unforeseen he comes with his kingdom, when the great mass of humanity, as in the days of Noah and of Lot, has sunk into spiritual sleep and undisturbed enjoyment of all the goods of earthly life—when love has grown cold and faith has faded upon the earth—when there is crying, Peace, peace! and human beings rejoice and mirror themselves in the Kingdom of God which, with the mind of the Pharisees, they themselves have built by earthly power and strength; then the Son of Man stands there unawares like the lion over the sleeping one, and the humanity which just now was eating and drinking and delighting itself in its sensuality lies at once upon its knees under wailing lament and unspeakable terror, and hides its face so as not to see the Son of Man.

Thus, you Pharisees and you heedless disciples, who so gladly would remove the cross and serve both God and Mammon: the Kingdom of God comes, and it comes soon.

But are you also ready to receive it?

Have you remembered Lot’s wife?

3 Third Sunday of Advent: The Way of the Lord

Luke 3:1–6. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the land of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. And he went throughout the whole region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough ways shall become smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

When the Lord comes to his people, the question is whether his way is prepared for him, or whether the people are prepared, so that they are a people made ready for the Lord.

This preparation of the way and of the people was so necessary that the prophet Isaiah had already proclaimed that a crying voice should sound in the wilderness before the coming of the Lord; and it was foretold by the prophet Malachi that the messenger of the Lord should come before him, to prepare the way before his face; and again, that Elijah should come before the day of the Lord’s coming, so that the day might not become a curse instead of salvation.

And of John it was said, before he was born, that he would be this forerunner, this crying voice, this preparer of the people in the spirit and power of Elijah.

And in our text it is told that John himself, in the wilderness, received the word of the Lord. We do not know how the Lord spoke to John; nor is that of any importance; but we know both that it was the Lord himself who called him, and we know that it was in order to prepare the way of the Lord, and so that the coming Messiah might be revealed to Israel, that he was called.

And John walked the hard path of the divine calling, which led him to death. He went to the secure and defiant Israel and preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In this way he was to prepare the way of the Lord; in this way he was to make people ready for the Lord.

But did Israel then need preparation? This chosen people of the Lord, with the Law and the Prophets, with the light of the Word and the call of the Spirit—did it need preparation for the coming of the Lord? They were indeed “children of Abraham” and “children of the promise”; the kingdom of God had been promised to them, the Messiah had been promised to them; and now they had waited so long and suffered so much—should they still need preparation? Were they not ready to receive the Lord, who would bring them vengeance upon their enemies and restore to them the glory of David? Would they not gladly see the day of the Lord and rejoice to meet their deliverer?

Alas, alas, Israel was not ready to meet its God; Israel was not prepared to receive the

kingdom of heaven. Their mind was earthly and fleshly; with anxious expectation they looked for improvement in their earthly conditions, for earthly glory, for worldly power and freedom. But the kingdom of heaven was not the longing and desire of the heart. Therefore the messenger of the Lord had to go before his face and cry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” Turn your hearts from the world to God, from the earth to heaven; for it is not the kingdom of David, but the kingdom of God that is coming; not an earthly kingdom, but the heavenly kingdom that is coming. It is not “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” that are to be given to fleshly hearts for sensual enjoyment; but it is the kingdom of heaven that comes to broken hearts with heavenly peace and healing. It is a kingdom that no one can see unless he is born again of water and the Spirit.

And John, who knew his people’s insatiable desire for the glory of the world, and who knew that the Lord does not give his people a sensual and perishable happiness, but an eternal and imperishable glory, stepped forward with the preaching that the Lord himself had laid in his heart in the solitude of the wilderness. He came to his people and preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Thus the way of the Lord was to be prepared; thus the valleys were to be filled and the hills leveled; thus the crooked was to become straight and the rough to become smooth.

Is the same still needed?

Yes, precisely the same is still needed for the whole people and for every individual soul.

Why do the people struggle against one another in our land? Why is the bondage so great and the zeal so burning and the struggle so hard and the envy so bitter? Is it for a heavenly glory and for a heavenly crown that they fight and run and rush so eagerly? Or is it not far more earthly advantage and happiness and power that are pursued with such insatiable desire? Stop for a moment and consider! Look at the teeming crowd around you and ask what all these are seeking. But ask above all after the desire and longing of your own heart. Is it not earthly, is it not sensual?

What voice is it that presses among us? It is the voice of John, which should sound over city and countryside, into house and home, into heart and soul: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” It is repentance that is needed among us. It is a baptism of repentance that we require, in order to escape the judgment of the Lord, in order to become a people prepared for the Lord.

The Lord is still coming to us; are our hearts ready to receive him? We speak of building a free church of free congregations; we speak of a renewal of God’s church among us; and this is indeed a coming of the Lord, a day of favor, one of the days of the Son of Man for us. Are we also a people ready for the Lord, so that he can use us in his service? Oh, it is time for the voice of John to sound among us: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!” It is time to go to the river Jordan and confess our sins and receive a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Will you not do it now, while it is the time of visitation?

We speak of unity and of peace in God’s church; we rejoice with joy toward the good days that are to dawn. Let us take care that we do not err. The good days are the days of the

Lord, and they do not become our days unless we open to him who stands at the door and knocks, and say to him: “You blessed of God, come in!”

We speak of Christmas and Christmas joy, of gladness and peace, of angel song and heavenly jubilation. Then it is time to turn the heart from the world to God, from the earth to heaven. Then it is time for sorrow and brokenness and humility before the face of the Lord; then it is time to “repent and turn again, that our sins may be blotted out, and that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

Then we shall see the salvation of God; then our hearts shall rejoice with imperishable joy.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!

4 Fourth Sunday in Advent: Four Witnesses

John 5:31–39. “If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true; there is another who bears witness of me, and I know that the witness he bears of me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he bore witness to the truth. Yet I do not receive witness from a human being; but I say this so that you may be saved. He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light. But I have a witness greater than John’s; for the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, these works that I do, bear witness of me that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness of me. You have neither ever heard his voice nor seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe him whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness of me.”

The Jews wished to kill Jesus, not because he had healed the sick man at the pool of Bethesda, but, as they said, because he had done it on a Sabbath.

The Lord took this as an occasion to show that his work was not bound by the Sabbath, because he was the Son of God and worked as the Father works until now. Therefore, instead of wishing to kill him, they were obligated to honor him as the Father—especially since they ought to remember that the Father has given all judgment to the Son, in time and in eternity.

These were heavy and perilous words for one to utter who in every respect appeared like any other human being; therefore he sets witnesses before the Jews, so that they might have no excuse.

The first is John the Baptist. The Jews had indeed made much of him. For a time at least he suited their expectations and aroused great hopes among them through his strict life, his prophetic appearance, and his earnest preaching of repentance. All Jerusalem and Judea had gone out to him. He had borne witness to Jesus and said: “Behold the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world.”

Should they not receive his witness gladly? As long as it was new and sensational, they rejoiced in it as in a burning and shining lamp, in the hope that something great for them would come of it. But when they began to take seriously what he preached—repentance and conversion and a suffering Savior—and when they saw that he himself had to lose his life for a king’s whim, they turned their backs on his holy words.

The Lord wishes to remind them of their faithlessness and the wavering of the heart, not because he needs John’s witness, but because it might perhaps bring them to reflection.

For he himself has a greater witness: the works that his Father had given him to accomplish, and which had taken place before the eyes of all the people, according to the Lord’s own words, which he sent to John in prison: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame leap, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor.”

And how did the Jews answer when the Lord had done these wonders and pointed to them?

Give us a sign!

They would not repent.

Jesus had another witness: the Father himself, as John had heard it at Jesus' baptism and proclaimed it, and as the apostles were allowed to hear it on the Mount of Transfiguration: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Did they listen to him? Alas, no; they answered: You are a Samaritan and have a demon; they would not listen to the Father either.

Therefore Jesus finally brings forward a last witness to them and against them: the Word of God, the Scriptures. "You search the Scriptures," he says, "you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is precisely these that bear witness of me and say: whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; but whoever does not believe in the Son does not have life, but the wrath of God remains over him." Did they bow under this witness? Alas, no; they did not have God's word abiding in them; they did not believe in him whom God has sent.

And now all you who are baptized with Christ's baptism and called by his name, what are these four witnesses concerning the Son of God for us? Have they bent our hearts or hardened them as the hearts of the Jews?

Perhaps you have been cast upon a sickbed, perhaps struck and paralyzed by some great sorrow, by deserved or undeserved misfortune; a lightning bolt has struck down before you as for Luther, death has opened its jaws toward you; a voice has sounded to you: "You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you! Repent while it is called today!" You were unspeakably terrified in your soul; you awoke from the sleep of sin with dread; you saw your sin, your evil corrupted heart, as you had never seen it before, and the judgment of hell stood painted before you. On the one side it sounded: "The axe is already laid at the root of the tree; every tree that does not bear good fruit shall be cut down and cast into the fire," on the other: "Behold the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world!"

But where have these voices and cries gone now? Where do you stand? That was John's witness; have you cast them all behind your back?

Yet strange works have taken place all around you; hard, resistant sinners have been converted to God and born again; they have abandoned the way of sin and vice and have learned a new song, a song of praise; they have received new sight and a new heart; they have begun to proclaim the great works of God and to love their neighbor with Christ's love; the old has passed away, and everything has become new; the gospel has been preached to the poor.

Has this too passed your heart untouched, without working anything other than a harder heart—oh, then remember the judgment of the Jewish people.

Or has the Father himself spoken to you?

Had you come so far that you were allowed to hear and appropriate in childlike faith this word: "Take courage, your sins are forgiven you," and did you receive witness from God's

Spirit in your spirit that you were a child of God and had the right to cry: Abba, Father?

Oh, where are you now? Have you remained standing in this blessed state of grace with daily access to the throne of grace in the Son, or have you even cast this witness from you, so that the last has become worse for you than the first?

But perhaps you still search the Scriptures; you have preserved the outward Christian life; you go to the Lord's table and to his house; you listen Sunday after Sunday to the Word of God and read it at home both morning and evening. But it strikes your heart and does not enter—a heart that has grown harder year after year. The sharpest arrows of the Law fall blunted against the hard wall of your heart, and the sweetest tones of the Gospel pass unnoticed by your soul. Oh, what a condition, when even the witness of God's Word loses its power! when it was "Hosanna!" yesterday and is "Crucify!" today! What a Christmas season for the one who not only with coldness and indifference, but even with contempt, looks upon the little child Jesus lying in the manger, the Word who became flesh in order to save us!

But praise be to the Lord! still it is the day of grace, still it is Advent time; once again the Lord stretches out his arms and says: "Come here, that I may save you! do not cast my words behind your back!"

What kind of Christmas shall it be for you?

5 First Day of Christmas: A Great Joy

Luke 2:1–14. In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be registered. This first registration took place when Quirinius was ruler in Syria. All went to be registered, each to his own city.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

There were shepherds in that same region, staying out in the fields and keeping watch by night over their flock. An angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. And the angel said to them, “Do not fear, for I proclaim to you a great joy which shall befall all people. For to you is born this day a Savior, who is the Lord Christ, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign to you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”

Suddenly the angel was joined by a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest! and on earth peace! and good will among people!”

It is written of the shepherds on the fields of Bethlehem that “they were greatly afraid” when the angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

Why were they afraid? And do you also fear, O heart, when the light of the Lord shines around you? What is it that you fear?

He who has experienced it knows well what it is that makes a human heart so fearful and anxious when the light of the Lord breaks in and it becomes bright as day within. And many, many who have not allowed the light of the Lord to shine into the heart know very well why they do not dare open the door of the heart to the light and the day.

Oh, how carefully they strive to keep it dark in the closed chamber of the heart, so that it may not be revealed how things truly look within. They sense how badly things stand; they keep it dark so that naked reality may not laugh them in the face. They do not want to see it themselves, and when it is too dark for their own eye, they so easily deceive themselves with the false comfort: No one sees it; God does not see it!

But “the Lord sees,” it is written.

Foolish person, open the door of the heart, that the Lord’s light may break in. It is better that you be cast down in fear and terror when the light comes in, than that you try in vain to shut it out.

Futile? Yes, futile; for even if it should succeed for a short while to shut out the light of grace, it will be utterly futile when the light becomes a consuming fire of wrath.

O, if you tremble before the glory of the Lord, my poor heart—open up, open up! If you think with a half-suppressed sigh of Christmas as it comes, of the Gospel as it sounds, of the child in the manger, of Mary in the stable, of the shepherds in the fields—if you think: If only I were a child again, that I might rejoice as before—open up, open up to the light of the Lord!

Your heart is in trouble, but open up, open up to the light of the Lord, and there is still hope.

For what is it that you lack? It is the coldness of the world, it is the darkness of doubt, it is the burning fog of reason, it is the misery of sin that fills the heart. They are enemies of your joy and peace and blessedness that have pressed in and settled inside the heart. Let only the light of the Lord shine in, so that the nature of the enemies may be made known, and you may see the corruption they have wrought.

And when you then in terror must cry out: my sin, my sin! then comes the angelic message: Do not fear! The Savior is here! A great joy shall befall all the people — and to you this day

A great joy — yes, a joy from heaven itself, the joy of children, the jubilation of angels

For a Savior is born to you; “He will save his people from their sins.” For this reason he has come into the world; for this reason he comes to you.

If your old sins weigh upon you, he will forgive them. If you think you are so unclean and filthy and ragged and torn that you dare not come before God—oh see, it is but a little child who stretches out his arms toward you and smiles at you; he does not take account of what you have been, where you have gone, how wretched and miserable you have become, if only you will now receive the little child and give him room with you.

Then you shall experience joy, joy as never before. For if you took the child Jesus into heart and home, then it was God’s life and love you gave room within you. There came new life, there came new joy. You experienced that all the old has passed away and all has become new.

Is that the great joy? Yes, it is the only pure and perfect joy that a human heart can experience here on earth. When all the old, all sin, all sorrow, all distress is sunk into the depths of eternal mercy; when all old anxious memories are taken away; when all uncleanness is washed away in the blood of Jesus; when you are permitted to begin life anew without any oppressive guilt, without any constricting fear, without any gnawing resentment, and you may live saved and free in the bright day of grace.

Then there is joy. Heavenly joy in a human soul.

But there are few who taste this joy fully and completely. And yet it is precisely therein that the glory of the Christian faith proves itself in all its fullness.

It seems so small to the world to go to the manger in Bethlehem; it seems so contemptible in the eyes of the world to become a child again; it seems so impossible for one who is old to be

born anew; and yet it is precisely this that is the glad message of Christmas: “A son is born to us, a child is given to us.”

Our reason says: Let us become better people, let us become more rational, wiser, more calculating, more cautious people.

Our conscience, inflamed by God’s law, says: Become righteous, become holy, become good!

But God’s Gospel says: Come to the manger of Jesus and become a child again!

That is the great joy. That is the new thing which God has done, and which fills our mouth with jubilation and our tongue with laughter: new life, eternal life, imperishable life given by God in his own Son, given to everyone who believes in the Son.

It seems so offensive to our old fleshly reason. And yet, if you are to receive an eternal life, does it make any sense to try to transform your old, perishable life into eternal life by your works?

Can an old garment become new by having ever so many patches sewn onto it?

Can perishability ever become anything other than perishability, no matter how greatly you exert yourself?

But either you must receive an eternal life as a free, undeserved gift from God, or you can never, never attain it.

And here the gift is given; here is the true God and eternal life. Come and see! Come and take the child into your heart in living faith, and you yourself shall be born anew.

Is that possible? Ah no, for a human being this is impossible; but remember what was said of the child Jesus: For God nothing is impossible.

If you believe this miracle, then the miracle has already taken place in your own heart. Then you yourself are a child of God, born anew by the miraculous power of God.

That is true and living Christianity.

Come, let us go with the shepherds and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us, and there shall be great joy in our hearts.

Joy is so greatly lacking in our Christianity because simple faith in Christ is so greatly lacking. Oh, that it might become better with us all at this Christmas feast! Let us then open the doors of our hearts wide and let the light of the Lord shine in; and when we are terrified over all our sin, all our self-love, all our unbelief, all our pride, all our self-righteousness, then let us also take the child Jesus in, and his holy love shall blot out sin and kindle the new heavenly love within, and we shall receive

a great joy.

6 Second Day of Christmas: The Pain of Christmas and the Joy of Christmas

John 1:1–14. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp it. There was a man sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. This was the true light, which enlightens every human being coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him. But to all who received him, he gave authority to become children of God, to those who believe in his name; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The angels proclaimed great joy to the shepherds, and added: “It shall be for all the people.” Today’s text shows us why the joy is so great that angels must sing it out over the earth. The child who is born to us, the Son who is given to us, the child in the manger, is “mighty God, everlasting Father” (Isaiah 9:6). The text also shows why not all people receive the joy that God intended to grant to “all the people.”

The Word, the Word of life, is the gospel contained in Christ himself, or the complete and all-sufficient, all-embracing revelation of God’s eternal being and his infinite love. Christ is the gospel, for in him the glory of God is revealed, so that all flesh may see it, that glory which is full of grace and truth.

What believers in the Old Testament saw only dimly in a mirror, that God was a Father with a father’s love for all his children, Christ revealed when he himself became a small, poor child among human beings, when he became like us in all things except sin, so that we, through faith, might become wholly like him.

How infinitely great this Jesus is, even when he lies as a small child in the manger! He is God from eternity. He was with God, and he was God, in heavenly glory before the foundation of the world was laid. And when the world was created, he was the one through whom all things came into being; nothing came into being, and nothing could come into being, apart from this Son who has now come down to the earth and become one of us. He commanded heaven and earth to come into being; he caused the sun to roll across the heavens; he set the stars upon their appointed paths. Infinite is he in power and wisdom from eternity to eternity. In him the Father’s being had its true image, and God’s glory its radiance. Therefore the Father spoke to him and said: Let us make a human being in our image, after our likeness. He was all that the human race was meant to be according to God’s purpose, and infinitely much more.

But sin entered the world; mankind tore itself loose from him who was its life and its light. Then humanity's true life was shattered; then its light was extinguished. In death and darkness, with blinded heart and wandering spirit, the poor human race wandered over the earth, groping for a way it could not find, striving for a goal it could not reach.

And yet the light was there, even though humanity had closed its heart and eyes to it. It was God's eternal Word, which shone and gleamed like "a light in a dark place" through Abraham and Moses and all the prophets. Throughout the whole time of the Old Testament there was a dawn-glow of the coming sun, which shone across the dark earth and called and beckoned to human souls. But they had turned their backs on the rising sun; they stared and stared at the shadows that lay across the earth, and they kept the darkness in their eyes and in their souls, although it was only necessary to turn around in order to see "the light from on high," which shone through the Word in the mouths of the prophets.

The darkness did not comprehend the light; the eternal, blessed light of God was shut out, and human beings walked in their worldly thoughts and desires, in the impurity and wickedness of their hearts, in pagan idolatry and abomination, or in Jewish self-righteousness and self-deification. Darkness closed in everywhere, and hearts did not find the way back to God and his radiant kingdom.

Then came John the Baptist. God sent him so that he might bear witness to the light, point to the Savior, and say to all people: Behold the Lamb of God! For light and life for sinners were to be found only with the Savior who laid down his life for them, just as the lambs died for Israel's firstborn in Egypt. John was to bear witness so that the worldly-minded might turn back before the Lord came, and believe in him who came with salvation for all who seek salvation, but with crushing judgment for all who loved darkness more than light.

The forerunner did his work, and how much fruit it bore was shown best when the Lord himself came. For a few—oh, all too few—John became a faithful guide who with joy led souls to their heavenly bridegroom; but most paid no heed to it. They perhaps rejoiced for a little while in his light, and then returned to their daily routines and their worldly life.

The Son of God came to God's people, and he found resistance, indifference, unbelief, contempt, hatred, persecution, and death. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.

What infinite pain lies in these words. It is the sorrow that has followed the gospel from the very beginning. Those who ought to have been the first to receive the Savior, those who said they had waited so long for him, were the first to reject him. "Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people," says the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 9:1). And Jesus himself wept over Jerusalem and said: Oh, if you had known on this your day what serves for your peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes. Thus sorrow also accompanies the joyful Christmas message; and it was not long before the angels' song of praise on the fields of Bethlehem was replaced by "weeping and loud lamentation," when the little children were murdered in Bethlehem by the cruel King Herod, who sought Jesus in order to kill him.

As then, so now. The gospel is met with resistance, contempt, and unbelief in the midst of a

dead Christendom. For most, Christmas brings no joy in Jesus and no song of thanksgiving for the wondrous child in the manger; no, for the vast majority who are called by the Christian name, Christmas is a time of worldly joy and sinful revelry, by which the life in God is often killed in the hearts of many young people. Still today God's Word continually utters this heart-rending complaint over God's people:

He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.

Therefore all true Christians also feel a living pain precisely at Christmas over the dreadful indifference and worldliness within Christendom. Can it not become otherwise? Must God's grace in the Son always meet with such resistance from sluggish, rigid, and defiant human hearts? Wake up, then, as you ought, you congregation of God; wake up, you worldly soul who sleeps so heavily in sin; and Christ, the light from on high, will shine upon you and lead you into God's peace and God's blessedness.

For truly there is joy, true and real joy at Christmas for those who receive him. It is not with Jesus as it is with other people. You receive them, you may have a pleasant time with them for a while, and when they leave you again there is perhaps a sense of loss for a little time, and then the waves of forgetfulness close over them, and it has no further significance for you that you met them. But with Jesus it is different. If he is truly received by a human heart, received with the whole distress and need of a grace-hungry, salvation-seeking heart, received as only one receives who has learned to hunger for love and receives it for the first time, then there also comes a great and joyful transformation in such a person.

Receive Jesus, and there will be a change in you that has significance for time and eternity. You become a child of God. No one can open the heart to Jesus with the broken soul's longing for relief and salvation without the Savior also granting salvation and life. Where he enters, he brings his grace and his gift with him, and his gift is God's own eternal life. You receive him in the bitter sorrow of repentance, with shame over your sin and yet with such deep longing for his grace; and behold, when he enters your heart, joy streams in like warmth with the sun, and you rejoice with unspeakable jubilation. This is the true joy of Christmas. Only the joy of becoming a child of God is the right and true joy over the child of God, Immanuel. Then he receives his honor and his praise. Then the true Christmas song sounds in the heart, a song that is not completed until you stand saved before the throne of the Lamb among the number of the blessed. You begin to see Jesus' glory as that of the only-begotten from the Father in the moment of time when you become a child of God; and when you one day see him face to face, you will recognize him, because you see the same glory so infinitely much more clearly.

Do you have this experience of being God's child, and do you have this Christmas joy, and do you have this living hope? Then Jesus has become your Savior. Amen.

7 Sunday after Christmas: The Fulfillment of the Promises

Luke 1:68–75

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, that he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up for us a horn of salvation in the house of David, his servant, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old: salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show mercy toward our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.

These words are the beginning of the glorious song of praise which the aged Zacharias lifted up when he had received his speech again on the day when his son John was circumcised and given his name. For a long time he had been mute because of his unbelief; but during his long and heavy silence he had thought and struggled and believed, and now he spoke, “filled with the Holy Spirit.” As Elizabeth his wife, and Mary the mother of Jesus, had already earlier believed and confessed and praised God for salvation through the child who was to be born, so now Zacharias also had become one of those who believed and confessed that the day of salvation had dawned and that the hope of Israel—the hope promised by the Lord and awaited by the fathers—had at last arrived.

And it is no wonder if joy arose in the heart of the aged priest when it finally stood firm for him in the Holy Spirit: now the day of salvation had dawned, now the promises were to be fulfilled for God’s chosen people. Whoever knows what it is to have waited long, waited patiently, waited under great afflictions, waited often under doubt and fear and inward temptation—and then at last to reach the goal of all one’s longings—he can indeed grasp something of the overflowing joy that filled the heart of Zacharias and made its way over his lips in song of praise and jubilation. And yet the unspeakable joy in the soul of believing Israel cannot be fully grasped, for the hope of the fathers was now fulfilled; indeed longing and expectation and tension are multiplied and multiplied again when it is a whole people who wait and hope and long, when it is the expectation of millennia that comes, and when it is the entire plan of the Lord’s salvation that is to be revealed in a single moment.

Can anyone wonder that in such an hour the Spirit of the Lord finds a believing heart wide open, so that he may fill soul and mind and mouth with words from God?

It is the promise to the house of David, of which the holy prophets have spoken, that is fulfilled. It is the oath to Abraham that is now kept. The ancient, faithful words of the Lord, upon which the fathers had placed their trust, now showed themselves to be true, as the Lord himself is true.

The promise to David had pledged a “horn of salvation” for Israel. This means a saving power that could strike down all enemies, that could break all resistance. It was the eternal kingdom that the Messiah was to possess, the kingdom of God that was to overthrow the kingdoms of the world, fill the earth, and itself endure forever. Of this Nathan spoke to

David; of this Isaiah and Daniel and all the prophets prophesied. Now it was to come through the child whom the virgin was to bear. This is the wondrous ability of true faith, to see the great in the small, to see the power of God in what the world calls frail. Blessed is she who believed! Blessed also are Elizabeth and Zacharias, who believed with her! Blessed is every soul that believes, believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, and finds in him a horn of salvation against all its enemies, a fortress in times of distress.

And the oath to Abraham—we read it in Genesis 22:16–18:

“By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore; and your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

This was the great word that Abraham and his descendants had received from the Lord on that dreadful day when Abraham offered his son and received him back from God as one raised from the dead. And now it was truly to be fulfilled. Zacharias saw in the Spirit that the child in Mary’s womb was that offspring of Abraham who was to possess the gate of his enemies. He saw that his own son John was to be the forerunner and the greatest of the prophets, who was to prepare for the Lord a people set in readiness. Zacharias saw how an innumerable multitude of blessed children of Abraham and children of God would find salvation—peace and life, righteousness and holiness through faith in the promised Messiah, who had already come.

Brothers and sisters, do we also have the faith of Zacharias? Has the Holy Spirit also filled our hearts and our tongues with the joy of salvation in this blessed feast of Christmas? Or do you still doubt, dear brother? Who is a God like our God, who proclaims salvation to Abraham for all the peoples of the earth, and who fulfills his word and remembers his covenant, as we see it with our own eyes? In Jesus it is all fulfilled—everything that the Lord had promised, everything that the fathers had hoped for. If you long with the fathers for a Savior, then come and see; seek your salvation in Jesus, and you will find it.

For in him and through him and with him it is also granted to you to serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of your life. And this is the proof that he is truly the Savior of the world. If he can save you, you poor child of sin, whom then could he not save among poor sinners?

Without fear you shall serve the Lord when Jesus gives you the forgiveness of all your sins and makes you a beloved child of God. It is only the child with an evil conscience who fears his father; it is only the sinner with unforgiven sin who must tremble and quake before God. When the blood of Jesus blots out all your sins, and the Spirit bears witness with your spirit that you are a child of God, then you no longer fear; then you love God. This is blessedness, this is salvation from all enemies, this is victory over the world and sin and death. Fear is not in love, for perfect love casts out fear. But when love is born and created in the heart, then there is righteousness and holiness. For what is born of God does not sin. And holy is the one who is like God, and God is love.

Thus a sinner is saved by the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus the image of God is restored in us. And what further salvation is needed? If we are beloved children of God who love God because he loved us first, who then shall separate us from the love of Christ? Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

But if Jesus has become your Savior, then you know that in him there is salvation for all peoples. Yet to all the blessing of Abraham has not yet reached. Therefore Christmas is the time for mission. Let the light of the Gospel shine to the ends of the earth; this is Christmas's urgent call to all who share in its joy. Lift the light high at home and send it far out into the darkness of the world and unbelief, that God's salvation may be made known to the ends of the earth. If you are glad, then share your joy with the many who are afflicted; you yourself will become gladder thereby, and the kingdom of Jesus Christ will be extended, and his love will receive the reward of its suffering.

Come then, take part in the work that the blessing of Abraham may come to all peoples!

8 New Year's Day: And so this year as well

Luke 13:6–9. And he spoke this parable: A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down! Why should it also render the soil useless?

But he answered and said to him, Lord, let it stand yet this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it— if it then bears fruit; but if not, you shall cut it down afterward.

It is not difficult to see the connection between this parable and the two preceding statements of Jesus. Eighteen men had been killed at once when the tower in Siloam fell upon them, and Pilate had had some Galileans killed while they were offering sacrifice, so that their blood flowed together with the blood of the sacrifices. People commonly thought that God had thus punished these people because of grievous sins they had committed. But the Lord says:

Do you think that these people were sinners beyond all other Galileans, or all who live in Jerusalem?

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

This applies to every person: all must repent, and moreover each has been given a certain season of grace in which this must take place.

Thus the parable of the fig tree enters in, and it is especially to be pondered today, when you step into a new year—perhaps the final year of grace.

The Lord here, as in the parable of the sower, takes his image from daily life. A vineyard was generally a small garden from which a man lived much as from a farm among us; for the extraordinary fertility of the soil made it possible in Judea to reap great yield from what by our standards would be a very insignificant plot of land, half or a quarter acre. In return, the soil had to be cultivated with the utmost care and used to the utmost. And since daily wages were exceedingly low, a vineyard owner could afford to hire one or more laborers or vinedressers to keep the ground well cleared, fertilized, and productive. Where it could be done without harm to the vine cultivation, fruit trees were planted to make use of the soil. If they proved unfruitful, it was a double loss for the owner: first, time and labor wasted; second, precious soil rendered useless. And it lies in the nature of the matter that a gardener who works with fruit trees from their first planting onward binds a special affection to them, almost as to living beings. This can be observed among us as well. And thus the full meaning of the parable at once stood fairly clear before the hearers, and ought so to stand for us.

For, as the prophet says, “the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his delightful planting” (Isaiah 5:7).

The Lord's vineyard is his dearly purchased congregation, and he comes today to find fruit in his vineyard.

You are the fig tree—whoever you are—who by baptism was grafted into Christ's body and

to this day has been warmed and watered by the sun and rain of his grace. To you—whoever you are who hear or read—comes today the holy and righteous God to find fruit in you.

He takes you aside alone and says: Come, let us set things right between us!

Is there anything I could have done to make you bear fruit that I have not done? Where, then, is your fruit?

There is only one fruit that the Lord requires of his planting: saved souls—no more nor less. For God has not placed his congregation and his children to help advance or improve the world, but that the world might be saved through them. God works by his Spirit and his Gospel through human beings, to bring peace to those far off and to those near, as it is written:

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring glad tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion: Your God reigns.”

But in order to proclaim this glad message in such a way that souls are saved, one must first have experienced its blessedness in a true and living faith. Only thus does a person become able to proclaim his excellencies, who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light—that is, by word and life to draw souls to Jesus. For this reason God has placed us here; for this reason he has given us the heavenly soil of his congregation, with the dew and warmth of the Gospel; and for this reason he has the right to seek fruit on his fig tree.

But what do you have to answer? Look back upon the year that has passed. Early and again and again the Lord has called to you by his Word and said: “Soon I am coming to seek fruit.” “Not yet, not yet,” you have said, and allowed the world and its love to rule and dry out your heart.

Look upon him who hangs and bleeds on the cross for you; will you—do you dare—trample his blood under your feet?

Perhaps you have been frightened and awakened from your sleep of sin; perhaps you have wept over your condition and cried out: “Yes, yes, Lord, I will repent and bear fruit for you”—and then immediately forgotten it.

Has not the Lord also had his severe dealings with you—illness, sorrow, death, loss of what was dearest—and you have made promises to the Lord and not kept them?

Now the righteous Judge stands over you: “Two evils my people have committed: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13). “Therefore the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will bear its fruit.” And two evils you have committed against me: my Gospel you have despised, and your entrusted place in the congregation you have made useless.

Thus the verdict sounds:

Cut it down!

Where shall I flee
From the thunder of the Law?
With my many sins,
Where shall I grasp consolation?¹

But the eternal abyss yawns open beneath you; the anguished cry of the rich man sounds up from below: One drop of water! One drop of water! One minute, and you are lost forever.

Then a voice comes in between, full of unspeakable love and compassion: “Let it stand this year also! One more year, one more attempt—perhaps it may then bear fruit. Oh, how I will dig and fertilize it, if only it may yet stand one more year.”

And the Lord says: “Let it be—one more year!”

Who is it, then, who so narrowly escaped the dreadful torment of eternal judgment?

It is you, O friend, who are reading this—who have entered a new year and with shame perhaps must look back upon an entire life of sin and negligence; yes, who belong to the Lord’s congregation and up to this time have stood as a dry, unfruitful branch.

You have received yet a small season of grace in the new year. A mother perhaps has prayed for you and moistened the Lord’s feet with her tears for her lost child. A friend, a servant of the Lord, a congregation has pressed in upon God that he should spare you for Christ’s blood’s sake.

How will you regard this final call, the new year God in grace has granted you? The Lord will require a soul of you.

And you who have prevailed upon the Lord with your prayer, and who have promised to dig and fertilize—shall this be a new year for you? Will you in this year give yourself no rest or peace with the gifts and powers the Lord has given you, until the soul you prayed for is won for Jesus?

You to whom children are entrusted—immortal souls, bought with Jesus’ blood—shall this be a new year for you, so that you not only pray for your children, but also labor for them with reverence and inward love?

You servant of God, for whom the work of the congregation often becomes so manifold and overwhelming that you at times forget the individual souls, especially if they are healthy in body—shall this also be a new year for you, so that you sincerely strive to keep what you have promised, to dig and fertilize the unfruitful fig tree in your vineyard, not only by the general preaching of the Word, but by all the manifold means which true love is so inventive in using, to approach that soul gently and tenderly and to draw near with particular and personal care?

And you, the Lord’s planting, Christ’s congregation, where it must be confessed with shame that multitudes of fig trees are without fruit—you holy “remnant” of God in a ravaged garden—will you immediately and gladly offer yourself “to uproot and tear down,” cut down! cut down! or will you humbly and lovingly cry to your heavenly Father: Spare the tree one

¹Hymn by Hans Adolf Brorson (1694–1764); the complete text is printed in the front matter.

more year!—and then begin anew “to build and to plant,” with burning zeal and heavenly power, because the Lord has granted also you

“one more year!”

9 Sunday after New Year: A Treasure in Heaven

Luke 12:32–34. “Do not fear, little flock; for it has pleased your Father to give you the Kingdom. Sell what you have and give alms. Provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure that does not fail in heaven, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The words “Do not fear, little flock” come in a striking context. A man had come to Jesus in order to take advantage of his selflessness and great influence among the people. He demanded that his brother divide the inheritance with him and wanted Jesus to compel the brother to do so. “Take heed and beware of covetousness; for even if someone has abundance, his life does not consist in his possessions,” was Jesus’ answer. Then he told the parable of the rich farmer and, on that basis, exhorted especially his disciples not only against all anxiety for earthly things, but also against all pursuit of them.

“Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

This was one of the sharp blows by which Jesus often struck down the disciples’ earthly expectations of the Messiah’s kingdom, and by which they were even “greatly astonished,” as when, on the occasion of the rich young man, he said: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25).

“Who then can be saved?” the disciples asked in their terror and despondency.

Therefore the Lord applies his heavenly balm to the wound when he here says:

“Do not fear, little flock; for your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom.”

But immediately thereafter he adds again: Sell what you have! Give alms! Provide yourselves a treasure in heaven, so that your hearts may be there; and do not be “unfruitful or barren” (2 Peter 1:8), but let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and—above all—watch! watch!

So it is with the Kingdom of grace: renunciation, labor, struggle, and vigilance go hand in hand with grace. Not that they can produce grace; for then it would no longer be grace (Romans 4:4). But where these are absent, it is because grace has not been received; where works are lacking, it is because faith is lacking (James 2).

Oh, how the self-righteous and the sharp-witted scribes have striven to separate these two things from one another—some by building on works and despising grace, others by resting in grace and mocking works.

But here the Lord has united the two and forced the disciples’ fleshly mindset to face itself, just as Paul also says: “We are glorified with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him” (Romans 8:17).

“For the Lord desires truth in the inward being,” and “blessed is the one in whose spirit there is no deceit.” If you say that you are willing to receive by grace the forgiveness of sins, life,

and salvation—yes, heaven itself—from God, and yet in sincerity are not willing to use the power of that grace to do the little that the Lord asks of you: to suffer and labor with him through a short earthly life, a small breath of eternity, or to renounce and relinquish, for the glory of heaven, the small, petty things that are called earthly riches, covetousness, and honor—then you have neither learned to know nor to value the treasure of grace in heaven, nor have you sincerely received it. You deceive yourself and others, and the truth is not in you.

For if God has forgiven you ten thousand talents, would it be something great to forgive a brother, or even an enemy, a few dollars? And if you neither can nor will do this, can you then sincerely pray, “Forgive me my debt,” when the Lord nevertheless says: “If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:15)?

And what sincerity is there in saying that you have your life with Christ in God, and yet being ashamed or shrinking back from letting it be revealed among people, when Jesus says: “Whoever does not confess me before people, I will not confess before my Father,” and Paul adds: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, who walk according to the Spirit and not the flesh.”

But for the one who is willing and ready
to do everything the Savior asks of him
though in weakness,
yet in sincerity of heart—

for the one who with joy is willing
to convert all earthly possessions
into spiritual values and in all he does asks:

How can this serve my Savior’s purpose?

for the one who strives to be merciful
as our heavenly Father is merciful,
to love as Jesus loved,
and not to close his eyes to a brother’s need,
but to help and relieve and heal where God gives opportunity,
and who in all earthly things sees only the perishable and fragile,
which thieves steal and moths consume,
and therefore has his gaze and his heart
continually turned toward the invisible and eternal,
having received the Kingdom of grace in humble faith—

for the one who thus feels his foreignness
and abandonment in the world,
his smallness and weakness,
the unceasing danger
and pursuit by the world and its prince—
oh, how blessed and precious is this word:

“Do not fear, little flock!”

Do not fear, you worm Jacob—you little flock of Israel, I am your Redeemer—do not fear, Mary; what is impossible for people is possible for God—do not fear, you of little faith, for I still the storm—in all distress and danger, spiritual and temporal, in tribulation and persecution, in despondency and abandonment, he stands before you, who has all authority in heaven and on earth, and says:

“Do not fear!”

You are little, that is true; but you are a flock, that is just as true—you congregation of God. You have a shepherd who went into death for you, and who rendered powerless the one who has the power of death; a shepherd whom God has subjected all things under and set as head over the congregation, his body, his fullness, who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:22–23).

He says to you, O congregation—to you, you poor, little, anxious soul who flees to him as the chick under the hen’s wings:

“Do not fear!”

Why? “Because your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom.”

Oh, what blessed words! What balm for wounded hearts; what strength in the weak; what victory for the downtrodden!

Your Father—that is what the holy, righteous, and almighty God is for the little ones who have believed in the one whom he sent. A Father who says: “Though a woman forget her nursing child, yet I will not forget you.” A Father who, without any merit of yours, but solely out of his fatherly goodness and mercy, has been pleased to have compassion on you in your lostness and misery of sin, and despite your enmity and resistance has had compassion on you, so that he has given this his only-begotten Son into death, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish.

Since this unspeakably loving Father, according to an eternal decision, has been pleased in the Son to have mercy on poor sinners, he now stands here in the Word and by his Holy Spirit with hands full of grace and bestows upon a world-harried, anxious soul “everything that pertains to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his glory and power.” He gives freely and abundantly without money and without payment, without merit and without works, to everyone who in his distress and misery sinks down before him and childlike and sincerely asks for it.

And what does he give? The Kingdom. Nothing less. Precisely that which the disciples at this moment feared to lose because they understood it carnally; precisely that which a hungry and thirsty human soul in its inmost being both desires and needs—not goods or gold, not the glory and honor of the world, nor even their opposite, but God in us: God with all that he is and has, with the Son and the Holy Spirit dwelling in the heart of a poor and helpless sinner; with cleansing from all sin; with the right of children in God’s house; with authority over everything God has, according to the word: “Whatever you ask in my name, you shall receive”; with the same power to overcome Satan and his entire kingdom with which God raised the Son from the dead; with an incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading

inheritance kept in heaven; and a hope that does not put to shame, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit—this is the Kingdom, this is the “treasure in heaven,” this is the unspeakable gift which it has pleased the Father to give to Jesus’ disciples, precisely because they are small, a little flock, and precisely because they are anxious and concerned about their own weakness and helplessness in the midst of an evil world, so that at all times they need to hear this blessed word of his Holy Spirit:

“Do not fear!”

What then shall we say, friends? “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all—how shall he not also with him graciously give us all things?” Oh yes; “for I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers nor powers, neither the present nor the future, neither height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Is this “treasure in heaven” worth some small renunciation, to deny ourselves and all that is dear to us in the world? Or is there anything in the world that, either for the individual soul or for the whole congregation of God, can outweigh the blessedness of being able to appropriate this word:

“Do not fear, little flock;

for your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom”?

10 Epiphany: Not by might and not by power, but by my Spirit

Matthew 12:15–21. And great crowds followed him, and he healed them all. And he strictly charged them not to make him known, in order that what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled, who says: Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved in whom my soul delights; I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not extinguish, until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the nations will hope.

Jesus had his own quiet manner of working while he walked here on earth in the days of his flesh. He was a king who had come to establish the kingdom of God and to spread it over the whole earth. He was to conquer the world and bring it under himself. Yet he advanced in an entirely different way from all other kings and conquerors. He did not march at the head of an army; he did not raise a people to an outward struggle for freedom. Around him there resounded neither the raw cries of triumph of victorious warriors, nor the lament of the defeated, the groans of the wounded, the pitiful wailing of the dying. Nor was he the great ecclesiastical prince who gathered around himself the great and small ambitions of the church and by their help advanced his own cause and that of his church.

According to our text, Jesus' way was wholly different from the way of the world and of the worldly church. And since Jesus' way is the only right way both in the individual soul and in the congregation and its mission, it is all the more necessary to heed it, the rarer it is that it is actually trodden by those who wish to be Jesus' disciples and followers.

Jesus works this way: he uses his divine power to help those who truly need it. He does not seek his own honor through his miraculous works. Nor does he seek to satisfy the honor-seeking and vain Jews who waited for the Messiah with such carnal impatience, because through him they hoped to attain the fulfillment of their earthly expectations. Jesus walks the path that leads him to the cross, that incites the Jews against him, but that makes him a Savior for all who labor and are burdened, all who are poor in spirit, all who hunger and thirst for righteousness. For him, everything comes down to this: he will not break the bruised reed or snuff out the smoldering wick.

Think only what victories Jesus could have won if he had called legions of angels to his aid and with them struck down his enemies! Think what enthusiasm and jubilation he could have awakened among the Jews if he had placed himself at their head in the struggle against their oppressors! Think what a jubilant multitude of friends would have followed him if he had grasped earthly power and distributed lands and offices and riches and temporal pleasures to his followers! Think how quickly he could have stretched his scepter over the nations if it had merely been a matter of dominion!

But behold, the greatness of the earth and the glory of the world were far too small for him; and the perishable joy that the world gives was too paltry a gift for his disciples. He would

not bow down to the god of this world to gain its kingdoms; nor could he allow his followers to become slaves of the world. He had come to destroy the dominion of the devil, not to fortify it. He had come to free souls, not to enslave them.

Therefore he went forward in a way altogether different from what the Jews desired; therefore his way was so unlike the way of the world. He wished to give God's salvation in human hearts and eternal life in their souls; he did not wish to delude them with an empty appearance and a continual earthly enjoyment. Therefore he did not step forth in dazzling splendor, nor did he gather around himself the great and rich and learned and righteous and esteemed, so that such respect might surround him and his following that the wretched, miserable sinners would have to shrink back in fear and shame and hide themselves from this glorious one and his proud retinue. Had Jesus chosen what was esteemed in the world and exalted among human beings, had he allied himself with the self-righteous Pharisees, then he would also have driven back into sin and despair the poor, struggling souls who longed for true righteousness and for God's peace and joy.

Jesus healed them all, says our text; yet at the same time he strictly commanded them not to make him known. He so willingly wished to help; he did not wish thereby to win any honor among human beings. He wished to save; he did not wish to awaken any earthly zeal and fanaticism. He wished to exercise divine mercy toward souls; he did not wish to gather a party against those who said that his work was of the devil. If poor sinners were truly to benefit from his mercy, they must not become vain partisans who boasted in an earthly way of their great leader. Therefore Jesus proceeds in the Spirit of God, and with the most inward tenderness he bends down and raises up the bruised reed and blows upon the smoldering wick, that the blossom may live and the fire burn.

This is the true power, which alone is great enough to save. For this love and Spirit of God alone are mighty to give human hearts true joy and real blessedness. Therefore it is this inner, hidden power of Christ's death and resurrection that alone effects the salvation of a soul and the spread of God's kingdom to the ends of the world. Therefore Jesus' course is so quiet; therefore the working of his Spirit is so mighty. Therefore he is the true glory of Israel and the true light of the nations. Therefore he casts down the pride of the mighty; therefore he lifts up the lowly from the dust.

Jesus' way is always good. And it is the only way that is good for our souls. Every soul that wishes to experience his salvation must walk this way of his. It is a way of lowliness and humiliation; yet there is no one who can truly become a partaker of God's glory unless he becomes like the bruised reed and the smoldering wick, an object of the inward mercy of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ. The soul's way to life and salvation passes through the painful experience of one's own sin, one's own unworthiness, and one's own inability.

So long as a human being lives in his own power and seeks his own honor, greatness, happiness, and joy, he has not yet entered upon Jesus' way. For all their contempt for the Pharisees, such people are nevertheless very much Pharisees themselves. They do not wish to hear of Jesus; they do not need his grace; they help themselves. And just as they despise grace, so they also despise those who need grace and seek grace with Jesus. They have no thought for the bruised reed and the smoldering wick; they despise such things; they believe in strength and

ability; what is weak and sick and fearful and suffering is, in the opinion of these capable and powerful people, of no value. It is not viable, so let it die. That is the cold, Pharisaic wisdom of the world; there is nothing in it of Jesus' love and God's truth. Unless God bends such people's greatness and pride, they will, with all their ability and righteousness, nevertheless have no share in the kingdom of God.

If we are to enter upon Jesus' way, the way of life and salvation, then we must through a painful experience of our own inability descend into the valley of humility, in order to walk there and remain there. For only those who walk there are on the right way to heavenly glory. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. But when a human being experiences his sin, his unworthiness, his inability; when he is made to taste what it is to struggle to become righteous by his own power and cannot become so; when he is made to taste what it is to labor to attain honor before God and is continually put to shame; when he breaks all his strength in the struggle against death and condemnation and yet accomplishes absolutely nothing—then he truly becomes a bruised reed and a smoldering wick. Then the proud head is bowed, then the ambitious eye is lowered, then a human being collapses, and he is worth nothing and worthy of nothing in the world; but then, in all his unworthiness, he is an object of the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

A father has a child who possesses the whole love of his soul, and it is to him dearer than the world and heaven and God and all. If such a child is laid upon a sickbed and sinks quietly and unceasingly into the arms of death, and the father sets everything into motion to fight the unequal battle and to conquer the creeping illness and the threatening death, how will it look in the despairing father's heart when the final hour comes for the beloved child, and it closes its eyes for the last time, and no earthly love can accomplish anything more for it? It is a picture of the soul that strives for eternal life by its own strength—and fails. It is a bruised reed. But Jesus does not break it; he has healing for the wounded soul, he has salvation and life for the crushed human being. His grace shall save a sinner, and his mercy shall bind up the wounds of the heart.

Friend, if you have entered upon this way of Jesus, then walk upon it! Remain in the valleys of humility and persist in poverty of spirit. And if you then continually feel yourself to be a bruised reed, then know that the Lord has a loving Spirit and hand, and that he takes pleasure in saving where it is impossible for human beings.

Jesus' way is the same also with his congregation and within his congregation. He does not intend to make it great in the eyes of the world; nor does he wish it to become great in its own eyes. God's congregation is the people who walk with Jesus and are healed by him. And even if they are many, the Lord nevertheless wills that they should not boast of their great number and think that therein lies their strength. The congregation's way is only then the right way when the congregation walks in Jesus' footsteps and does not seek to draw to itself the great unconverted multitude of the world by its visible greatness and power, but much more has the mind of Christ, which has compassion upon the bruised reed and the smoldering wick.

If we are to be the body of Christ, then we must follow our head. "He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets." It was not Christ's way to seek outward

exaltation and worldly power. By such means he could indeed force the world to pay him homage as a mighty lord, but he could not compel the salvation of a single soul. What does all the greatness of the world avail, if we lack the Spirit of Christ? But this is the mark of the Spirit of Christ: that we have his inward love, so that we seek what is lost, that it may be saved.

Away therefore with all ambition and vanity in our congregational work! Away with the desire to glitter in the pulpit, away with the desire to be foremost in the congregation! Away with laboring to become a great congregation without the Spirit of Christ! Let us follow Jesus in his inward love's self-sacrificing work for the raising up of fallen human beings, for the salvation and blessedness of poor sinners.

Jesus' way is the true way of mission. All the armies and navies of the world together can accomplish nothing for the salvation of the nations. All the merchant fleets of the world and all its means of communication can accomplish nothing to give the nations hope of eternal life. If culture and civilization are never so loud and boastful, over against the darkness and despair of paganism they stand powerless. It is only Christianity that can enter into this black night full of devilry and misery and, with the Spirit of Christ and the light of the gospel, seek out the lost souls in order to show them the way and give them life.

Not by might and not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord, shall the work be done.

God's kingdom in the individual soul, in the building up of the congregation, in the work of mission, is always advanced in the one and same way. The Spirit of the Lord, who without worldly greatness and outward glory heals the wounds of souls, creates life, imparts love, and makes hearts glad in the Lord, is the hidden power that drives the blessed work which from day to day brings us nearer to the goal: the gospel of the kingdom shall be preached to all nations, and then the end shall come.

Do not aspire to the high things, but keep to the lowly; let Christ's humble and unassuming way, with its healing power for sick and wounded souls, with the world's proud contempt and bitter hatred, but with God's blessed promises of eternal joy and glory, be our way, and we shall one day reach the point of seeing the King in his beauty and all God's children in their blessedness.

Amen.

11 First Sunday after Epiphany: Let the little children come to me

Mark 10:13–16. And they brought little children to him, that he should touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them: Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you: whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall never enter it. And he took them in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Late one evening a man found a little child outside his house that had wandered off and could not find its way home by itself. The child could not tell where it belonged, but nevertheless bore a mark by which the man discovered where it belonged. But it was too late to bring it home that night.

What did he do with the child?

Perhaps he acted like the man the apostle James speaks of and said: “My dear child, go bravely out into the dark night; the Lord will surely lead you safely to your mother, if it is his will. Go on!”

Or perhaps he said: “I have no room in my house, and my wife is frail; I will set the child down at my neighbor’s door, ring the bell, and go my way. He can take care of the child; he has better means and more time than I.”

Or did he take the child to the police station and let the authorities see to bringing the child to its rightful mother?

No, this man did none of these things. He had read and learned a little about the merciful Samaritan. He took the weeping and helpless child into his house; his wife cared for it, spoke kindly to it, and wiped away its tears.

“Lie down now and sleep peacefully,” she said; “early tomorrow morning you shall come to your mother.”

And the child slept sweetly through the whole night and found its mother the next morning, who had almost been beside herself with anguish over the lost child.

Did the man not act rightly? And if he had acted otherwise, knowing to whom the child belonged, would he not have been worse than a wild beast?

Now then, father and mother, do you not also have a child — perhaps several — and do you not know to whom they belong? Are they not among those of whom Jesus says that “such belong to me”?

What then have you done to lead your child to Jesus?

I do not ask what you have done so that your child might fare well in the world.

Nor do I ask whether you have often wished: “If only my child might be saved!”

Let the frivolous flatter and deceive one another with their frivolity. I ask you in earnest: What have you done — to lead your child to him whom you know it belongs to, and who is more than a mother to it, yes — who has marked it and made it his own in the holy water of baptism; — what have you done, so that your child might come to Jesus? What have you done in the short time it was entrusted to you, from evening to morning — a little, short child-life?

Oh, surely you have not hindered it? — It would be too dreadful even to think.

To hinder a poor little child from coming home again to its mother — its Jesus!

And yet the Lord himself says: “Do not hinder them!”

Then it must indeed be possible — to hinder.

Father and mother, could the terrible thing have happened, that you have hindered your own child — humanly speaking, your own flesh and blood — from coming back to its rightful Lord and Father, Jesus, who has acquired a right to it by his own precious blood?

Oh no, not hindered?

You lie down and rise up without Jesus in your thoughts or on your lips. The child lies down and rises up, and Jesus becomes a stranger both to its thoughts and to its speech.

Is that to hinder?

At the midday table in a hotel, a son sitting beside his father was asked by the waiter what he would like to drink. “The same as my dad,” he said. The father looked at the waiter and then at the son. “Give me water,” he said.

For the first time in his life he truly felt the meaning and the heavy, incalculable responsibility of being an example.

Have you given your child a bad example? That is to hinder.

A harsh and unfeeling word, a heated and reckless act, an unforgiving or frivolous utterance or deed in your own house — where many often make use of a self-indulgent freedom — has often dug a grave of offense for your own child, so that it did not come to Jesus.

But even if you have not hindered your child — and who can lift the first stone? — you have still not come far in leading a child to Jesus.

“Let them come to me,” that is, work, strive, pray night and day that your child may reach where it belongs, that it may be saved.

Father and mother, what have you done?

Have you entrusted to your neighbors, or perhaps to society, the task of raising your child for heaven? There are Sunday schools and weekday schools where religion is taught; if someone sends his child there, is that all one is obligated to do for one’s child’s — immortal soul?

Oh, how heartless!

Was this what the Lord meant when he said: “Let the little children come to me” — that we should send them to religious school, and that be the end of it?

There you see a mother in the evening kneeling by her child’s bed. The small hands are folded and lifted upward. The little heart beats in blessed joy at the thought of heaven and Jesus, whom the mother has so often painted with the bright colors of faith, and to whom they now pray together.

That is what a mother has been granted grace to do.

The father takes the children in his arms, sings with them, tells of God’s wondrous deeds among his people, and lifts their gaze from what is passing to the imperishable above. The children ask and answer, so that one is often compelled to marvel. It is as though they were truly like Jesus in the temple, having come onto their own field, into their rightful house, when they speak of the “home” up there.

This is what every single father can do, in order to lead his child to Jesus.

And no one must say: “I cannot; I have no ability to teach children,” for then he must at the same time confess that he does not love Jesus.

It is not outward ability or lofty learning that matters.

There are two things that are required, in order to become leaders of one’s children to Jesus.

They are: first, to know and love the Savior oneself; second, to love and esteem the children.

Many do not esteem children higher than things or animals, which they would make Christian by coercion or beating.

Praise be to the Lord, that Jesus esteems both us and the children more highly, and loves us and draws us to himself with deep patience and mercy. Let everyone remember how the Lord has led him; in that way shall he lead his children.

“Let them come to me and do not hinder them!”

Others again do not esteem children as dearly entrusted treasures. They regard them more as a kind of personal possession, a sort of luxury and toy, from which they can draw purely human pleasure and satisfaction.

Rabbi Meir had two sons whom he loved above all earthly things, and a godly wife. One day, while he was in the synagogue, the two sons suddenly died. The mother had them carried up into the upper room, and with a compressed heart laid a cloth over them. The Lord made her strong.

When Meir came home, the wife asked whether one is not always obligated to return what has been entrusted. Meir looked sternly at his wife. “Can my wife ask such a thing?” he said.

Then she gently took him by the hand, led him upstairs, and showed him the two bodies.

“That was the dearest thing the Lord had entrusted to us,” she whispered; “now he has demanded them back.”

Tears ran quietly down the old rabbi's cheeks; but he thanked God, because the children had come safely home.

For this reason children are entrusted to us — that we should lead them home to Jesus.

If this were always clear and alive before us, what children there would be! and what a new generation to bear God's congregation and its message of salvation to the ends of the world!

“Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them!”

12 Second Sunday after Epiphany: Zacchaeus

Luke 19:1–10. And he entered and passed through Jericho. And behold, there was a man called Zacchaeus, and he was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was short. And he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and noticed him and said to him: Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for today it is necessary for me to stay at your house. And he hurried and came down and received him with joy. And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying: He has gone in to lodge with a sinful man. But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord: Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone by deceit, I restore it fourfold. And Jesus said to him: Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,” it is written; and of Zacchaeus it is written: “And he was a chief tax collector and was rich.”

It was not easy for Zacchaeus. Everything seemed to stand in the way of his salvation. In every respect he appeared to be far from the kingdom of God, and all doors seemed shut.

He was a tax collector; and these despised men, who had taken service with the Romans—how could they hope to share in Israel’s promised inheritance? Had not the tax collectors done as Esau and sold their birthright for a dish of food? In Roman gold and bread they sucked and cheated their countrymen and grew rich by plundering the poor Israelites. Truly, they had forfeited all right to Israel’s glorious promise, to the kingdom of God which the Messiah brought. If Jesus was truly the Messiah, then there was little prospect of help for Zacchaeus with him.

Zacchaeus was a man of high standing. His high office was a new hindrance to him. “Not many mighty, not many noble are called,” it is written. People of high rank and position are often too great and too proud to inquire after Jesus of Nazareth. Often they are also too busy to set aside time to seek the Savior of the soul. And here in Jericho the coming of Jesus was accompanied by such a commotion among the “common people,” such a crowd gathered, that it was utterly beneath Zacchaeus’s dignity to have anything to do with the matter. Had Jesus been a refined and noble philosopher, it would have been another thing; then the crowd would have stayed at home, and Zacchaeus could have had him to himself as an honored guest. But out on the street, in the midst of the crowd, Zacchaeus had to seek him if he would find him.

Zacchaeus was rich; and his wealth had been acquired in a bad and ignoble way, as is often the case. This was almost the greatest hindrance. What had the rich man to gain from the poor one? What more was there for Zacchaeus to desire than money, the “almighty” money?

But Zacchaeus was not satisfied or content. There burned a fire within him that gave him

no rest. He had to, he had to see Jesus. Let it cost what it would, and let it be the same whether it helped or did not help; he would see him in spite of everything.

And Zacchaeus did see Jesus; but it was a hard struggle for him. The little eager man cared nothing for mockery and scornful words; the distinguished tax collector cared nothing for the pressure and shouting and laughter of the crowd; the rich man found no satisfaction in his riches. He tried to force his way through the crowd to Jesus, but could not; he ran ahead, climbed up into a sycamore tree, and there he sat, anxiously watching for Jesus who was to pass by.

And Jesus passed by and saw Zacchaeus. Just as Zacchaeus had thought of Jesus, so Jesus had also thought of him. Or how could anyone seek to see Jesus, and Jesus not seek to meet the seeker? Can longing burn in a human heart for the Savior, and his longing of love not be kindled? Oh no; he seeks those who seek him. He will meet those who inquire after him.

And therefore there is a blessed meeting. That Zacchaeus sees Jesus is not yet enough; but that Jesus also sees Zacchaeus and enters his house—that is the main thing. And who can describe or explain the joy that is in such a meeting with Jesus? It is impossible, because human language can scarcely express the human feelings that move a heart; but it is powerless before the divine movements that shake a person's inmost being when a new heart is created and a new spirit within him. Small and poor images of it may be found in the joy that earthly love can produce in a human soul; but the joy of finding Jesus and tasting his love, of belonging to him and being born again, is not only infinitely greater, but also of an entirely different kind and nature. As heaven is higher than the earth, so Jesus' love is higher than earthly love, and the joy in him higher than all the joy of the earth.

Therefore it is not strange that Zacchaeus “hurried and came down and received him with joy.” Like a fresh living spring for the thirsty, so were Jesus' words and love for Zacchaeus's soul. He was born again; he was a son of Abraham.

But people did not know it; only Jesus' eye saw what was taking place in the tax collector's heart. Therefore the onlookers murmured and said: “He has gone in to lodge with a sinful man.”

Yes indeed, “a sinful man”; and blessed and praised be the Lord for it. He has come to “seek and to save the lost.” Here he has found a lost sinner. In this lies all our comfort; on this we build all our hope: the Son of Man lodges with “a sinful man.” And yet no longer “a sinful man.” Now that he has found Jesus, and Jesus has found him, now the great change has taken place; now he is converted, now he is born again and has become a son of Abraham, an heir of the promise, with free access to the kingdom of God.

For the meeting with Jesus has opened his heart, so that he says: “Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone by deceit, I restore it fourfold.”

This is the language of repentance and love. He does not deny that he is a sinful man; he confesses that there is unjust property in his hands; but now, since Jesus has entered his house, he will hasten to be rid of it. Unrighteous mammon and Jesus, the friend and Savior

of sinners, do not belong together. And not only will he give up all unjust property, but he will restore it fourfold and thus cause joy where he previously caused sorrow and bitter pain. Truly he is a converted man, a son of Abraham through faith. The friend of the poor, the helper of the oppressed has he become—he, the tax collector, the deceiver, the bloodsucker.

“The sinful man” is no longer a sinful man.

What do you think now? If this is how a sinner is saved, how is it then with you and me? How is it with our rich men, who have gathered riches unjustly and who perhaps for the sake of their riches are highly esteemed in the congregations? Where is the poor man’s half, or has anyone heard of the one who was defrauded receiving fourfold back from the deceiver? Alas, there are surely not many like Zacchaeus. We so gladly comfort ourselves with the thought that Jesus is “the friend of tax collectors and sinners”; we so gladly rejoice that he “lodges with a sinful man.” But what does it help if Jesus’ friendship does not make us new people, with the love of God poured out in our hearts?

Let us then awaken in earnest and seek Jesus until we find him and he finds us, so that there may be new birth, a new heart, a new mind, and a new way of life, so that we too may become children of Abraham and heirs according to the promise. Behold, the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost!

Friend, has he also found and saved you?

13 Third Sunday after Epiphany: A Teaching with Authority

Mark 1:21–35. And they went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. And they were greatly astonished at his teaching; for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Be silent, and come out of him. And the unclean spirit convulsed him, and cried with a loud voice, and came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him. And immediately his fame spread throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee. And immediately they left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and raised her up; and the fever left her, and she served them. And at evening, when the sun had set, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a solitary place, and there he prayed.

It is especially the first two and the last verse of this text that we shall here consider. Between them lies the account of how Jesus cast out “an unclean spirit,” healed Peter's mother-in-law, and—after the report of him had spread throughout all Galilee—how in the evening the whole city of Capernaum was gathered at his door, and he healed many sick and possessed among them.

On the one side, the people's impression of Jesus' teaching and work: they were greatly astonished, they were all filled with awe—it was a “new doctrine”; he taught as one who has authority, and “not as the scribes.”

On the other side, the Son of God, the Son of Man, in his humble rest and childlike devotion to God, his Father: he “went to a solitary place and prayed there.”

“Doctrine with authority” and “prayer”!

“Out of the mouth of infants and nursing children you have prepared praise,” was Jesus' answer when the chief priests and scribes complained that the children greeted him with Hosanna in the temple. Children sometimes know Jesus better than scribes.

The people who heard Jesus' discourses and saw his signs received an impression such as they had never received from the sermons of the scribes. Was this because the latter taught false doctrine? The Lord himself says (Matt. 23:2–3): “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on

Moses' seat; therefore do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do; for they say, but do not do."

Their doctrine was therefore correct enough, but their heart was not in their words; their words were sound in teaching, yet at the same time only sounding brass and a clanging cymbal, because they lacked the love that is poured into hearts by the Holy Spirit of God. Their preaching was indeed both thorough and well supported by passages of the Law, but it was barren and powerless, because it lacked the force of personal conviction. It did not come from the heart and did not go to the heart.

It was otherwise with Jesus. He not only taught rightly according to the Law, but he also revealed its spiritual content; for he had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17). He was not only led by the Holy Spirit of God; he had "the Spirit without measure" and was one with God himself. His words were not merely the fruit of his personal conviction; rather, his person and his words were one—he himself was the Word, just as his person itself was the Way and the Truth and the Life.

Therefore his words made such a mighty impression on the people that they said, "Never has a man spoken like this man" (John 7:46); "he spoke as one who had authority." The words from Jesus' mouth passed like a two-edged sword through their consciences, and when they saw the unclean spirits depart at his command, they were all terrified and asked one another: "What is this new doctrine?"—a teaching with authority and force.

But when the crowds had been gathered around him to receive relief and healing from his gentle and mighty hand also for their bodily diseases, he withdrew in the solitude of the night in order to renew his strength through childlike and intimate fellowship with his Father in heaven. **There he found the strength that made his words a doctrine with authority—there he daily sought new power for the great conflict he was to undergo with him who had the power of death, and to gain the power "to deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage," and "to save completely those who come to the Father through him." This is the true "doctrine with authority"; it comes from Jesus' intimate filial relationship with the Father.**

"Do not rejoice in this," says the Lord to the returning seventy disciples, "that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20).

The great miracle is not that unclean spirits are cast out, that the sick are healed, or that the dead are raised bodily; the great miracle occurs when a soul is saved by the blood of Jesus, and the angels in heaven also rejoice greatly when "one sinner repents." Therefore the Lord also says to his disciples: "Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and he will do greater works than these, because I go to the Father" (John 14:12).

What works are greater than those Jesus did? It is to proclaim Christ crucified and risen, a Savior for sinners. For this cannot take place until Jesus on the one hand has truly died and been raised, and on the other hand has sent someone his Holy Spirit to carry out his work.

Therefore he also says: "It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you" (John 16:7).

Without the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, there is therefore no one who can be a true disciple and perform the greatest of all works, to proclaim salvation through the blood of Jesus, “not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor. 2:4); for without the Holy Spirit no one knows Jesus, the Son, since “no one can call Jesus Lord except by the Holy Spirit.” And without that same Spirit no one knows God, the Father; for only by this Spirit can we cry, “Abba, Father!” Only by this Spirit can we have that childlike, intimate, heartfelt fellowship with God which the Son himself had, and which is called prayer. In such a daily and unceasing life of prayer, a child of God finds the power by which he can do greater works than these, namely the love of God that is poured into the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit,

so that for Jesus’ sake and in his stead they are ready to go out into the wilderness and seek the lost sons and daughters, and on the strong shoulders of the Gospel carry them home to the Father’s house.

Therefore no one can carry on a true and living proclamation of the Gospel unless he himself through faith has become one with Jesus Christ, made a partaker in the power of his death and resurrection, and with him a son in the Father’s house, so that in the anointing and conviction of the Holy Spirit he can testify to what he himself has seen and heard.

But if someone in such unity of faith and Spirit with the Father and the Son boldly preaches the Gospel to the poor—let it be that “his body is weak and his speech mediocre”—then he shall experience that the Lord is today and yesterday, yes, to all eternity the same; that his power, which with a word drove out evil spirits, dwells in him; and that his strength is perfected in weakness. And when such a messenger in Christ’s stead, in heartfelt love, pursues souls and in unceasing prayer cries out for their salvation and daily humbles himself in the dust before the living God, then the same testimony shall meet him from the mouth of the people as once met the Lord himself:

“You speak as one who has authority, and not as the scribes.”

Brothers and sisters, should we not pray to God that this “doctrine with authority” may become more and more the reigning one among us, in all congregations and in all lands?

14 Fourth Sunday after Epiphany: In Faith and in Doubt

Matthew 14:22–33: And immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. But the boat was already far out on the sea, distressed by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus came to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified and said, “It is a ghost,” and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take courage; I am here. Do not be afraid.”

And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” And Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat fell before him and said, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

This narrative sets before us the apostles of Jesus in the hard and yet blessed school of the cross, as a pattern for the disciples of Jesus and for his followers and servants in all times.

Jesus had revealed his divine power by feeding five thousand men, besides women and children, with five loaves and two fish. The twelve apostles had been his willing, obedient, and believing instruments in that great miracle. And the people had become glad and uplifted when they received food in the wilderness in a wondrous manner, just as ancient Israel in the days of Moses.

Then enthusiasm arose among the people; a jubilant murmur ran through the assembly: He is the prophet who is to come; him we will have as king. And did not the twelve also feel a blessed rapture at their Master’s glorious self-revelation, and at the same time a secret joy in observing the powerful impression that Jesus’ work had made upon the people? So do we often rejoice when we see something similar of God’s work, and when it seems to us that now it goes well, now many are being won for Jesus, now all the people are gathering around him.

There was faith among the twelve at this moment; therefore Jesus wanted them to depart from the people, lest the people’s carnal enthusiasm should become a temptation and a fall for them. Therefore he also willed that they should be separated from him outwardly, so that they might learn to believe without seeing. Therefore “he immediately compelled them to get into the boat and go over to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.” He himself wished to be alone to pray for the people and for the twelve, who each in his own way were placed in a dangerous and difficult situation, that it might yet be granted them to understand the Lord’s meaning with the great miracle.

The twelve apostles set out upon the sea according to the Lord’s command. Alone in the

darkness of the night they were to row over to the other side. It was not far, and the men were accustomed to the sea; there seemed to be no danger at all. Nevertheless it became for them a peculiar trial. For the twelve found themselves in that distinctive state of mind which the miracle and the people's enthusiasm had produced, a half-spiritual, half-carnal uplift, in which they felt as though everything must yield, and as though all obstacles must give way, since now the kingdom of God was coming with power, and they were to be its bearers under the leadership of Jesus.

Jesus saw that they needed to be tested. Therefore he sent them out alone against the storm, which he himself had caused, and they labored and toiled the whole night against wind and waves, and yet made almost no progress. It was a hard night after a long day, when the work had not felt heavy because they had been borne by spirit and faith, but which had nevertheless wearied them with that kind of exhaustion that is felt doubly when the tension is over and the miracle's excitement has faded. And when they were in the middle of the sea, the boat was in danger, and the hearts of the disciples were discouraged and fearful. Darkness and storm, labor and the raging waves had taken away the festive mood, and there was not much left of their courage and faith.

But Jesus, who was upon the mountain in prayer for them, saw them in their distress and came to their aid. Yet he used his own way and manner. They were to reach the place to which he had sent them, but they were not to reach the goal without him. If they had trusted at all in their own strength when they began the journey across the sea without having Jesus in the boat, they had now learned their own weakness. And now Jesus came to them in a new miracle: he came walking on the sea. Then icy fear seized them, and the Savior who came to help them became for them a ghost, which foretold death rather than their salvation. But Jesus spoke kindly to them and said, "Take courage; I am here. Do not be afraid." Thus it was he himself who came; there was the Lord, there was the Savior, there was the friendly helper who came, he who had watched over them with fatherly love and who was ready to help with divine power. In the hour of weakness he himself was near to them with miraculous power.

Then Peter's faith awakened with overflowing strength: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He thought that he too would take part in this miracle, as he had taken part in the miracle of the feeding. And the Lord, who rejoiced in his faith and wished that he should gain more experience, said to him, "Come."

And indeed, the incredible happens: Peter steps out of the boat; he who just before had been afraid, though he had the boat between himself and the water, now walks out upon the raging sea to come to Jesus. At first it goes well. The sea bears him—no, faith bears him upon the sea; but then Peter looks at the sea and the waves, and as his gaze leaves Jesus, fear again slips into his heart, and with fear, doubt; faith no longer bears him, and he sinks into the angry waves.

But Peter is not to go under. He is given time to utter the cry of distress: "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus takes his hand and leads him safely into the boat and says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Then the storm subsided outwardly and inwardly, upon the sea and in the hearts, and with holy trembling all in the boat fell down before the mighty

Savior and said, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

As the little boat upon the Sea of Galilee with the precious band of disciples on board, so is the Church of God upon earth since Jesus has ascended and is no longer visibly present among his believers. The world into which Jesus has sent them, while he himself has gone to the Father, is a hostile world. Dark and threatening as the storm cloud in the west at evening stood the black, thick paganism against which the Lord sent the disciples when he commanded them to go out into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. And it was not long before apostles and evangelists came to experience that “the wind was against them,” and that there was toil and struggle with the spiritual hosts of wickedness under heaven, which enlisted princes and kings on earth into their service in order to crush and annihilate the little Church of God.

But in this distress of the Church there is continually this blessed consolation for all God’s true and genuine children and for all sincere workers, that Jesus is in prayer for them with the Father; he watches the little struggling host; and when distress rises to its highest point, and faith is on the verge of yielding to doubt, then he himself comes near, walking over the surging and roaring sea of the peoples of the world; and when human wickedness lifts itself high and seems as though it would crush the Church, then at that very moment the Lord reveals himself and brings help to the terrified in their need. Thus the death of the martyrs is both the world’s threat and at the same time a blessed testimony of the Lord’s nearness; and through the firmness of stones and the flames of the pyres sounds his own loving voice: “Take courage; I am here; do not be afraid.”

And when again and again the servants of the Lord have ventured forth against the violent passions of human hearts, both within the Church and among the pagans, then they have indeed had to repeat Peter’s experience, that they sank whenever they looked away from the Lord and toward the many difficulties; but no one who has tried to raise the cry of distress like Peter, “Lord, save me!” has cried in vain. The Lord has heard also the cry of the one of little faith—yes, of the doubting one—and immediately helped and spoken the reproving and yet blessedly consoling word: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Why? In truth you have no reason for doubt if your situation is like Peter’s. If it is at the Lord’s command that you walk upon the sea, then pay heed only to the Lord’s command and the Lord’s eye, which so kindly follows you the whole time while you are placed in such great danger. And above all, if you feel that you are beginning to sink, then do not neglect, even in the very moment of doubt, to cry out to your Savior, and behold, he will immediately stretch out his hand to you and hold you up.

There are so many fearful souls among us who walk so timidly and therefore so close to sinking. They see resistance all around them, and they feel doubt and discouragement and unworthiness within themselves. Hear the voice of Jesus: “Do not be afraid; only believe!” “You of little faith, why do you doubt?” Jesus, who has commanded us to walk in the world with his testimony against the world, nevertheless sees all our path and all our danger, and he sees no reason why we should doubt. If we see something that frightens us, it is because we see too low and too short; we do not look high enough up to the Lord, nor far enough forward to the glory with God.

“I live, and you shall live,” says Jesus to his believers. Amid the many dangers and great hardships of the wilderness journey, let us hold fast to the invisible one as though we saw him. And even if we are led in strange ways through storm and calm, let us hold fast to the faithful Savior’s hand, which is stretched out to us through the dark storm clouds that seem to close heaven entirely over us. And if we should even let go of his supporting hand for a moment, so that we come to know that we sink unless he holds us up, then let us remember that such experience is beneficial for us, so that we may once again learn the ancient cry of distress: Lord, save us! Amen.

15 Fifth Sunday after Epiphany: The Seed that Grows

Mark 4:26–29. And he said: This is how it is with the kingdom of God: when a man casts seed into the ground and sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows, though he himself does not know how. For the earth bears fruit of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the fruit is ripe, he immediately swings the sickle, because the harvest is at hand.

There are three things this parable presses upon the heart concerning the kingdom of God:

1. That the seed, that is, the life of God in us, grows and must grow; 2. That the power for this growth is not our own power; and 3. That this growth has a conclusion and a final goal.

These are truths that touch the very foundation of the life of God, and without whose inward and daily recognition and embrace life, both in the individual and in the congregation, will wither and die. For just as it is said: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather scatters,” so it is also true that what does not grow withers, and the one who does not go forward in grace and faith goes backward and falls away.

The seed of which the Lord speaks is life through the Word of God. “You have been born again,” says Peter, “not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God.” Faith is therefore not mere intellectual assent that leaves the heart untouched, nor is it a moral striving to live outwardly respectable and devout; faith is a heavenly seed, a new life created by the Spirit of God in a heart hungry for salvation, as the Lord himself says: “Unless you are born again, you can neither see the kingdom of God nor enter the kingdom of God; for what is born of the flesh is flesh, and only what is born of the Spirit is spirit,” and: “As many as believe in him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

If the grain of wheat that is laid in the ground does not after some time come up, it is because it was dead, without germinating power. But if it is a living seed, then it will indeed lie some days unseen in the ground, yet it is at work there, drawing nourishment from the soil, and soon pushes up out of the earth, despite all hindrances, as a fresh green shoot which, though not always quickly, gradually brings forth blade, ear, and full grain, and promises the sower fruit and joy.

So it is with the seed of faith in a human heart. It may indeed for a time seem hidden from the eyes of other people, but not forever; otherwise it is dead and useless. If it is of the right kind—if it is born of God—then in its time, whether you understand it or not, it goes to work within the hidden depths of a person, sanctifies them, permeates them with its divine life, and finally, and not too long thereafter, breaks forth, despite the resistance of the flesh and the world, as a fair and fresh planting of God, so that all may see and know that something new and divine has taken place here, a great miracle of God. The one who stole, the one who drank, the one who sought all his joy in the world and mocked God and his gospel does so no longer; the one who was proud, self-centered, hateful, slanderous, greedy, is so no more, but loves people and praises God in word and deed. Is it so with you, O soul?

And yet it is not enough. Sun and drought may come, and the shoot wither, and that is worse than if it had never been planted. If the plant does not set leaves and ears, it cannot bear fully ripe fruit.

Thus the life of God in human hearts must grow and go forward, if it is not to wither and die. Here the Word of God contains so many earnest exhortations, not only to take up the whole armor of God, to fight and strive against the enemies, to renounce and suffer with Christ, but above all to be filled with the love of Christ and to practice it more and more, so that people may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. It is here that the children of God are often lukewarm and indifferent, as they take comfort in blessed memories from the first time of awakening and childhood, and forget to apply all diligence to bring forth into the open, in the power of faith, but also in power, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly love, and, as the crown of it all, love toward all, and to have these things in abundant measure and not remain idle or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, lest they become nearsighted, forgetting the cleansing from former sins, and thereby make firm both their calling and election and be preserved from falling (2 Peter 1).

A faith active in love is what God requires of us, so that we show mercy to the poor, the suffering, the helpless—not in word, but in deed—just as Christ has shown mercy to us, not with lofty and glorious speeches, but by giving his life for us; so we also are obligated to give our lives for the brothers, if our faith is not to die because it has no works (James 2).

This is the growth that is required, friend, if you are not to become unfruitful and cast out as a dry branch. But alas, you say, how shall I, so frail and powerless, be able to do these things, and if God requires this of me, how then can I be saved?

Alas, I say, how often do we not seek to slip away from God's holy demand by all manner of empty excuses about our weakness and great sinfulness and frailty!

If you meant it sincerely, you would say with Paul: "When I am weak, then I am strong." Your powerlessness to grow comes from this, that you seek the power for it in yourself instead of in him who gave birth to it in you, who cannot sin, he who laid the seed in you so that you received your life hidden with Christ in God and were made a partaker of the divine powers of eternal life, which were given to you undeservedly, without money and without payment, for the sake of Jesus Christ alone, and which therefore are called grace.

This is the power that brings the life of God in a human heart to grow and bear fruit, and this alone is the power. If you go daily in childlike faith to the fountains of grace, to Siloah's quietly flowing streams of the cross, then you shall become like "a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and whose leaf does not wither," and in all that you do you shall prosper, because it is done in God. It is God who works in us both to will and to do according to his good pleasure, and if I forget all that lies behind me and, emptied of all my own, let this power of grace work through the Holy Spirit in my heart, then you also, however small and disregarded you may be among people, may confess with Paul: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

If, then, there is no progress or growth in your life of God—no more inward fellowship with

God in prayer and in the knowledge of the Word, no stronger will to renounce your own and to confess Jesus in word and deed, however slowly it may go—then you must seek the cause not in any lack of love or patience on God’s part, but in your own unwillingness to give room in your heart to the power of his grace. There is danger that you grow lukewarm, become weary in the struggle, or find it less necessary, become indifferent about watching, or fall into spiritual pride and fleshly self-confidence. For the Lord will not only begin but also complete; the Lord does not grow weary or tired in his work of grace, and when your sin has abounded, grace has abounded all the more.

Therefore, when this happens to you, that there is stagnation or sluggishness in your spiritual growth, then first look within yourself and test whether you stand in the faith, then look upward toward heaven and toward the goal that has been set for you: to bear fruit for the harvest in its time.

For God has also given each individual human being a certain span of time—according to his own reckoning of time (2 Peter 3:8)—a time of grace in which he imparts the grace he has determined, and after which he requires the fruit which his gracious power, according to the measure allotted to each, can and shall bring forth. Then comes the day of reckoning, when it shall be rendered to us according to what has been done through the body, whether good or evil: for those who remain steadfast in the faith, eternal blessedness; for those who have squandered grace, eternal perdition: “When the fruit is ripe, he immediately swings the sickle, because the harvest is at hand.”

Therefore Paul says to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:5): “Be watchful in all things, endure suffering—fulfill your ministry,” and adds concerning himself: “I am already being poured out, and the time of my departure is at hand; I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course—and the crown of righteousness is laid up for me, and not only for me, but for all who have loved his appearing.” And in another place he says that he counts everything as nothing and does not even hold his life dear, in order that he may finish his course with joy—the course he compares to the marked-out distance that must be run on a racecourse, where only the one who finishes receives the prize.

This is something for each of us, and for every day, to take to heart:

Begun is not finished—

Mark this well:

You who know your Jesus,

Press on.

(Hans Adolph Brorson)

God will require a soul from us and has set a boundary of time when the account must be settled, sometimes swiftly as with the rich farmer—“Tonight you must die!”—sometimes somewhat extended—“Spare the tree yet one year!”—but always, humanly speaking, short: today, and for the great multitude of people, unexpected. The Lord will require fruit—the naked clothed, the hungry fed, the wretched comforted—so that he may say to you, humble and sincere as the one who is saved, because he knows it is all of grace: “See, this you have done to me, for you have done it to the least of my little ones.”

O friends, let us never lose sight of this holy and blessed goal; it hastens toward the end, and there is no time to waste. Let the power of God's grace through a childlike faith therefore be given great room in our hearts; let us daily examine ourselves thoroughly and see whether we have oil in our lamps—so that when the day comes, we may not, with shame, be left standing outside. For if the righteous, those justified by grace, are scarcely saved, how shall the ungodly, the lukewarm, the sluggish, the apostate come through?

16 Sixth Sunday after Epiphany: From Tabor to Golgotha

Matthew 17:1–9: Six days later Jesus took Peter and James and his brother John with him and led them apart, up onto a high mountain. And he was transfigured before their eyes, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah were seen by them, speaking with him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus: “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you will, we will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice came out of the cloud, saying: “This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased; listen to him!” And when the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. And Jesus came forward and touched them and said: “Rise, and do not be afraid.” And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus alone. And as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying: “Tell no one of this vision, until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.”

This was Christ’s course here on earth. And this is also every child of God’s path of pilgrimage in the land of exile.

But this is a great offense to flesh and blood.

For before the Lord went up onto the Mount of Transfiguration, he had begun to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and rise again on the third day.

The eager but uncomprehending Peter took offense. He likely thought that Jesus, for all his heavenly insight, did not truly understand earthly matters; that he saw everything in far too dark a light; that he went far too far, and so on, as such reasoning always goes.

At any rate, it is written of him that he took the Savior aside and even rebuked him.

Peter rebuked Jesus!

“Lord, spare yourself,” he said; “this shall never happen to you! You go too far in your zeal; you will ruin the whole cause for us.”

The Lord answered him as his fleshly misunderstanding deserved: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you do not set your mind on the things of God, but on the things of men.”

These were hard words, crushing words; and yet that was not all. It is not enough that I must suffer; you yourselves must also suffer, he says, and drink the same cup which I must drink.

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

This is the path laid out for a disciple of the Lord.

“For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

This is what a Christian must order his life by.

For what would it profit a person if he gained the whole world and forfeited his soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for his soul?

After such conversations and painful instruction, Jesus took three of his disciples, among them Peter, up onto the Mount of Transfiguration to meet the Lord's glory.

Jesus needed it, and the disciples needed it, for the heavy journey and struggle that lay ahead.

And it was indeed a blessed hour.

Jesus, a man like you and me, truly human, yet transformed, transfigured, glorified—his face shining like the sun and his garments white as the light—and the heaven-taken Moses and Elijah in his company, speaking with him!

What wonder that the disciples were terrified, overwhelmed, so that they did not know what they were saying, and that Peter therefore cried out: "It is good to be here; let us build dwellings!"

Peter possessed an excellent human understanding. What would bring his flesh and blood pain, he recognized from afar: "Lord, this shall never happen to you."

And what, on the other hand, let him glimpse the blessedness of heaven, he understood well enough must be seized at once, in order to avoid all future suffering and struggle. Then he would be proven right after all. "This shall never happen to you."

Therefore he said: "Rabbi, let us build dwellings here for you and Moses and Elijah."

But no. The Lord had said: "Get behind me, Satan! You set your mind on the things of men," because he could not avoid suffering if men were to be saved. The Transfiguration was not given in order to avoid the struggle, but in order to be strengthened for it—both for him and for the disciples.

Therefore a cloud came and overshadowed them, and a voice sounded: "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased; listen to him!"

That was the matter.

Not to avoid suffering and struggle, but to carry within them light in darkness, victory in struggle, life in death—that is why he took the disciples up onto the Mount of Transfiguration, and why the Lord's voice sounded: He—Jesus—the man who shall be rejected and suffer and die—he is my Son, the Son of God; look to him, listen to him! And there is no danger amid the deafening roar of storm and waves; he stretches out his hand, and each time you are rescued from the devouring deep.

"And suddenly, when they looked around, they saw no one anymore, but Jesus alone with them."

Thus the blessed hour of the Transfiguration was over.

From Tabor Jesus went down and set his face and his steps unwaveringly toward Jerusalem and Golgotha.

But in the hardest hour of the struggle, when the bloody sweat flowed, this was his strength: “You are my Son!”

And in the darkest hour of suffering, when he cried out: “My God, why have you forsaken me!” this was his light and victory: “You are my Beloved.”

And thus he overcame death and the devil, loosed the bonds of hell, and rose victorious with a transfigured body to sit at the right hand of the Father.

Peter had to walk the same path from Tabor to Golgotha. In the darkest hour, when he denied his Savior; in the deep hour of humiliation and testing, when the Lord answered his unfaithfulness with the tenderest mercy: “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?”—what was his strength and his restoration if not this: “Jesus is the Son of God,” the voice he had heard on the holy mountain. And at Pentecost, before the council, on the cross in Rome—what was his light and victory if not this:

“We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty; we heard the voice borne from heaven: ‘This is my Son.’” (2 Peter 1:16)

And so the apostle John testifies to the end: “We saw his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

So it is also with us. Every child of God has his Tabor—a blessed hour when, by the power of faith, he came to his Savior, saw the heavens opened and the Son of God shining like the sun at the Father’s side, and heard this blessed word from his mouth: “Your sins are forgiven,” and believed this blessed testimony from God’s mouth: “You are a child of God!” and learned to stammer “Abba!” and felt the whole blessedness of heaven flow through his heart. Oh, why did it last so briefly? Why could I not always remain on this mountain of blessedness?

One is always willing, gladly,
to go with him up onto Tabor;
but unwilling, at times, to step down
into the Garden, where he lay,
full of anguish, fear, and distress,
cried out, prayed, and sweat blood,
in order to save me and others—
that path one is reluctant to walk.

And yet, every child of God also has his Golgotha, his labor and his measure of pain; there he must go.

Here Peter’s understanding avails nothing: “This shall never happen to you!” Nor is there room for the desire to linger in blessed feelings and, with Peter, build one’s dwelling on the mountain.

Down you must go—unceasingly down—into the dark valley of death’s shadow, until God in

his time exalts you.

Here labor, struggle, and suffering are required; here you must serve as a soldier of Jesus Christ; here you must ‘fill up in your flesh what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church’ (Colossians 1:24)—and rejoice in it.

Here it is not only a matter of working out your own salvation with fear and trembling, under painful trials and heavy struggles with flesh and world and Satan: ‘Not my will, but yours be done!’ It is also a matter of working and fighting and suffering like Peter and Paul and all the other witnesses, for Christ’s body, which is the church: to be light and salt and leaven in the world, in small matters and great; to be an example, so that God’s name may not be blasphemed; to encourage, lift up, and draw souls to the Lord; to seek out the poor and help the helpless; to proclaim the Lord’s acceptable year—all under contradiction, under mockery, suspicion, slander—all for his sake who endured the torments of hell for us; and to do so with praise and thanks and song, that it has been granted to us not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for his sake.

Oh, how heavy a path! How many fall beneath the cross! How many are covered with gloom and darkness and have forgotten the light from Tabor! How many built their own Tabor and wallowed in the pleasure of their own feelings in order to avoid the path to Golgotha.

But praise be to the Lord: many went courageously into the struggle and held out faithfully. Many kept their eyes unwaveringly fixed on the footprints of Jesus and went where he went and were comforted with his comfort. And when the weary soldier at times was allowed to sit down by the way and drink from the brook (Psalm 110:7), then the heavenly radiance of Tabor came as a new light in the soul and a new strength on the path: “I have the testimony of God’s Spirit in my spirit, that I am a child of God. Abba! Father!”

Friend, are you among these faithful laborers, these obedient soldiers? You long? You grow weary? See, it is drawing toward evening, and the day is declining. Soon your time of service is ended. Look there—Golgotha and the cross! Now soon he comes, God’s blessed Son, whom you saw so livingly by faith in your holy and blessed hour of new birth; now he comes soon with the same power by which God raised him, to lead you also up over Golgotha’s dark hill of death to the heavenly Tabor, where he has prepared a dwelling for you, eternal and imperishable, where you shall live and reign with him forever.

Oh, such blessedness is well worth a journey from Tabor to Golgotha!

O Jesus, sweet,
My comfort in my need,
I pray to you in sorrow:
Help me, that until my death
I give my heart to you.

17 Septuagesima Sunday: Talents and Interest

Matthew 25:14–30. A man who was about to travel abroad called his servants and entrusted his property to them; and to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, each according to his ability, and immediately departed. Then the one who had received the five talents went away and traded with them and gained five more talents. In the same way, the one who had received the two gained two more. But the one who had received the one went away and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And the one who had received the five talents came forward and brought five more talents, saying, "Master, you entrusted me with five talents; see, I have gained five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." And the one who had received the two talents also came forward and said, "Master, you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." But the one who had received the one talent also came forward and said, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter; and I was afraid, and I went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, here you have what is yours." But his master answered him and said, "You wicked and lazy servant! You knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter; then you ought to have entrusted my money to the bankers, and at my coming I would have received what was mine with interest. Therefore take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have abundance; but from the one who has not, even what he has shall be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

In the Kingdom of Heaven, there is inquiry both after talents and after interest. The one who has no talent is outside the Kingdom of Heaven; for in the Kingdom of Heaven all have received talents, "each according to his ability." But the one who does not produce return from his talents does not enter into his master's joy; he is not saved. Still more, the worthless servant is cast out into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Therefore each person should first ask himself whether he has received any talent at all. This is the first thing that matters; for the one who wishes to begin with the interest before he has received the talents goes entirely astray. You must receive your talent first; then you can begin with the interest.

This seems simple enough. Nevertheless, many go wrong in this simple matter. They think that they must begin by giving God something before they have yet received anything from God. But this is in vain; it is of no use. God must give you talents first; then comes the time to trade and to gain interest.

Therefore test yourself: Do you have any talent? Have you had an encounter with God in which he gave you something with which to trade? And what is your talent? How great is it? What grace-gift have you received, and in what direction does it lie?

For here we are not speaking of the gifts and abilities you received at your natural birth; here we are speaking of the grace-gift you received when you became a participant in the Kingdom of Heaven. Natural endowment is also God's gift, and you shall answer for it; but you cannot answer God with interest from your natural endowment unless you have received it sanctified and transformed by grace. Therefore in our text it is the natural endowment that is meant when it is said that the servants received talents "each according to his ability"; this "ability" is the natural endowment with which every human being is equipped by God, and which is sanctified by grace-gifts and taken into God's service by the Holy Spirit.

You therefore have ability by nature; but do you also have talent by grace? With your natural ability alone you are still outside the Kingdom of Heaven; but if you have also received talent by grace, then you are inside. You cannot, with the most brilliant abilities, produce interest for the Lord; he himself must give you the capital with which you are to trade.

Yes, you say, if it is so that all who enter the Kingdom of Heaven also receive their talent, then I too must have a talent; for I was received into the Kingdom of Heaven as a little child through holy baptism. And you speak truly. But, dear brother or sister, where is now this your talent? Have you begun to trade with it, or did you long, long ago bury it in the ground?

If you must confess that you have not yet thought about your talent—what it is or how you are to gain interest from it—then you are in a dreadful condition. You have received talents from the Lord, and you must answer for their return; but you do not even know where the talents are, let alone the interest. You careless and thoughtless servant, what will you do? The time has already advanced far, and you have not begun to trade; and the capital has been buried, and the interest is not even to be thought of as obtainable. What will you do if you are now immediately called to account?

If this is your condition, then hurry to the Lord, that you may be renewed in grace, that with him you may receive your talent renewed, so that you can begin to trade. Yes, hurry; for it takes time to gain interest, and you do not know how much time you have left.

I know well that one or another will answer and say: "But the thief on the cross was saved, and he had no time to gain interest." But you are mistaken. He used the time—the short time, the hour of death—so well that his words have become a sermon for thousands and for millions. It will surely be shown that he gained interest. But you—are you in his situation? Have you, as was the case with him, not encountered Jesus until the hour of death? Or do you have, as he had, the opportunity to become a witness for all peoples and generations and tongues? Friend, do not kid yourself! You cannot, according to your will or your calculation, become like the thief on the cross.

No—ask yourself immediately, today: Do I have any talent, and how do I use it? And if you do not yet have any talent, then hurry to repent and turn to the Lord, and he who gives generously and without reproach shall give you the talent with which you can trade.

For the other great question in the matter of salvation is the interest. The talent comes from

God. From it, you must bring forth a return.

If you have become a participant in the Kingdom of Heaven, then there are talents enough. You have received the Word and grace, the Son and the Spirit, reconciliation and life, forgiveness of sins and love. What do you now do with this? You have also received your particular grace-gift. What do you accomplish with it? What do you use it for?

There is an abundance of spiritual gifts in the congregation—but how few of them are used! How then shall it go with us in the Lord's judgment? We content ourselves with going into the congregation, calling the pastor, listening to the sermon, receiving the sacraments, paying the pastor's salary; but for many, that is also the end of it. Do you think that you are trading with your talent and gaining interest in this way? Up, up to the Lord's work! Is there not enough of it?

Is there no unconverted soul in your circle of acquaintance? Have you spoken to the Lord about him or her, and have you spoken to him or her about the Lord? Are there no sick to visit, no distress to relieve, no tears to wipe away? Are there not little children who are to be brought to Jesus? Are there not millions of heathen—of the nations—to whom the gospel is to be brought? Have you done it? Does God's living love drive you to pray and to work?

Oh, if only you would think about the interest! **The Lord will demand it, and if you do not have it, then you are a worthless servant who is cast out into the outer darkness.** If your Christianity became for you merely like the miser's useless treasures—a matter you kept to yourself for your own enjoyment, your own advantage, your own honor—then you are without interest because you are without love.

Live in God's love and love the brothers as God loved you, and there will be interest from your pound.

But, you say, I am not able; in many directions it is of no use for me to work. My position is not such that I can go out and preach to the heathen, for example; can I then not be saved? Yes—then the word about the bankers comes into its proper place. "Therefore," it says in verse 27, "you ought to have entrusted my money to the bankers." Our missionaries are our bankers. Mission is God's bank, where your gift can be put to work. What do you do for the sending of missionaries? Do you work for heathen mission and Jewish mission? There is much to do for that cause, even if you cannot yourself go out and preach.

Have you truly done all that God's Spirit urged you to do?

If, then, we have received talents, let us trade. Let every member of the congregation take hold of the work for the Kingdom of God and not leave it to the pastors alone. Only in this way will there be powerful awakening; only in this way will there be vigorous congregational life. Only in this way will proper provision be made for the education of pastors, for the sending of missionaries. Only in this way will there be interest from God's precious talents. And only in this way shall we hear that blessed word: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over little; I will set you over much.

Enter into the joy of your master."

18 Sunday Sexagesima: The Harvest and the Laborers

Matthew 9:36–38; 10:1–7. And when he saw the crowds, he was moved with deep compassion for them; for they were fainting and scattered, like sheep that have no shepherd. Then he said to his disciples: The harvest indeed is great, but the laborers are few. Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would drive out laborers into his harvest! And he called his twelve disciples to himself and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity. And these are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Lebbaeus, surnamed Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and enter not into any city of the Samaritans; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach and say: The kingdom of heaven has drawn near.

Is it not now as it was then? Are God's people still fainting today, "stricken"—as it should literally be translated—stripped bare and abused? The congregation that is called by Christ's name, the new Israel, is it not also among us in a lamentable condition, according to the well-known hymn verse:

The land and shore with baptized teem, But where is faith's bright flame?

Thousands of enemies lie in wait for the poor souls in this land. Mammon stands in every street and at every crossroads and beckons like an angel of light and says: "Worship me, and I will give you enough and abundance of all the good things of the earth!" And in droves people stream into his seductive net and are robbed of the hope of eternal life. In vain the Lord cries out to the wandering crowds who chase after the goods of this world:

"Why do you weigh out money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me! Then you shall eat what is good, and your soul shall delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear and come to me! Listen, and your soul shall live" (Isaiah 55:2–3).

Many who in Norway, in earthly poverty, worshiped the living God and feared him, have here exchanged their fear of God for earthly pleasures; song and prayer have fallen silent in their families, and the book of the Word of Life is hidden away on a shelf or displayed in a fine binding upon a table—for never to be opened.

The saloon first, unbelief afterward, entice the young on every corner; light-minded and thoughtless, they cast away the faith of childhood, and with laughter and mockery they compete to outdo each other on the road to ruin. At home sits an old father or mother, white-haired and forsaken, crying and screaming to God for their children and weeping, because they themselves once failed, even with heartfelt love, to draw them to Christ. And when the years have passed, these same smiling young men and women are found again

plundered, beaten, half-dead by the roadside! For “my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, to hew out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that hold no water.” Oh, “as a woman is faithless to her companion, so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel, says the Lord.”

“Is there then no balm in Gilead, is there no physician there?” Praise be to the Lord! If the condition among us in spiritual respect is as sorrowful as it was then, yet the blessed Savior still stands among us. If our people, as it is said of Israel, are truly “scattered,” torn out of their fathers’ land and cast about on these wide prairies, where the bread of life in many places is only sparingly distributed to the hungry and fainting, yet the Lord still stands in his congregation with his Word through his servants, and he is “moved with deep compassion” for his people.

Shall he call us in vain to his great harvest, where the laborers are still so few?

Friends, priests of the Lord, all children of God, open your ears and listen!

“A voice is heard on the bare heights, the weeping and pleading of the children of Israel; for they have perverted their way, forgotten the Lord their God.” Shall they cry for help in vain?

Both priests and congregations have many weighty matters to attend to in this land. All are for the building up of the kingdom—both inwardly and outwardly. But “one thing is necessary.” The salvation of a soul is more precious than all the treasures of the world. Oh, then let us once again unite in prayer that the power of God’s Spirit may be poured out upon us, that we may be filled with new, heartfelt love for souls and burning zeal for their salvation, so that we might lay aside all other things and go out in Jesus’ name, as he sent his apostles, to “seek the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” See the dogs, see the mutilation, see the evil workers! See the power and lust of the world that rules over the great crowds, strips them and makes them miserable—and begin to cry out with full voice: “Land, land, land! Hear the word of the Lord! Return, you apostate children, I will heal your apostasy, says the Lord.”

Oh, that God’s servants especially might more earnestly apply themselves not to be satisfied with the proclamation of the Word from the pulpit alone, but to go to the plain and unlearned, not only when they are sick and dying and send for them, often in fleshly fear and superstition, but to the healthy, strong, secure sinners, spiritually lame, crippled, and leprous, at crossroads and street corners, and compel them to come in. That there might come a new time, a time of awakening and of spring, when the turtledove once more lets its song be heard, and that from the prairies and forests of this land, among our people from one end to the other, there might come, like a mighty wind of Pentecost, this answer of the prophet: “See, we come to you; for you are the Lord our God!”

But if this is to happen, then it is also necessary “to pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth more laborers for his harvest,” men of good testimony and full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3), earnest, zealous, God-fearing pastors. Of these there is always need of more and more. Many do not seriously consider what spiritual distress there is in many places among us, so that souls faint for lack of the proclamation of God’s Word. We are inclined to settle down and thank God because we have it so well, and then let the others try

to help themselves. Oh, if God had dealt with us in such a way!

When we consider that whole settlements for years are without the ministry of God's Word by God-fearing pastors—and that many of God's servants must nearly work themselves to death in order every three or four weeks to reach their many congregations with the Word and the Sacraments, then surely many of us should awaken and remember the poor souls who are neglected, and the Lord's admonition: "Pray the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth laborers for his harvest."

Whoever truly prays will also work. That is what is needed. Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us not grow weary in doing good; let us awaken and with renewed strength take hold of the work and become zealous for the instruction of children in the fear of God, and for the establishment and preservation of schools for the training of living men, filled with and driven by God's Spirit, to go out among the fainting crowds and cry:

"Return, you apostate children, I will heal your apostasy, says the Lord."

See him, the blessed Savior, see him as he is "moved with deep compassion over the people," see him hanging on the cross for you—compassion, not in words, but in deed; and know that as he has done for you, as he has prayed, labored, and suffered, so he wills that you should do for the "fainting and scattered sheep" whom he has redeemed with his blood. Will you?

19 Quinquagesima Sunday: God's Lamb — God's Son

John 1:29–34: The following day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said: Behold the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said: After me comes a man who has been before me; for he was before me. And I did not know him; but in order that he might be revealed to Israel, for this reason I came baptizing with water. And John bore witness and said: I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained upon him. And I did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me: He upon whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, he it is who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen it and borne witness that this is the Son of God.

God's Lamb is God's Son, and God's Son is God's Lamb, who bears the sin of the world.

Here, in a single sum, is the whole wondrous truth of the Gospel: a foolishness and an offense to the world, but a power of God unto salvation for those who believe.

For this is the preaching of the cross.

If Jesus is God's Lamb, who bears the sin of the world, then the sin of the world is too heavy for the world itself to bear; it is a burden that drags the world down into the depths of perdition, as the stone sinks into the sea.

But if Jesus is God's Lamb, who bears the sin of the world, then the heavy burden has been laid upon shoulders strong enough to carry it. For God's Lamb is God's Son, and what casts the world into the abyss of perdition, the Son of God can bear without perishing.

This is the mightiest testimony to the sin of the world: that the Son of God had to become the Lamb of God in order to bear it.

This is also the strongest testimony to God's eternal love: that the Son of God took the sin of the world upon himself and was slain as the sacrificial Lamb in order to atone for it.

And if it is an offense to the world to hear that it is sinful, and an even greater offense to hear that its sin has been atoned for by the blood of the Lamb, yet it is blessed and sweet for the one who knows his sin, that the Son of God has become the Lamb of God and has borne it.

Or is there a heavier burden than sin? Of all the cries of pain that sound from this poor earth, where tears moisten the eye and pain pierces the soul, this is the most grievous cry: "My sin, my sin, my sin!"

O the one who has writhed in the distress of sin, who has seen God's wrath over himself, and who has felt it in the innermost depths of the soul, that this is an incurable ruin, a torment that will endure through the eternity of eternities — for him all other pain has become small and all other sorrow light.

No heavier burden exists than the burden of sin; no more bitter pain exists than the hellish torment of an evil conscience.

Have you ever known it, soul? Or have you until now been so afraid to perceive it that you have fled and fled from the Word of God and the Spirit of God, lest your sin should come to light before you?

Poor human being, who flees from the Gospel of the cross because it reveals your sins to you: you cannot flee from death and judgment; and your sin will overtake you and drag you down into eternal perdition, when there is no longer any way to find reconciliation by the blood of the cross.

Though it is dreadful as death to acknowledge one's sin, it is nevertheless better to know one's disease and seek healing for it than to carry it until it is too late.

Come out from your deceitful hiding place and confess that you are a sinner. Come out of your frivolity and your cowardice and place yourself beneath the cross of Jesus and see what your sin has done to the Son of God. Behold the Lamb who was slain. **Behold the blood that flowed for you!**

When the Spirit of the Lord convicts you of sin, there will arise a moment of joy in the night of your pain, when the Spirit glorifies Jesus in your heart, and you begin to glimpse with the awakening eye of faith that the Son of God has become the Lamb of God for you.

Atonement, reconciliation, forgiveness in the blood of Jesus for all my sin — oh how blessed for the one who is crushed by sin and wrath. “He has borne our sicknesses and carried our pains; the punishment lay upon him, that we might have peace, and by his wounds we have received healing.”

For this purpose, then, the Son of God has come into the world: that he should bear the sins of the world. For this purpose he is baptized by John: that he who knew no sin should be made sin for us, that in him we might become righteous before God. The baptism with water in the Jordan is the consecration to the baptism of blood on the cross, so that our baptism might become a bath of cleansing, in which we receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our baptism is a baptism into Christ's death, in which the blood of the Lamb cleanses us from all our sins; for it is the blood of the Son of God.

Purchased with the blood and baptized into death, we belong to Christ, friends. Our life is no longer our own, but his who loved us and gave himself for us. If my sin cost you, my Savior, your life, then I am yours in life and in death.

And when soon the hour of death comes, and I must walk through the valley of the shadow of death, then this is my refuge and my confidence: “The blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, cleanses me from all my sins”; for the Son of God has become the Lamb of God for me.

Thus it is better to die with Christ in order to live eternally with him, than to live with the world in order to die eternally with it. O souls who have been purchased with the blood of Jesus, hasten to listen to the Baptist's glorious testimony: “Behold the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world”; for this Lamb is the Son of God.

20 First Sunday in Lent: Overcoming the Devil

Luke 10:17–20. And the seventy returned in joy, and said, “Lord, even the devils are subject to us in your name.” And he said to them, “I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I give you power to tread upon serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall harm you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice more that your names are written in heaven.”

The realm of the Devil—and indeed of spirits in general—is not as well known as many would wish. Therefore, in ancient times and in our own days, there have been no few who, with fleshly imagination or imagined secret knowledge, have believed themselves able to explore the mysteries of the spiritual world beyond what God’s Word has revealed to us, and by their fables and pretended secrets have deceived many.

Yet enough has been revealed to us concerning the Devil and his kingdom to let us know both that all the corruption and misery of mankind have come from the Devil and his angels, and that he remains the most dangerous enemy of every individual Christian and of the whole Church, against whom we have an unceasing and irreconcilable struggle, and over whom no victory can be won except by the victory which the Son of God won when he entered the strong man’s house, “took away his full armor in which he trusted, and divided his spoil” (Luke 11:22).

This is indeed the first promise we have in God’s Word: “The seed of the woman shall crush the serpent’s head,” a prophecy that is first fulfilled when the Lord, after the temptation, could say, “Go away, Satan!” and then when he gave his disciples power over the spirits; when he himself fought the final battle in Gethsemane and on the cross; and which continues to be fulfilled through the struggle of Christ’s body—the congregation—and all its members against the prince of evil, who has power in this world, until “the great dragon is cast down, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world”; for he shall one day be cast down to the earth, and his angels shall be cast down with him.

On this occasion John exclaims (Rev. 12:10): “Now salvation and power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Anointed have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been cast down, who accused them before God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even unto death.”

With regard to this struggle against the Devil and his mighty kingdom, which lies before God’s congregation and each of its members until the great day of the Lord’s judgment, Paul says (Eph. 6:12): “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness under heaven.” Therefore put on the armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the cunning assaults of the Devil (6:11). And Peter says (1 Pet. 5:8): “Be sober, be watchful; for your adversary the Devil goes about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” And the Savior himself says (Matt. 10:28): “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

But that the Son of God, by becoming man and conquering the Devil in temptation and death, has taken from him the power to destroy us, if we hold fast to Jesus, and has given us power to prevail in the struggle, if we fight only in and with Jesus—this is declared in Hebrews 2:14, where it is said: “Since the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same, so that through death he might render powerless the one who had the dominion of death, that is, the Devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.”

Thus power is given to poor, frail children of men, whom the Son of God has cleansed and regenerated by his blood through faith, to overcome the mighty adversary the Devil and his entire host of angels who rule in this world; and what wonder, then, that the disciples, astonished and surprised by this power over the spirits which they found themselves to possess, returned to Jesus with joy and jubilation and told him of it: “Even the devils are subject to us in your name!”

But the Lord answers them with a solemn warning: It is true, Satan’s power is broken, and I saw him fall like lightning from heaven, and to you, my disciples, power is given over serpents and scorpions—over all that by which the adversary’s power could harm you. But remember, it is a dangerous power, which can lead you into the temptation to seize it as a prize to be like God, so that many will come on the great day and say: “Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out devils in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then I shall have to answer: “I do not know you; depart from me, you who defile yourselves with unrighteousness.”

Therefore it is indeed a great and glorious power that is given to the Lord’s disciples, the children of God, that without fear, with the Gospel in heart and on lips, they may confidently go against all Satan’s strongholds among the nations and in their hearts, among those who walk in the world’s lust and corruption, and with a single word—the word of sin and grace—see them fall into dust, so that tax collectors and sinners enter the kingdom of God, and the light from heaven dawns among those who sit in the shadow and darkness of death, just as it has happened century after century and still happens to this very day—praised and blessed be the Lord for all eternity!

It is an inexpressible joy for a servant of God to see a stubborn sinner bowed into the dust by the word he has proclaimed about Jesus, and to see him crawl humbly to the cross to obtain there healing for the wounds of his heart and deliverance from the power of death and Satan. And the soul of a warrior of Christ must be lifted to heaven with jubilation when God grants him power to step forward against the kings and lords of the world and without fear bear witness to them of the King of kings, as Moses bore witness before Pharaoh, and to see their power sink into dust before that little word: Cross! from Israel’s Anointed, just as David went against Goliath and struck him down with his simple shepherd’s weapons.

But do not rejoice over this! Rather, fear! For soon you might take the power into your own hand like a raven and boast in fleshly fashion of your gifts and your piety.

There is one thing that it is sure and safe always and everywhere to rejoice in: to have the grace to be a child of God, to be preserved in childlike and simple faith amid daily sins and falls, to have a firm and confident assurance that the blood of Christ cleanses me from all sin,

that I know nothing for salvation except Jesus and him crucified, and that when the outward person perishes and life hastens toward its evening, then a new and blessed time dawns for me—an eternal fellowship of life with Jesus and his Father in heaven; for I know whom I believe in, and my name is written in the Book of Life.

Brothers and sisters, let us not aspire to the high things, but hold to the lowly; and even if I should be the least and most disregarded of all the Lord's disciples—as I know that I am the most unworthy—may the Lord grant that we day and night might ponder this one thing: how we might be preserved in the faith and one day, though scarcely, enter the kingdom of God, and say daily with the Psalmist: “I would rather sit at the threshold of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.”

21 Second Sunday in Lent: Father and Son

Mark 9:17–29: And one of the crowd answered and said, “Teacher, I brought my son to you; he has a mute spirit. And whenever it seizes him, it tears him, and he foams and grinds his teeth and wastes away; and I spoke to your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not.” But he answered them and said, “O unbelieving generation! How long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to me.” And they brought him to him; and when he saw him, the spirit immediately convulsed him, and he fell to the ground and rolled about, foaming. And he asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. And it has often thrown him both into fire and into water, to destroy him; but if you can do anything, have mercy on us and help us.” But Jesus said to him, “If you can believe— all things are possible for the one who believes.” Immediately the child’s father cried out, weeping, and said, “I believe, Lord! Help my unbelief!” And when Jesus saw that the crowd was running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You mute and deaf spirit, I command you: come out of him and enter him no more!” And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out; and he became like one dead, so that many said, “He is dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him up, and he stood up. And when he had gone into a house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” And he said to them, “This kind can come out by nothing except prayer and fasting.”

In our text, a father with a mute and grievously afflicted son finds his way to Jesus and receives healing for him. It is just like the Canaanite woman whose daughter was sorely vexed by the devil and who wrestled with Jesus until he helped her against the fury of the devil.

This father in our text is a true example for all God-fearing fathers among us. He shows the simple and only way to fight against the power of the devil in our houses and homes.

Many fathers imagine they can manage well enough on their own. They will surely raise their children so that they become good and upright and perhaps even God-fearing; their children are so different from all other children— with them there is no danger; and when they in addition receive a good upbringing, they will surely become their parents’ joy and honor and the support of their old age.

But what can you accomplish, a mere human being, against the power of the devil? And how many proud and self-satisfied fathers have not had to hide their faces in shame over their children’s misery, when sin and the world and the devil have taken power over them and cast them down into the depths of sin and into the disgrace of vice! And how many mothers have not had to feel the bitterness of the old saying, that “the small strike the rod, the grown strike the heart.”

Is there any deliverance from this distress? Is there any remedy for this pain?

Yes, God’s Gospel shows the way—a hard and narrow way for parents, but one that leads forward.

It is a way upon which the self-seeking, self-willed, and proud father does not walk. For as long as someone seeks only his own honor and his own advantage in his child's goodness and uprightness, the Gospel of God cannot help him. He takes the responsibility upon himself, and he must also take the consequences upon himself.

But the unhappy father in our text shows the way. For he comes with his son to Jesus and says, "Teacher, I have brought my son to you."

Behold, here is the way you must go if you truly intend to fight the power of the devil in your child. Your refined and careful upbringing is of no use. Something else and something mightier is required. You must follow Jesus' gracious command: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

Have you considered this, that with all your careful upbringing you may perhaps be standing in the way of your little child, so that it does not come to Jesus? Or is it not with many of our educators as it was with the Pharisees, who cleansed the outside of cups and dishes and polished them bright for their own pleasure and pride; but beneath all that outward polishing and adornment the heart remains full of wickedness and deceit?

The one who would see his child saved begins by loving his child, loving its soul, instead of loving himself. Whoever seeks his own advantage in raising a child will receive exactly that—and nothing more. But the one who in sincerity seeks his child's salvation and eternal good, he goes to Jesus with his child and for his child.

Do you do this? Can you in truth say to Jesus, "Teacher, I have brought my child to you?"

It is a daily humiliation for the vain father's heart to have to go to Jesus and say with the unhappy father in our text: "If you can do anything, have mercy on us and help us!" For in this lies the full acknowledgment of our own impotence in the face of the evil whose powers stir in our children's hearts. How utterly different is this deep humiliation from the pride with which our hearts rejoice over the outward refinement that our own carefulness can produce in our children! Wretched hypocrites that we are; we point with pride to our well-behaved children, and we think in our hearts: I thank you, God, that they are not like other people's children—disobedient, stubborn, unclean, thieving, vicious, and corrupt. The Lord will say to us: You servant, you have strained out the gnat and swallowed the camel; your child looks better before people and in your own eyes, but God looks at the heart, and its uncleanness and wickedness you have not touched, nor do you have power to do anything about it.

Therefore guard yourself, friend, lest you forget the heart for the sake of outward conduct, and neglect your child's soul while you labor for its temporal happiness. Go deeper and ask whether you can also do something for your child's eternal blessedness, and then fall humbly at Jesus' feet and acknowledge that you can do nothing, and say to him in heartfelt simplicity and sincerity: "But if you can do anything, have mercy on us and help us!"

Yet you are not finished. The hardest still remains. Jesus will answer you as he answered the unhappy father with the sick son: "If you can believe— all things are possible for the one who believes." It is as if he were saying: Certainly I am able to help; but are you also able to believe?

It does no good to go to Jesus with mere words, nor to seek him with a heart full of sheer despair. You must indeed despair of your own power, but not of his power. You must acknowledge your impotence, but you must in faith entrust yourself to him with your whole heart.

Oh, that we could answer like this weeping father: “I believe, Lord! Help my unbelief!” Then our child’s distress would truly become our distress, when it dawned upon us with the Lord’s light and clarity that we ourselves needed his help just as much as our child. We needed faith just as much as our child needed help; and the distress and sorrow and anxiety would become a blessing for both father and child.

Is it then truly true that all things are possible for the one who believes?

Yes— it is precisely here that our unbelief shows itself. We do not believe God all the way; we do not believe the Savior fully on his word. Lord, Lord, help our unbelief!

And this is the new humiliation that only the Christian heart knows, because it alone knows what pain it is to experience that it does not believe, when it so dearly wishes to believe. Yet even this humiliation must be accepted by the one who would prevail in the struggle with Jesus for his child’s soul. Do not think: I am a believer, and my children will surely become believers when I train and raise them. Oh no; but go to Jesus, and when he looks at you and says: Do you believe? then let it become for you a moment of self-examination and humiliation, in which you truly confess and pray: “Help my unbelief!”

Then you shall receive faith from God, who gives gladly and without reproach. And you shall receive more: the devil shall be driven out of your child and plague him no longer.

Can the child of a Christian be lost?

A dreadful question! A child is not saved because it is a Christian’s child. But a child is saved if a Christian father truly brings it with him to Jesus and obtains help for the child.

If Christian parents truly did this in earnestness and simplicity, then not so many Christian hearts would sigh and lament over wayward children.

It is true, a child does not always remain a child. The time comes when it is no longer a child, and when it can give the devil room despite parents’ prayers and intercessions. Christian father and mother, do not wait until that time to carry your child on the arm of prayer and faith to the Savior. It may be that then it is too late! It is while your child is still a child that you can let it come to Jesus, that he may take it in his arms and bless it.

If you do this, you people of God, then God-fearing fathers shall raise God-fearing sons, and the Lord’s blessing shall rest upon house and home.

Oh, that the Lord would lay something of his seriousness and his Spirit into the hearts of the many young married couples who have sons and daughters in this land, so that they would in time go to the Savior for their children and with their children. Truly, they would spare themselves bitter tears in their old age, and they would bind their children’s souls to themselves, so that by the Lord’s grace it would be granted them to say: “Here am I and the children whom you have given me.”

22 Third Sunday in Lent: A Man with an Unclean Spirit in the Synagogue

Luke 4:31–37. And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and taught them Sabbath after Sabbath. And they were greatly astonished at his teaching, for he spoke with authority. And in the synagogue there was a man who had an unclean spirit and cried out with a loud voice, “Ah! What business have you with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you really are—the Holy One of God.” And Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent. Come out of him!” And the devil threw him among them and came out of him without doing him any harm. And terror came upon all, and they spoke with one another, saying, “What is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out.” And the report about him went out throughout the surrounding countryside.

To a “word with authority” there belongs first a direct and uncompromising word about sin, and then an equally direct word about grace.

Not infrequently are preachers deficient in both; indeed, one may safely say that where there is a lack of power and seriousness in a word that names sin for what it is, there is an equal lack in a word that proclaims grace, and vice versa. At times one speaks to the assembled congregation as though they were all Christians already, about how good it is to be God’s children, how beautiful it is to gather around God’s word, and so forth, until through such proclamation a great many are allowed to lay themselves sweetly down upon their pillow of sin and sleep securely.

At other times, to be sure, sin is spoken of, but in such a manner that everyone feels it concerns those who are outside, and the hearers go away each with a secret pleasure over how powerfully “the others were chastised.”

But at times—yes, often, perhaps always—it happens as in the days of Jesus, that a man with an unclean spirit comes into the synagogue and sits quite calmly and listens. It is precisely this person the preacher must seek out and address, so to speak, in private from the pulpit.

A man with an unclean spirit is one in whom Satan has gained a dwelling, just as the Spirit of God comes to dwell in the one who repents and believes. Such a person has been so ensnared by the devil’s cunning that the sting of conscience is nearly gone. He not only lives in sin, but takes his joy and satisfaction in it.

Such a person is under an unclean devil’s spirit.

Such a sinful condition in one or several respects can very well coexist with considerable respectability and even with apparent godliness in other matters. Only this distinction is commonly made: if the sin is one of the so-called “gross” sins—that is, such as even secular society condemns or punishes, such as dishonesty, sexual immorality, drunkenness, and the like—then such persons are often expelled both from ecclesiastical and civil associations and regarded by most with aversion, almost with disgust.

But if, on the other hand, the sins are of an inner, more “refined” sort, such as hatred, anger, selfishness, greed, and the like, which make no difference whatsoever before God, then they are not only tolerated; such people are even sometimes set in places of honor within God’s congregation itself, and their sin is excused and glossed over with expressions such as “refined sins,” “sins of weakness,” “besetting sins,” and the like—to irreparable harm both to those concerned and to Christ’s congregation on earth.

While therefore scarcely any congregation would tolerate a murderer or perjurer or thief in its midst, all congregations harbor those who are wrathful, slanderers, and unmerciful, and one excuses them and says of the one, “Yes, poor fellow, he is somewhat hot-tempered,” of the other, “she is a bit loose with her tongue,” and of the third, “he is surely a little tight-fisted.”

That is why every congregation has more than a few who live under an unclean spirit, and unfortunately it is all too often precisely with regard to these that there is lacking that word which accuses the conscience and, like a two-edged sword, pierces down into the depths of the heart, to divide soul and spirit and to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

All too often we are inclined to think of the former—the criminals, the deeply fallen sinners—“It helps nothing”; they do not come to church anyway; and with regard to the others to content ourselves that they are “interested in churchly matters”; “we are, after all, not knowers of hearts.”

But if we are not knowers of hearts, then God’s word, from our heart and in our mouth, is nevertheless well suited to search the innermost being of man and to tear down Satan’s strongholds, and the Lord himself has spoken so weighty and comforting a word, that “tax collectors and prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before the sons of the kingdom.”

Therefore let us not forget the “man with an unclean spirit who has come into the synagogue”; perhaps there sits such a one on every bench; it is precisely the lost sheep, the prodigal son or daughter, whom the Lord wills that you should seek out and lead back to the Father’s house.

Over there sits a drunkard who has become a complete slave to his vice; today he is sober and has by chance come into God’s house. Here is a woman “caught in adultery”; she has almost slipped into the assembly, and had anyone known it, she might perhaps have been denied entrance. Further forward sits a man who has sworn a false oath over a piece of property and is shunned by all. Near by you see a rich man who drove a poor, hungry boy from his door just as he was on his way to church, and at his side a young man who nourishes and feeds his soul day and night with crude and unchaste thoughts.

Alas, how many there are today who have come into the synagogue with an unclean spirit! Leave all the others and speak to these alone; they are well worth it; they have immortal souls purchased with the blood of Jesus. Let the Holy Spirit speak through you—naming sin, righteousness, and judgment plainly, so that it begins to flash and thunder like the voice of the Last Day in these wretched, devil-bound souls, and their eyes are opened so that they see the shame of their nakedness, and their hearts tremble with unrest and fear, and the devil begins to fear losing his prey.

Then speak to them of grace and righteousness and blessedness; paint Christ crucified before them; tell how he has loved them, of his bloody sweat, of his

hellish agony on the cross and in death, and that he did it all to save them from the devil and from eternal perdition, and that he still stands there with outstretched arms and says, “Come to me, you who are burdened, and I will give you rest.”

And speak so earnestly and so insistently of this love of Christ that the poor sinners begin to tremble still more, with cries for salvation and with hope, so that the unclean devil who has bound them leaps up in terror before the power of the cross and the fire of the word, and tears and rends them, bound as they are, and out of sheer fear must give testimony to the word: What business have you with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you really are—the Holy One of God.”

And what happened in Capernaum shall happen anew among us: the Lord shall again say to such a poor, enslaved sinner, “Be silent, come out of him!” The devil will indeed still tear and rend, but he must come out when the mighty word of the Lord sounds. The Spirit of God comes in instead, speaks the word lovingly to the anxious, trembling heart: “Do not fear!”—shines into all the innermost corners of the heart, sweeps out all the devil’s uncleanness, and says: “Take courage, son; take courage, daughter; your sins are forgiven you!”

Then there is joy among the angels of heaven because a sinner has repented, and fear and stirring among human beings because authority and power have also been given to human beings to cast out unclean spirits; and one and another shall be troubled and begin to test himself and say, “Do I have an unclean spirit? Do I have an unclean spirit?” until throughout the whole congregation there comes a stirring and a storm-wind of the Spirit that cleanses the air and drives the loose and shallow roots to seek deeper and firmer ground in order to be able to stand when the Lord comes.

Therefore let us never forget that there may also be in our synagogue “a man with an unclean spirit,” and that it is the will and command of our precious Savior that we should seek him out in the firm, simple faith that Jesus by his word both can and will save him.

23 Mid-Lent Sunday: Life from God's Life

John 6:52–65. Then the Jews disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Jesus therefore said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is truly food, and my blood is truly drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father has sent me, and I live because of the Father, so also the one who eats of me shall live through me. This is the bread that came down from heaven; not as your fathers ate the manna and died; whoever eats this bread shall live forever.” These things he said in a synagogue, where he was teaching in Capernaum. Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, “This is a hard saying; who can bear him?” But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were murmuring about this, said to them, “Does this offend you? What then if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail; the words that I speak to you are spirit and are life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I told you that no one can come to me unless it is given him by my Father.”

Jesus had said: “I am the bread of life,” and again: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

This last saying offended the Jews. Alarmed and offended, they ask: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” The Jews think: this is impossible. Thus Nicodemus had also thought concerning the new birth: this is impossible; an old man cannot be born again.

But Jesus had said to Nicodemus that it was just as necessary for salvation. And in the same way he answers the Jews here: it is absolutely necessary for salvation to eat my flesh and drink my blood; the one who does not do this has no life; the one who does it has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

Thus, what the Jews call impossible, Jesus calls necessary for eternal life, for redemption and salvation.

This is the teaching of Jesus. By nature we are flesh; but all flesh is grass, and all its glory as the flower of the grass. It is sinful; therefore it is perishable. All our life is subjected to death, and even our strongest efforts and our highest and noblest thoughts and deeds cannot lift us out of the power of sin and death that holds us down. Our life is torn away from God, who alone has imperishability; and cut off from the source of life, we are utterly powerless, either in ourselves or in the world, to find new sources of life from which we can draw eternal life.

But—God be eternally praised and glorified—what our sin has taken from us, Jesus brings us as a free gift of grace from God. Jesus will give us himself, so that we abide in him and he

in us. And if this fellowship enters between us and him, then we receive life from God's life; for then he says: "Just as the living Father has sent me, and I live because of the Father, so also the one who eats of me shall live through me."

Thus there is indeed salvation from death; for Jesus is the mediator of life, who again gives poor sinners life from God's life. In the midst of the perishable world there is a source of life and imperishability in Jesus, since his blood cleanses us from all our sins. Against sin and uncleanness there is an open fountain, a living well, in the death and resurrection of Jesus; therefore there is also eternal life in him. From the living Father he brings life—the eternal, imperishable, and incorruptible life—to the children of sin and death.

But how, how can this happen? How can we come into such fellowship with Jesus that his life becomes our life, and through him we receive life from God's life? To "eat his flesh and drink his blood"—that is indeed "a hard saying; who can listen to it?"

Therefore Jesus adds a word that is mighty to open our dull hearts: "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail; the words that I speak to you are spirit and are life."

Eating and drinking with the mouth alone does nothing, just as hearing with the ears does nothing. Such outward connection with Jesus does not give a person eternal life. Spirit is required—Spirit from God, the Spirit of Jesus Christ—to establish the life-giving fellowship with Jesus Christ. Even among Jesus' disciples, who followed him in the days of his flesh, who attached themselves to him in a fleshly manner, there were some who did not believe. Therefore their fellowship with Jesus availed them nothing. The Spirit had not united and bound them to him, so that they lived in him and he lived in them.

It is the Spirit who gives life; but the Spirit is in Christ's word; therefore faith alone is the appropriation of Christ by which his life becomes our life, and we receive God's life through him. Therefore there is no one who can come to the Son unless it is given him by the Father.

There is no one who by his own strength or reason can believe in Christ or come to him. It is no fleshly work to eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood so that one thereby receives eternal life. It is a spiritual work, wrought in us by the Holy Spirit.

Thus the Spirit works faith; faith grasps Christ and unites with him in the fellowship of Spirit and life; and it is Christ's word that is the means to give the Spirit and work faith. In this way our heart is united with Christ and our life with his life, and we receive eternal life in fellowship with him and with the Father.

Now then, friend, do you still live the life of the world, or do you live God's life, the life in faith in the Son of God? This is eternal life, and there is absolutely no other. If you live in the world, then you die with the world; if you live in God, then you do not die, but you have eternal life abiding in you.

Let us hasten to the Son and grasp him in faith, and he who lives in the Father shall give us new and eternal life.

Life from God's life.

24 Mary's Annunciation Day: The Wonderful Ways of God

Luke 1:46–55. And Mary said:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has looked upon the low estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations shall call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

And his mercy is from generation to generation toward those who fear him. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has taken up his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways, says the Lord.” Truly, he had chosen a strange way to take up his servant Israel—whom he had engraved on both his hands—and to remember Abraham and his offspring forever.

With the strength of his arm he scattered those who were proud in their thoughts and cast the mighty down from their thrones; but the lowly he exalted.

He let the rich go away empty, but the hungry he filled with good gifts.

Mary, a poor and unnoticed Jewish maiden, saw this beforehand in the Spirit and therefore praised God. Eighteen hundred years later we look back with astonishment upon the mighty and wondrous deeds of the Lord and mingle our weak voice with Mary's song of praise.

In a secluded valley among the mountains of Judea the glory of the Lord is revealed. Two women, who both in wondrous ways were to become mothers, meet and greet one another; the power of God's Spirit seizes them and stirs their hearts from the depths with joy and thoughts of salvation.

“Blessed are you among women,” Elizabeth exclaims, “and blessed is the fruit of your womb; and how has it happened to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

And Mary answers: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, because he has looked upon the lowliness of his servant; for behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

None of the contemporary pagan historians mention this meeting between the two Jewish women. Yet it is more important than all the meetings and battles of emperors and kings combined. The words they exchanged outweigh all the writings of philosophers together.

For this meeting, as it were, introduces the birth of the Forerunner and the Savior, and the words contain the Gospel for all peoples—but all in God’s own wondrous way, in a way that seems impossible to us.

On David’s throne sat Herod, of Esau’s lineage, half Jew and half pagan—Jew in order to rob power from the promises of God’s people, pagan in order to sneak his way into power from the Roman world empire. In this way, through hypocrisy toward Israel’s sanctuary and servitude to worldly power, through crimes and cunning, Herod had become one of the world’s mighty. In his pride he imagined he could restore David’s kingdom by earthly means. The two women in the mountains of Judea knew better than the mighty king of the Jews, who nevertheless had built Solomon’s temple more splendidly than it had ever been before.

In vain he sought to ensnare the wise men from the East with his old hypocrisy in order to destroy “the King of the Jews” who had been born; in vain he let the blood of innocent children flow in Bethlehem for the same purpose; in vain his son had the Forerunner murdered and, together with Pilate, crucified the Savior, the King of the Jews; in vain his descendant had the apostle James executed and Peter imprisoned. The Lord was stronger than Herod and his house; he laid his heavy hand upon them, cast them down from their thrones, let them be eaten alive by worms, scattered the whole house, and caused their kingdom to be utterly destroyed.

But the lowly he exalted. The humiliated, despised, crucified Jesus he tore out of the hand of his enemies, out of the hand of death and of Satan, so that the house of Israel might know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom they had crucified—and has given him a name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, of those in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. This has been done by the Lord, and it is wondrous in our eyes.

“On Moses’ seat sit the scribes and the Pharisees.” They thought themselves rich beyond all others in spiritual treasures. They were Abraham’s offspring; they had the covenants, the worship, the promises, and the giving of the law; they had all knowledge and all insight; they had the commandments of the law explained many times over and could fulfill them all and boast of righteousness before God. What wonder, then, that in the pride of their riches they took offense at the Forerunner, who bore witness to them of sin, and conceived a deadly hatred toward the lowly-looking Savior, who had come only to seek the lost and to give them forgiveness of sins!

What wonder that when the Savior rebuked them for their sins, they in hatred and wrath fulfilled his words and said: “There is the heir; come, let us kill him and take the inheritance ourselves!” They killed him and hung him on the tree of the curse; but they received no inheritance; they had to go away in shame with nothing in their hands. The Savior’s words were fulfilled: that the kingdom would be given to a people who would bear its fruit. From east and from west they would come—poor, hungry, miserable, despised—and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, while the children of the kingdom would be cast out, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

These rich Pharisees, who had abundance in everything and lacked nothing, and who therefore

were angered at the poor Savior when he offered them forgiveness of sins by faith—how empty-handed and miserable and poor they had to depart from the presence of the Lord whose Son they had slain. “Crucify! crucify! His blood be upon us and upon our children!” they had persuaded the people to cry, but how deeply they had to sink. “We have no king but Caesar!” was their humiliating confession. And when they had finally crucified him whom death could not hold and persecuted his disciples everywhere, how they had to drink the cup of disgrace to the last drop, when the Lord with his mighty hand left not one stone of the temple upon another and scattered them, temporally and spiritually stripped and empty-handed, over the whole earth unto this day.

But the hungry he gave good gifts. Sinners, tax collectors, Gentiles, who in their distress turned to the Lord—on them he had mercy and gave them forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation by faith in the crucified one; he gave them all things with Jesus Christ. Have we not then received riches enough? And has not Mary’s song of praise come to glorious fulfillment over us, who by faith have found mercy?

Yes indeed, the Lord has taken up his servant Israel in remembrance of mercy toward Abraham and his offspring—not offsprings, as though of many—as Paul says—but of one: Christ, and those who by faith and baptism are clothed with him and have become children of God. As it went with Herod and the Pharisees, so it has gone from century to century, and it is wondrous in our eyes: the mighty cast down, the rich sent away with nothing, but the lowly, the crushed and bowed down in heart, these the Lord has exalted; and the poor, the poor in spirit, he has made rich beyond all description, so that though they have nothing, they yet possess all things.

Thus he has, in the midst of the season of fasting and sorrow, when the congregation of God with bowed hearts follows Jesus on his heavy path of suffering, prepared for us a table in the wilderness, a moment of joy in affliction, so that our hearts together with the two women in the mountains of Judea might lift themselves up in praise, our spirit rejoice in God our Savior, and our soul magnify the Lord: “My soul, bless the Lord and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with mercy and compassion.”

Come here in comfort, you who hunger for righteousness, you who have lost all joy in the world, yes, who are rejected and despised by the world and see nothing before you but an eternal judgment—you poor, lowly, wretched sinners who fear that you are too great transgressors for the Lord to have mercy on you—come with assurance: our Savior has descended deeply enough to pay for it all. “Can a woman forget her nursing child? I, I have not forgotten you, says the Lord.” Come here in comfort once more; let your hearts in childlike faith with the crucified one experience the truth of these words: “The Lord has exalted the lowly and filled the hungry with good gifts.”

Come, let us unite with Mary in praise and thanksgiving: “The Lord has done great things for us; holy is his name, and his mercy endures from generation to generation over those who fear him.”

25 Palm Sunday: The Grain of Wheat

John 12:20–33: But there were some Greeks among those who had come up to worship at the feast. These then went to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him: Sir, we wish to see Jesus. Philip comes and tells Andrew this, and Andrew and Philip tell it again to Jesus. But Jesus answered them:

The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Truly, truly I say to you: Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life shall lose it, and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it unto eternal life. If anyone will serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant also be; and if anyone serves me, him shall the Father honor.

Now my soul is terrified; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour! Yet for this reason I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name! Then there came a voice from heaven: I have both glorified it, and I will glorify it again. The crowd that stood and heard it said then that it had thundered; others said: An angel has spoken to him. Jesus answered and said: This voice did not come for my sake, but for your sake. Now judgment comes upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself. But this he said in order to signify what death he was to die.

Our text tells us that some Greeks, who had come to Jerusalem to worship at the Passover feast, came to Jesus' disciples and said: "We wish to see Jesus."

When the disciples came to Jesus with this message from these foreigners, he answered them: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

This Passover feast, then, is the Savior's hour of glorification. Now that hour has come which he has awaited; that hour in which the eternal counsel for the salvation of the human race is to be fulfilled; that hour from which blessed effects shall proceed for all times and all eternities.

The Greeks' simple words, "We wish to see Jesus," led the Savior occasion to call it the hour in which he was to be glorified; for the salvation of the nations is his glorification, and this Passover feast is the hour in which our salvation is won.

But the hour of glorification is an hour of suffering. At this Passover feast the Passover lamb is to be slain, the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world. Therefore the Savior says: "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

This, then, is Jesus' glorification: that he dies in order to become the Savior of the nations; that he gives his life over into death, so that through his resurrection he may bring life and incorruptibility to light.

Therefore the hour of glorification is a dreadful hour, of which the Savior says: “Now my soul is terrified; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour! Yet for this very purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name!”

It is the Son’s struggle to do the Father’s will and to reveal his counsel of love for our salvation. So deep is the abyss of suffering into which the Son must descend for the sake of the fallen race that he prays for a moment to turn back—but not to refuse the path. Overwhelmed by the dreadful guilt and offense of our sin, he looks only to the glorification of divine love through the atoning death; and though he feels the full bitterness of death, he prays that it may come upon him, so that the Father’s name may be glorified and the fallen race be reconciled with God.

His struggle with suffering ends in complete surrender to the Father’s will; and from heaven comes the Father’s testimony concerning the Son, that the hour of suffering, bitter though it is, is nevertheless the hour of glorification. This gives blessed assurance of victory, and the Savior testifies that the hour of his suffering and death is his hour of victory, in which power is taken from the ruler of this world; and henceforth the exalted Savior from the cross will stretch out his arms toward all people to draw them into the embrace of grace. There is no power strong enough to keep a human being bound in the bondage of sin any longer, if that person is willing to follow the drawing of the crucified Savior. Satan is bound, death is conquered, sin is atoned for, wrath is stilled.

What do you think, O soul—shall your own resistance nevertheless become your perdition, despite the Savior’s drawing? Shall all of God’s love and all of Christ’s suffering be wasted on you, because you will not come when the Savior calls? Your own heart’s resistance is now the only obstacle to your salvation. Shall it prevail—and you lose, lose the salvation which an eternal Father-love prepared for you?

O no, do not resist him! Open to him who knocks at the door of your heart, and God’s name shall be glorified in you through your salvation. You too shall become a grain of wheat that is gathered into the granary, if you let Christ’s drawing power overcome you, so that you are united with him, who himself is the true grain of wheat that was laid in the ground in order to spring up from it and bear a blessed harvest.

Already we see how the wheat grows and the heavy head is filled. Already we see God’s kingdom grow forth like a mighty tree from the little seed that was cast into the field of the world. Where are you, O soul? Are you among the noble fruit of the bloody sowing, or are you only chaff, ready to be burned? God’s kingdom can go forward without you—can you do without God’s kingdom?

O that we all might be drawn in to Christ’s cross, so that we all might become fruit of the grain of wheat and honor God’s love by being saved by his grace! But Christ’s way to glory is also the way of all his servants. **As he died, so must we die, in order to live.** Our entire old, sinful life, our entire corruptible and sensuous life with all its enjoyment and desire, we must give over, so that we die from sin and the world in order to live for God.

It is the hour of suffering, but it is also the hour of salvation. When a person gives up everything in order to win salvation in Christ’s death and resurrection, that person suffers the

pain of crucifixion, but also gains an eternal life and an eternal glory. Let go of everything you have, and everything to which your heart clings among earthly, sensuous, and corruptible things; then you will indeed feel the agony of crucifixion, but if you then grasp Christ, dead and risen, you will also taste the blessed joy of the resurrection. Only in this way do you share in the life of the grain of wheat; only in this way do you yourself become a new grain of wheat, sprung forth from the true grain of wheat, a living member of Christ's body.

But not only that. If you wish to be Christ's servant and go to work in his vineyard, then know that it is the same way for you as for him: the way of self-surrender and self-sacrifice. If there is to come fruit from your life, fruit for God's kingdom, then prepare yourself to suffer hardship as a soldier of Jesus Christ. You must give your entire life if there is to be any blessed fruit. From half surrender, half heart, half life, and half death there comes only imperfect fruit.

Be unsparing in your surrender in God's work and do not spare yourself; then you too shall become like a grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies, and from which much fruit grows. Your life in God is not given to you so that you should live for yourself alone and win for yourself an eternal glory. If you are to be to the praise of God's love, then let your life be a service of love as an offering, in which you live for God's people and God's kingdom, so that there may be blessing with you wherever you go, and blessed fruit from your labor.

See what fruit there is from the lives of those who truly have followed in the Savior's footsteps and sacrificed themselves wholly for the Lord's cause! Let us also follow in the same footsteps; and if we suffer with him, it is nevertheless only incorruptible honor to suffer for him who suffered for us. And our brief hour of suffering shall become a bright day of eternal glory for us.

Awake, you soldiers of the Lord.

And let there be a whole spirit of sacrifice among us, so that the cold spirit of selfishness of the world must retreat in shame before the power of Christ's love, and the Lord's field shall put forth a glorious harvest among us, to the praise of God's love and to the salvation of human hearts.

Stake your life, and you shall win an eternal life; stake your life, and you shall see blessing and rich fruit from your life. Do not fear the pain: the way of glory is a way of tribulation. For God's love is revealed in Christ's death on the cross for the sin of the world, and only through Christ's cross are our hearts filled with God's love, so that we also are able to present ourselves as a living, holy, and God-pleasing sacrifice.

26 Maundy Thursday: The Example of Humility

John 13:1–15: Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them unto the end. And during the Supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He came from God and was going to God, rose from the Supper and laid aside His garments; and He took a linen cloth and girded Himself. After that He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the linen cloth with which He was girded. Then He came to Simon Peter; and he said to Him: Lord, do You wash my feet? Jesus answered and said to him: What I am doing you do not know now, but you shall understand it afterward. Peter said to Him: Never—ever—shall You wash my feet! Jesus answered him: Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me. Simon Peter said to Him: Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. Jesus said to him: He who has been washed needs only to wash his feet; he is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all. For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said: You are not all clean. So after He had washed their feet and taken His garments and sat down again, He said to them: Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you speak rightly, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that just as I have done to you, so you also shall do.

The hour had come. Jesus knew the Lamb was to be slain for the sins of the world; He knew that the dreadful hour of suffering was to begin, and that it was to begin with the deepest humiliation for Him; for the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, that he should betray Him. Jesus knew also that of the little flock of eleven chosen apostles there was not one who would stand firm that night. Utterly alone, without any friend on earth for strength or support, He was to suffer what must be suffered for the salvation of the world.

But He knew also that this was the way from this world to the Father, and that He who had come from God and entered the world now left the world again and went to the Father. Therefore His soul was lifted up with blessed joy in this hour of humiliation, so that He could say: Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him. It was but a little while that He must pass through the valley of the shadow of death; yet through anguish of soul and bodily pain, through crushing shame and mockery from the devil and his tools, the way led forward to eternal and infinite glory, which He was to obtain not for Himself alone, but also for all His weak and wavering friends, whom He had loved while He was in the world and loved unto the end.

Yes, Jesus loved those who had followed Him until now, and who soon were to stand face to face with a hostile world, in which they were to continue the work and the conflict without having Him visibly among them. Jesus loved them, and in His humiliation and in His

exaltation thought more of them than of Himself. He would help them in every way to endure in the conflict against the enemies whom He saw threatening them. Therefore He instituted the Supper that night; therefore also He undertook the washing of feet. For He knew that of all the enemies that threatened them, none was more dangerous than the devil of pride, who had just caused a dispute among them as to which of them should be regarded as the greatest. If only this enemy might be kept away from the circle of the Lord's friends! For truly the experience of the Church through the ages has sorrowfully confirmed what Jesus foresaw, that of all the enemies of God's congregation on earth none is more dangerous than the spirit of pride and vanity, which stirs in the old Adam so long as there is a shred of strength in him.

There was absolutely nothing of this spirit in Jesus. When the prince of this world came, he had nothing in Him. Jesus had come to serve, and precisely on this night He was to do the fallen world the greatest of all services: to give His life as a ransom for all. Terrible and immeasurable therefore is the difference between Him who is and was and ever shall be the greatest, and His chosen disciples, who even this night could dispute about who was greatest.

Therefore, when the Passover meal had been prepared and the moment had come when, according to Jewish custom, a servant should bring water around to those who reclined at table that they might wash their hands, Jesus rose and went and took the water, as though He were the servant or the slave who should carry it around to the guests. Yet it was not enough for Him to be the servant among the disciples by bringing them water for their hands. That would indeed have shamed them, but it would not have sufficed also to humble and raise them up after their fall.

He would help His own now and for all time by showing them the way and giving them the power to walk in it. Therefore He took the water and went to the one who this time perhaps had received the lowest place at the table, Simon Peter, and was about to kneel at his feet in order to wash them. Then it dawned upon Peter what was to happen here, and in dismay he cried out: Lord, do You wash my feet? He felt the sting in Jesus' action, but he did not clearly see how bad things were among the disciples and with himself, and he would rather avoid the deep shame which he felt would come if Jesus carried out His purpose.

But Jesus was the steady and strong physician who knew what was needed here. He saw that Peter felt the reproof, but He saw also that Peter did not understand the sin, and how it alone could be taken away. Therefore He answered with the precious word which so often has become a comfort in heavy hours when the way of love seemed so strange: What I am doing you do not know now, but you shall understand it afterward.

Yet Simon Peter still thought that he must prevent the incomprehensible and shameful thing from happening: Never—ever—shall You wash my feet! He supposed that he understood it well enough; he had already learned what it meant, and he would show that he understood his position and had grasped the meaning. He was ready now to throw himself down before Jesus and wash His feet; indeed, if Jesus had now given him the basin and asked him to wash all the disciples' feet, Peter would gladly have taken Jesus' place, if only he might escape this humiliation, that Jesus truly should kneel at his feet and wash them. Thus the soul so often resists allowing Jesus to perform the work which He alone can do.

Jesus does not release Peter with half repentance and half restoration. He saw the danger of

his beloved disciple's soul, that he would hasten to come away from his real need without receiving real help. Peter was willing to do something for Jesus now, if only he might avoid that Jesus should do everything for him. Therefore Jesus takes the matter so seriously; He saw that if Peter were allowed to escape in this way, he was not fully prepared in his sorrow and therefore would not draw the true comfort from the right source of comfort, Jesus. Unless I wash you, He says, you have no part with Me.

Then Peter once more awakens with living, storming love for Jesus; then he will have not only feet but also hands and head washed, if it is so that Jesus alone must do all, and that all his fellowship with Jesus rests upon complete surrender and yielding to Him. Yet now it is Jesus who restrains and tempers Peter's impetuous zeal and lets him see the deep meaning of the symbolic act. What He has willed that Peter should understand, and what Peter now in his willing surrender to the Savior is able to understand, is this: that both he and the other disciples need a cleansing which only Jesus can give them. Even if they belong to Him and already are clean, yet the daily walk in the world will soil their feet, not only because the world around them is unclean, but because the world's unclean mind still stirs in themselves and is awakened in them through contact with the world. It had indeed just shown itself in the dispute they had with one another about who was greatest. But if Jesus may serve them with His cleansing grace, with the daily forgiveness of sins, then they need not fear that their daily falls shall rob them of their state of grace and their standing as God's children. If they walk in faith, then the heart is the Lord's, and He who has cleansed them shall daily cleanse them, so that sin will no longer rule their lives. But one among the twelve is no longer clean; therefore, you who stand, see that you do not fall. Judas is not cleansed from the wickedness of his sinful heart, even though his feet are washed with water by Jesus Himself. For he no longer loves; he no longer needs Jesus. He hates Jesus now, since he has sold Him, and the world's lust has taken the place of love.

Thus Jesus completes His cleansing service of love upon all His disciples. And never has there been, nor can there be, revealed greater humility, self-abasement, and self-sacrifice than precisely this: that He who is the Lord against whom we sin is Himself the One who bears our sins in His body on the tree; Himself the One who takes away our sins by forgiving and blotting them out; yes, Himself the One who begs to be allowed to serve us in this way, since we so sorely need it. Not because He needed His disciples, but because they needed Him, therefore He lays Himself down at their feet and renders them the service of love.

In truth this deed of Jesus is serious and moving for all believing souls. And yet there are those who do not heed it as they ought. There are those who once needed Jesus and His grace in order to become clean, but who no longer need Him for that matter, because they think they sin no more. Is not this the same error as Peter's: Never—ever—shall You wash my feet? They manage that matter themselves. But oh, if you would heed the gripping word which Peter received: Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me.

And again there are those who do not take to heart that he who is washed needs only to wash his feet, but is entirely clean. They seem constantly to wish to feed on the excitement of awakening and never to come to the believers' quiet state and their firm and unshakable standing as God's children. Unhappy souls, who easily can become a prey to the devil's dreadful power, since they always require the unrest of the first awakening in order to have

the violent feelings which have become to them a sign of their conversion. How quickly such souls become like the restless waves of the sea, which are tossed by every wind. They run from one stormy movement into another; and they forget that salvation does not consist in being cast up and down by the foaming waves and now and then touching the Rock with one hand and then slipping out again. No, friend, you must climb up onto this Rock with your feet and take full and complete foothold upon it; then you first experience the peace and assurance which Jesus gives, and then you understand what it is that we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast our first firm confidence unto the end.

But Jesus is not finished with His disciples merely because He has washed their feet. He adds an admonition, and how greatly it is needed! What He has now done, in that He has bowed down before each of the disciples and washed their feet, shall be for them an example of humility. We bow in the dust before You, Lord Jesus, and sigh in our hearts: O Lord, how impossible for us to imitate You!

And yet, brothers and sisters, if we are to remain in the fellowship with Jesus and are to have true congregation in spirit and in truth, then we must learn from Him who is meek and lowly of heart. It will not do in the old way, that we rejoice over the neighbor's faults and exalt ourselves at his expense and thank God that we are not like this publican. It is indeed hard to hear that we are Pharisees and self-righteous, but we are so if we do not wash one another's feet and from the heart forgive each his brother his trespass. It requires humility to ask one's brother for forgiveness; but he who has had spiritual experience and has tested his own heart somewhat in the seriousness of life knows that more humility is required, more of Christ's mind, truly to forgive his brother.

Where shall we obtain this power of humility, this precious grace? With Jesus at the table of the Supper. He gives us Himself in the Supper, that through His body and blood we may become partakers of His life and Spirit. But if we receive Jesus Himself, then we receive His mind and His love, so that we can do toward the brothers what He has done toward us. Oh how differently would God's life and God's congregation flourish among us if we became more hungry and thirsty for the food which only Jesus can give, and if thus we truly came to experience that His flesh is truly food and His blood is truly drink.

Therefore come in poverty of spirit and receive from Jesus' riches, and you shall find that His commandments are not burdensome, since He Himself pours out His love into your heart. Amen.

27 Good Friday: Your Hour and the Power of Darkness

Luke 22:39—71; 23:1—46.

And he went out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples also followed him. And when he came to the place, he said to them, Pray that you may not fall into temptation. And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours be done. And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground.

And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow. And he said to them, Why do you sleep? Rise and pray, that you may not fall into temptation.

While he was yet speaking, behold, a multitude came, and he who was called Judas, one of the twelve, went before them and drew near to Jesus to kiss him. But Jesus said to him, Judas, do you betray the Son of Man with a kiss? And when those who were about him saw what would follow, they said, Lord, shall we strike with the sword? And one of them struck the servant of the chief priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus answered and said, Let it go this far. And he touched his ear and healed him.

Then Jesus said to the chief priests and captains of the temple and elders, who had come against him, Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? When I was daily with you in the temple, you did not stretch out your hands against me; but this is your hour, and the power of darkness.

And they seized him and led him away and brought him into the high priest's house; and Peter followed at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the midst of the palace and sat down together, Peter sat among them. And a certain servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light, looked intently at him and said, This man also was with him. But he denied it, saying, Woman, I do not know him. And a little later another saw him and said, You also are one of them. But Peter said, Man, I am not. And about an hour later, another confidently affirmed, saying, Truly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean. But Peter said, Man, I do not know what you are saying. And immediately, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, Before the cock crows today, you shall deny me three times. And he went out and wept bitterly.

And the men who held Jesus mocked him and beat him. And they threw a cloth over him and struck him, saying, Prophecy, who is it that struck you? And many other things they spoke against him, blaspheming.

And when it was day, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together,

both chief priests and scribes; and they led him away into their council, saying, If you are the Christ, tell us. But he said to them, If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I ask you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God. And they all said, Are you then the Son of God? And he said to them, You say it, for I am. And they said, What further testimony do we need? For we ourselves have heard it from his own mouth.

And their whole crowd rose up and led him to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying: This man we have found misleading the people and forbidding the payment of tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is the Christ, a King.

And Pilate asked him, saying: Are you the King of the Jews? And he answered him and said: You say it.

And Pilate said to the chief priests and to the multitude: I find no guilt in this man. But they insisted strongly, saying: He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee even to this place.

But when Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's authority, he sent him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem in those days.

And when Herod saw Jesus, he rejoiced greatly; for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard much concerning him, and he hoped to see some sign done by him. And he asked him many questions; but he answered him nothing.

And the chief priests and the scribes stood and accused him vehemently. And Herod and his soldiers mocked him, put a white robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. And on that day Pilate and Herod became friends with one another; for before they had been at enmity.

And Pilate called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them: You have brought this man to me as one who is misleading the people; and behold, I, having examined him before you, find no guilt in this man concerning those things of which you accuse him. Nor has Herod either; for I sent you to him, and behold, he has done nothing deserving death. Therefore I will chastise him and release him.

Now he was obliged to release one to them at the feast. But they shouted as one, saying: Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas—who had been cast into prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.

Again Pilate addressed them, desiring to release Jesus. But they shouted in reply, saying: Crucify, crucify him!

And he said to them the third time: Why, what evil has this man done? I find no guilt deserving death in him; therefore I will chastise him and release him. But they pressed upon him with loud cries, demanding that he should be crucified; and their shouting prevailed.

And Pilate pronounced that their demand should be granted. And he released the one they were asking for, who had been cast into prison for insurrection and murder; but Jesus he handed over to their will.

And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, coming from the country, and laid the cross upon him, that he might bear it after Jesus.

And there followed him a great crowd of the people, including women who were mourning and weeping for him. But Jesus, turning to them, said: Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep over me, but weep over yourselves and over your children. For behold, days are coming in which they shall say: Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that did not bear, and the breasts that did not nurse. Then they shall begin to say to the mountains: Fall upon us; and to the hills: Cover us. For if they do these things in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry?

Two other evildoers were also led out with him to be put to death. And when they had come to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, and the evildoers, one on the right and the other on the left.

And Jesus said: Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. And they divided his garments and cast lots.

And the people stood looking on; and the rulers also mocked him, saying: He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ, the Chosen of God.

And the soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying: If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.

And there was also an inscription over him, written in Greek and Latin and Hebrew: This is the King of the Jews.

And one of the evildoers who were hanging there railed at him, saying: Are you the Christ? Then save yourself and us. But the other answered and rebuked him, saying: Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence? And we indeed justly; for we receive what our deeds deserve; but this man has done nothing amiss.

And he said: Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom. And he said to him: Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in Paradise.

And it was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, and the sun was darkened and the veil of the temple was torn in two.

And Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said: Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. And having said this, he gave up his spirit.

This is the week of silence. And Good Friday is for us the quietest of all these days of sorrow. In Norway it was the custom that on that day neither organ nor bells were used. But for Jesus it was no quiet day. It was long—and loud.

First a bitter struggle in his soul, so that the sweat fell like drops of blood, while his disciples could not watch one hour with him; at last, since they might not use weapons, they fled from him.

Then an onslaught against him by the chief priests, the captains, the elders, and a band of servants with swords and clubs and torches—as against a robber. Then before Annas, then to Caiaphas with mockery and scorn and blows and false witnesses in both places; later before Pilate and before Herod and back again to Pilate, while the chief priests and the elders and the whole people cried out as one: Crucify! Crucify! Give us Barabbas! His blood be upon us and upon our children! If you release him, you are not Caesar's friend! Crucify! Crucify! Until even the proud Roman was overcome by the noise and frightened by the fury of the people, so that he handed Jesus over to be crucified, and the cries of the people and of the chief priests prevailed.

The Lord himself gathers all this tumult of wickedness and injustice into one word: "This is your hour and the power of darkness."

So the servants of darkness and of Satan also have their time and their hour; and silent as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, Jesus humbled himself under this hour and power of darkness, though he could have commanded legions of angels for his defense. He did so that he might suffer it all—wholly innocent—and thus become the Lamb who bears and takes away the sin of the world.

There is something wondrous and beyond us in this providence of the righteous and almighty God to permit the powers of wickedness such injustice and, as it were, to appoint for them an hour and a fixed time in which they have complete dominion, so that they could trample under their feet and cast down into the depths of shame this holy and innocent Son of God. Yet it shows us also that, whether we understand it or not, it was necessary — yes, it was pleasing to you, Father — in order that we might see that God means it in dead earnest when he says that he loved the world so greatly that he gave his only-begotten Son, that we should be saved when we believe.

How often does not the question arise in our hearts in the course of daily life, when we see great injustices committed without punishment: Why does God permit this? — so that we are often shaken by it and tempted to doubt God's almighty and righteous love.

And yet, what are even the most dreadful injustices either in history or in our own personal experience compared with this people's rebellious conduct against their own Savior and Messiah? And if God did not spare his own Son, but gave to the prince of darkness and his servants, the elders and chief priests, an hour and a time which they could use freely to satisfy their heart's wickedness and bloodthirst, and he did it with a purpose that lay far, far beyond any human understanding to grasp or devise — that, as we see on this day, innumerable human souls should be eternally saved — how ought we not to bow humbly in the dust before the eternal and all-seeing One, when he still today in the midst of us permits things that are offensive to our sense of justice and simple faith, and when this holy and grave word again sounds over us from the Savior's mouth:

"This is your hour and the power of darkness."

For it serves us for good, even if we do not understand it, as it then became our eternal salvation. It was then also in order that the power of darkness and its servants should have no excuse. Had they not had their hour? Had not God given them leave to use the whole might of their wickedness? And what was the fruit thereof? Jesus raised from the grave; Satan and all his kingdom overcome. And what had they to say when the Lord's hour came, according to the word of Jesus: "Weep not for me, but for your children; for the days shall come when you shall say to the mountains, Fall on us, and to the hills, Cover us!"

As surely as God gives to the power of darkness its hour, so has he also appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness; and he had already appointed an hour on which this people's children, who had cried "crucify," should see their sanctuary laid in ruins, and the holy city where they had shed innocent blood leveled to the ground, and they themselves scattered as slaves and strangers over the whole earth unto this day.

Therefore the Savior can on this day of torment and anguish say so calmly: "Let them go so far; this is your hour and the power of darkness." He knew what significance it already had and what his Father would accomplish through him: "Shall I not drink the cup which my Father has given me?"

And now, my friend, you who have been brought over from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, now the same Good Friday question comes to you which Jesus put to James and John:

"Are you able to drink the cup that I must drink?"

For you must indeed drink it, according to the word that no one can be glorified with Jesus who does not suffer with him. When you have labored yourself weary and spent your strength in vain and to no purpose; when all your love and devotion have been despised and misinterpreted; when it seems as though your whole building shall fall into ruins, and enemies trample upon you and would blot even your name from remembrance in violence and shame — can you then still say with the prophet:

"Yet my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God," and add with confidence:

"This is your hour and the power of darkness," because you know that your shame shall be God's glorification, and your humiliation the salvation of many souls — then you have today had your Good Friday with Jesus and shall in the Lord's time be raised and exalted with him.

Then you have today beheld him, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross and despised the shame; and you shall not grow weary nor faint in your soul, but shall sit with him at the right hand of God's throne, and, when the hour of darkness is past, inherit the unfading crown of glory. For yet a very little while, and he who is to come will come and will not delay.

Be therefore not of those who, because of the power of darkness and the hour of wickedness, draw back to their own destruction, but of those who believe in the midst of Good Friday's anguish and darkness unto the salvation of the soul.

For truly, he will not delay either with salvation or with judgment. And as the day came,

dreadful with fire and destruction upon the city and the temple, so that not one stone was left upon another, so shall it surely come in the Lord's appointed time to strike down and cast into eternal darkness those who now rejoice in the hour of the power of darkness and again trample the Son of God's blood under foot, persecuting and misleading his little ones, mocking the Spirit of grace, or sinking into lukewarmness and being spewed out of the Lord's mouth. For recompense belongs to God; I will repay, says the Lord.

And therefore the Good Friday voice sounds as a holy admonition also to the impenitent: "This is your hour and the power of darkness."

Friend, shall it sound in vain?

28 First Day of Easter: Fear and Joy

Matthew 28:1–8: And when the Sabbath was past, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to behold the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled the stone from the door and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And the guards trembled for fear of him and became as dead men. But the angel answered and said to the women: Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus, the crucified. He is not here; for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead. And behold, he goes before you into Galilee; there shall you see him. See, I have told you. And they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples.

In the three hours immediately before Jesus gave up his spirit on the cross, Luke tells that the sun was darkened and that the veil of the temple was rent in two. At his resurrection Matthew reports in our text that there was a great earthquake, and that the angel of the Lord descended from heaven as lightning and rolled the stone from the tomb. The Lord's death and resurrection was an event that set heaven and earth in motion to show that he who is Lord over death is he who has all authority both in heaven and on earth.

But every revelation of this divine power, small or great, over an individual or over the whole of humanity, works terror and fear in every sinful heart, which thereby comes to know both its impotence and its judgment.

When the angel was revealed in the temple to Zacharias, he was afraid; and when he came to the Virgin Mary, who should become the Mother of God, it was the same with her, wherefore he also said to her: "Fear not, Mary, for you have found grace with God." When Jesus was revealed to the disciples walking upon the sea, they were terrified; and when after the resurrection he suddenly stood in the midst of them, they were seized with fear, so that he had to calm them by showing them his hands and his feet, and when their fear thereafter passed over into so exceeding a joy that it would almost take from them their faith, he calmed them again by eating before their eyes.

What wonder if fear and terror seized not only the guard, but also the women who on Easter morning came to seek the crucified, when the forces of nature were shaken and the power of the Lord's glory was revealed and the angel spoke to them: "He is not here; he is risen."

It is sin which awakens fear when I am at once placed face to face with the holy and almighty God, whether this be accompanied by extraordinary manifestations or whether it occurs through the Spirit's awakening and testimony in the heart.

My sin! my sin! my sin! — that too becomes a child of God's continual lament here below, as it weighed upon the Apostle Paul and made him cry out: "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of death?" And although also a carnal and unconverted man will be filled with fear and terror when God's nearness is revealed to him in some visible

and supernatural manner and will tremble before the judgment which he knows in his heart, yet it is a child of God who most deeply feels fear in the face of the revelation of God's power, not only because a child of God most deeply knows his sin and God's holy righteousness, but because he has also known the foretaste of the blessedness of eternal life and fears, so long as he walks in sinful flesh, to lose this incomprehensible treasure. For "let him who stands take heed lest he fall;" "I go in peril where I go, and never know myself secure." What wonder therefore if these women, to whom the angel had proclaimed the blessed tidings of Easter morning: "Christ is risen!" went away from the tomb with fear. Can fear be separated even from the most blessed joy here in the world, unless a man forgets to search his heart at every time and to remember his sin?

I recall an Easter morning when I was to preach. I had been taken up with the thought of the victorious power of the resurrection and had prepared a sermon which in my opinion should resound with that triumph which as a shout of joy ought to pass through the whole congregation on the morning of the resurrection and sound up to heaven to be met by the angels' answer. I fear that there had entered fleshly enthusiasm into my proclamation and that I had forgotten fear before the revelation of the Lord's glory. I ascended the pulpit, as it seemed to me, festively disposed and well prepared. It was to become a true "Easter sermon." I prayed God for his blessing. But when I had come into the midst of reading the old, simple text in Mark and again met the words: "Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the tomb? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away," then I was seized by a strange feeling; my breast began to heave, my throat was constricted, and my eyes were filled with tears despite all my efforts. The letters ran together before me, and my tongue could not bring forth a word. So I stood for a while mute and in a state of unspeakable humiliation and brokenness. The Lord's holiness and power had been revealed to me, and I had been made to remember my sins. When at last I as it were tore myself free and read the remainder of the text, my whole sermon was gone, and I would gladly have crept under the earth for shame. O how I wished that I had never been a priest! But preach I must, and I know not to this day what I spoke in my fearful and poor condition. Only this I know, that some days thereafter, while I still felt cast down and humbled over the events of Easter Day, a man came to me, opened his heart in many tears, and asked me to show him the way to salvation. He had been awakened by that Easter sermon over which I was ashamed. When he was gone, I felt myself tenfold more confounded and would, like Peter, have cast myself at the Savior's feet and said: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man!" But the Lord met me halfway and said: "Take courage; I make you a fisher of men." It was for me an Easter Day of humiliation, but also of blessing, and I began to understand the women's feelings when they went from the tomb with fear; but I also came to understand how they nevertheless went away with great joy.

"Love casts out fear," says the Apostle. No one knows God's love except he who has been made to see his sin and in his fear and distress has found grace through faith in the crucified and risen one. Where sin abounded, grace abounded yet more; the deeper one is allowed to descend into his own sin, the more firmly he clings to the Savior, the more he grows in faith, and the more blessedly he feels the joy of being saved. Therefore Paul also says after having lamented: O wretched man that I am! — "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus; for if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live

with him; for death has no more dominion over him; the death that he died, he died once for sin, but the life that he lives, he lives to God.”

If we cannot approach Christ’s opened tomb without fear when we consider our sin and God’s omnipotence and grace, then neither can we draw near to the risen one except with an unspeakable joy, praise and thanksgiving; for he who was dead, behold, he lives; and we who were dead, behold, we live! If he is risen, then we too are risen; if he has ascended, then we shall be allowed to follow him; and if he sits at the Father’s right hand, then we also shall live and reign with him in all eternity. Precious soul, do you believe this?

O if you must indeed be humbled like Peter and terrified like Mary Magdalene, what unspeakable blessedness to come again early on Easter morning to Jesus’ tomb, and and so believe and know that Jesus is risen — and that you are risen with him — and go away not only with fear, but also with great joy because of God’s love which is poured out in you by his Holy Spirit!

Then there remains only this: like the women, with the conviction of faith and childlike trust, to go out among brothers and sisters and proclaim this truth, which is eternally new and ever powerful:

Jesus is risen!

He is risen!

And as it stands written: “We are buried with him by baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also shall walk in newness of life” — so begin this Easter morning with earnestness and sincerity, not only with confession of the mouth, but above all with a Christian life, a life in daily fear and poverty of spirit, but also a life in great joy and victory over the flesh, to proclaim first among your own, then to all others, this saving truth — if you yourself have experienced it — “Christ is risen!” From poor sinners, from tried Christians, yes, from the angels in heaven there shall sound back the answer:

He is truly risen!

29 Second Day of Easter: Faith or Hardening

Matthew 28:9–15: And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them and said, “Hail.” And they came and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not fear. Go, tell my brothers that they are to go into Galilee, and there they shall see me.”

And while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and told the chief priests all that had happened. And they assembled with the elders and took counsel, and they gave the soldiers many silver coins and said, “Say: His disciples came by night and stole him while we slept. And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will persuade him and keep you free from trouble.” And they took the silver coins and did as they were instructed. And this saying has been spread among the Jews unto this day.

When Jesus was born, an angelic message concerning it sounded to the shepherds; they believed the message, went to Bethlehem, found the Child and his mother, and praised Israel’s God, who had given his people a Savior, the Lord Christ in David’s city. To Gentile wise men the star brought tidings of the birth of the King of the Jews, and they believed the message, and they came and worshiped the Child in Mary’s arms. But to Herod the Great, the king in Jerusalem, that same message came through the wise men from the East, and he believed, in the same manner as the devils believe that God is one, and he trembled for fear, and he hardened his heart and sought to slay the Child.

So it goes also with Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Our text today tells of it, for our encouragement and warning, how it becomes for some a fragrance of life unto life, but for others a fragrance of death unto death. And that question demands its answer also from us: What do we do with Jesus’ resurrection from the dead? And where do we stand with the risen Jesus? Upon the answer depends our salvation or our perdition, eternal life or eternal death. May God’s Spirit, who alone can give the right answer within believing hearts, help us that we may believe and live.

Jesus Christ’s resurrection is a miracle no one can honestly deny; that is to say, it is impossible to deny that Jesus is risen without lying. All who deny Jesus’ resurrection know that they deny that which is true. Because they tremble at the thought of this miracle, they prefer to say that they do not believe it.

Jesus Christ’s resurrection is a miracle no one can honestly deny, and that means it powerfully proves that he is God’s Son. Therefore it also brings life and blessedness for those who believe in the risen One and worship him.

Faith or hardening is therefore the real choice that lies before us. The dull, indifferent sleep in which so many of the so-called Christians find themselves is in reality already a sure sign of death, and there is no salvation for any of these sleeping ones unless they give heed to the Word which sounds to them also out from the open grave: Awake, you who sleep, and arise from the dead.

The women of whom our text speaks are for us an example of those who believe unto the

salvation of the soul; the chief priests, on the other hand, are of those who shrink back unto their destruction.

The women had been at the open grave, and an angel had spoken to them a blessed word: “Do not fear; for I know that you seek Jesus, the crucified. He is not here; for he is risen, as he said. Come here, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead. And behold, he goes before you into Galilee; there you shall see him. Behold, I have told you.”

The women believed the Word and obeyed the command. With fear and great joy they ran to bring the glad message to the eleven. They had never been so shaken; their hearts trembled with fear and joy, and they hurried off, that all who loved Jesus might hear what they had seen and heard.

Blessed are they who believed the message they heard; for it went with them as with Nathanael: they received to see greater things. Jesus himself met those who believed the word from the angel’s mouth, and he greeted them with the glad word: “Hail!” It was the first word from the lips of the Risen One to those for whose sake he had gone into death; it bore with it to those who heard it a joyful assurance of his divine majesty, of his infinite love, and of his perfect victory over sin and death and all the power of evil. The Crucified had conquered, the Dead was alive, God’s glory was revealed among men as never before.

The women fell to their knees before the Risen One; it was the Son of God who stood before them, and he did not refuse to receive worship from them. So shall his believing congregation worship him and exalt and praise his Name. He is not only the one through whom all was created and through whom all creation has its natural life; he is also the firstborn from the dead, through whom eternal life and incorruptibility are brought to light; he is the Head of the body, the congregation, and what the old creation lost through sin, that the new creation receives back in the risen Savior. Bow before him, my soul, and worship; for the Lamb who was slain is worthy to receive honor and praise and power unto eternity.

It was a blessed hour for the women; such is only the hour in which the longing soul finds its Savior and a poor sinner receives the forgiveness of sins. It is the holy joy of faith which the world has never tasted and never shall taste. All perishable joys together weigh nothing at all against the soul’s infinite blessedness in Jesus’ fellowship and worship. Do you know this blessedness, brother? It is the fruit of faith in the risen Jesus.

For if he is risen, then sin is atoned and God’s wrath taken away. If he is risen, then that life is won which death cannot destroy. If he is risen, then our faith is not in vain, but mighty to raise us with Christ, make us alive with him, glorify us with him, and set us with him in the heavenly places, so that in the midst of death’s and corruption’s world, while we ourselves still bear the body of death, yet we are God’s children, and Christ lives in us, so that we are dead, and our life is hidden with Christ in God. Blessed and praised be he who was dead, and behold, he lives unto all eternity.

And when the women had seen Jesus and were anew assured of his resurrection, Jesus sends them to do his work and bear his Word to the apostles. All who have found life in faith in God’s Son must labor in his service. No one can love Jesus in an evil and unbelieving world

without confessing him. Therefore he lets his believing ones remain in the body and live upon the earth, that they shall be his witnesses. And here Jesus sends the women to the apostles with the loving greeting: “Tell my brothers that they shall go into Galilee; there they shall see me.” In the hour of his resurrection Jesus calls the disciples brothers. That too is the effect and fruit of the resurrection. Now they shall not only hear his Word and learn from his wisdom; now they shall also become partakers of his divine life, which is offered and given for them, and which by the Spirit shall be poured out into them.

That is the congregation. It is possible only through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Only by the power of the atonement can sinners draw near to the Lord in his sanctuary; only by the resurrection from the dead can Jesus’ immortal life be communicated to those who were dead in sins and trespasses, and who were reconciled to God through his Son’s death.

Blessed are those who truly believe in the Risen One and are born again to a living hope through Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead.

But those who know Jesus only in order to hate him — what can they do with Jesus’ resurrection? All the sleeping souls who love to sleep, and who above all things hate the light from Christ’s open grave and Easter morning’s awakening earthquake and its signs and wonders — what must they do to stay asleep?

There is one thing they must do, if the risen Savior shall not awaken and save and make them alive; they must harden themselves like the chief priests and deny for themselves and others the living truth, concerning which they know full well cannot be denied.

When the soldiers came and told the chief priests what they had seen and heard, then the chief priests understood very well that it had happened as Jesus had said: “After three days I rise again.” But they would not that it should be true; for if it were true, then they must acknowledge their guilt and condemn themselves and all their conduct, when they had denied that Jesus was the Christ and had slain the Prince of life. It should not be true; for then they themselves were wretched criminals, but Jesus’ disciples were those who had understood God’s counsel and chosen the way of salvation and life. They would not repent; therefore they must harden themselves. And since the soldiers were witnesses of their shame, they did with them as with Judas; they gave them many silver coins, that they should become traitors against the truth and spread falsehood instead. Like so many other rulers in state and church, these too had learned to believe in the power of money. They thought that before the power of money even the truth, God’s living truth, should lie subdued. And how did that turn out? Truly, the soldiers at the grave and the seal upon the stone and the very money with which the false testimony was bought have become speaking, yes crying witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection. For why should the frightened guard receive money, if it did not know more than the chief priests wished to have spread among the people?

Yet even today it is possible for men to close heart and mind to the Gospel of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Even now men in the midst of Christendom can cling to earthly things with such passion and desire that they would rather reject Christ and the hope of the resurrection and eternal life than repent and believe in the Crucified. The sleeping members of the congregation, who are awakened neither by the earthquake nor by the angel’s voice, often resemble the chief priests who paid money that the truth should not become known

and condemn them. Or are there not many carnal men who would rather pay money than repent? So long as they are not disturbed in their carnal security and false peace, they will sacrifice much — to their own destruction.

But if Jesus is risen from the dead, then it becomes a matter of life or death what you do with it. and with the Gospel concerning it. Jesus died for your sins and rose for your justification — does that mean nothing to you? He opened heaven for you; are you then so busy with the earth and earthly things that you care nothing for it? If you live as though there were no resurrection, and all your conduct is only a testimony that you seek the earthly things, then you do not believe God's blessed Gospel, and with every day that passes you harden your heart more and more against the truth.

If Jesus is risen, then let us turn to him in whom there is deliverance from death, and being raised with him seek those things which are above, where Christ sits at God's right hand. For our citizenship is in the heavens, from where also we await as Savior the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall transform our body of humiliation to be conformed to his body of glory, according to the power whereby he is able also to subject all things unto himself.

Amen.

30 First Sunday after Easter: The Risen Jesus

Luke 24:36–43: And while they were speaking, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them and said: Peace be with you. But they were terrified and seized with fear and thought they were seeing a spirit. And he said: Why are you troubled, and why do such thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; touch me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they yet believed not for joy and marveled, he said: Have you here anything to eat? And they gave him a piece of broiled fish and of a honeycomb. And he took it and ate before their eyes.

“The Lord is truly risen!”

This the eleven already knew and confessed when the two disciples returned from Emmaus and told that they had seen the risen one. For the eleven greeted them at their entrance with this cry, which since then has sounded unceasingly within the congregation of God: “The Lord is truly risen and has been seen by Simon.”

Yet our text shows us how difficult it is to believe it exactly as it stands that Jesus is truly risen, bodily risen, as Peter later says on the day of Pentecost: “His soul was not left in the kingdom of the dead, nor did his flesh see corruption.”

For when Jesus himself stood in the midst of the disciples, who had just confessed his resurrection, they were afraid and thought that they saw a spirit. And when Jesus had said: “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; touch me and see; for a spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see that I have,” they still did not believe for joy; so that at last Jesus even took a piece of broiled fish and of a honeycomb and ate it before their eyes.

As easily as it is said: “The Lord is truly risen,” so difficult it is to believe it altogether as the words sound. And yet only this is the true and genuine Christian faith.

In our days, and indeed always since the times of Christ, there have been certain very lofty spirits who have readily believed and taught that Christ has spiritually risen from the dead. By this they mean chiefly that his life and work, his suffering and death, have called forth a movement and stirring in the world which has continued until this day and will doubtless continue until the end of the world. Nor indeed can this be denied.

Others again speak more freely and say: Christ has risen in his disciples, in his congregation; the Jews put him to death, but behold, his congregation, which is his body, lives. Nor can this be denied either.

Yet neither of these is the whole, true, Christian faith. It is far simpler, and therefore far more demanding, but therefore also far more blessed. It believes in Jesus Christ crucified, dead, and risen—that is, bodily risen—so that “his soul was not left in the realm of the dead, nor did his flesh see corruption.”

The Christian soul finds its salvation in Jesus himself. His bodily death upon the cross is the atonement for our sins; his bodily resurrection is the mighty testimony that he is the Son of

God and the victor over death. If he has died, he who bore our sins, then our sin is atoned for, then there is forgiveness of sins through faith in his blood; if he is risen, then death is overcome, then there is eternal life for sinners through faith in him.

Therefore this is the simple Christian faith which is mighty to save our souls: that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.”

In this there is salvation for the soul, in nothing else. Not in the understanding’s insight into God’s order of salvation; not in the will’s exertion to improve itself and live a life according to the Lord’s law; not in the feeling’s sorrow and joy. But the living Savior, dead for you and risen for you, the worker of wonders, he himself is the Savior, who can say with the power of Spirit and life to your soul: Peace be with you! For he alone has authority over sin and death, because he has suffered, innocent for the guilty, righteous for the unrighteous, and has come forth from grave and hell with victory over them both. Therefore he can forgive sin; therefore he can save from death.

The only thing that matters is to find him, who has the keys of hell and of death, who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens. If you find him, then he shall say to you: “Fear not! I am the first and the last and the living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, Amen.” And his peace shall descend into your heart, because in that same moment you know that he is the one who understands all your distress, since he himself has suffered it, and who is mighty to relieve it, since he has gone forth victorious out of suffering.

But where is he to be found? Yes, where did his disciples find him? The two who went to Emmaus, the eleven who were gathered in Jerusalem—where did they find him? It was he who came to them as they went with weeping in their hearts and spoke of his suffering and death. It was he who came to the eleven as they sat frightened behind closed doors with his words and works in remembrance. He came to them. Therefore do not fear, you who earnestly long for salvation and peace; he will come to you also, if you seek him in his Word and in his congregation. It is as it stands in the hymn:

Where two in God take counsel, There he himself the third; He makes their
counsel open, And speaks the comforting word.²

Or as it stands in another hymn:

See how Jesus everywhere Is present with each one Who will inscribe him in the
heart And hold himself near him! In the midst of the disciples He lets himself be
gloriously seen, As they, full of sorrow in the hall, spoke of him in sweet discourse.³

If you seek him in full earnest, then you shall find that he is not far from any of us. You shall find him, and he shall find you, and your soul shall be refreshed by his peace. For he can give you all that you lack. You are sinful; he gives you righteousness. You are mortal; he grants you eternal life. You are lost and condemned; he gives eternal salvation and the hope of life.

²Johannes Neunherz, *To Guds Venner vandre silde* (3rd verse)

³Thomas Kingo, *Se hvor Jesus alle vegne* (1st verse)

You bear a corruptible and sensual body; he gives incorruptibility and the glorification of the body. For all that he has won as the Son of Man in glory for his human nature, that he has won in order to give it to us; for he himself had enough in the glory which he had with the Father before the foundation of the world was laid.

Thus it is only the risen Jesus who can be our Savior. What we need is not merely a teacher who can show us the way through life, but a Savior who can show us the way through death. As it is written: “Our God is a God of continual salvation, and to the Lord God belong deliverances from death.” For “we ourselves also, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for adoption, the redemption of our body.” To full salvation belongs also the salvation of the body in incorruptibility; therefore Jesus’ bodily resurrection is so precious a pearl in the wreath which Christian faith possesses. God gave his image in body and soul; he raises it again in both through his Son.

Therefore the believing congregation of God is a blessed fellowship. For when death breaks the brother- and sister-chain with its strong hand, yet it is only a separation to the eye, not to the heart. For the soul lives, and the body rises by God’s power, which he revealed when he raised Jesus from the dead. Though therefore we stand with tears in our eyes beside bier and grave, yet we sing glad in mind and soul:

Let heart and eye then break, And body laid in coffin lie, The hour shall not be
far away When he shall call it back to life.

By death from all distress set free, The bodies mingle with the dust, But glorious
they shall rise again, With life-breath and with beauty filled.⁴

The Lord be praise and glory for the resurrection and the hope of resurrection. May we all do as Paul: “Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forth to what lies ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

⁴*Med sorgen og klagen hold maade*, 3rd–4th verses; hymn based on Aurelius Clemens Prudentius.

31 Second Sunday after Easter: The Shepherd and the Sheep

John 10:1–10. Truly, truly, I say to you: He who does not enter by the door into the sheepfold, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he has driven out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, because they know his voice. But a stranger they will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers. This parable Jesus spoke to them; but they did not understand what it was that he spoke to them. Then Jesus said again to them: Truly, truly, I say to you: I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have abundance.

Here we have from the Lord's own mouth two parables which, with all their authoritative and arresting content and all their simplicity, were nevertheless incomprehensible to the Lord's own disciples and have since caused the theological interpreters great difficulty. It was precisely on account of these things that Jesus had promised his disciples the Holy Spirit, who should teach them all things and remind them of all that he had spoken to them. And when the learned man suspiciously wrestles with the apparent lack of logic in the Word of God, the simple and immature leaps over all difficulties and finds also in these two parables green pastures and still flowing waters for refreshment and rest for his weary soul.

It appears irreconcilable with human reasoning that the Lord calls himself both "the door" and "the shepherd of the sheep" and "the doorkeeper." But for the one who knows that there is no access to the Father except through the Son, that there is no entrance into heaven except through the crucified and risen body of Jesus, that there is no one who can give to him who hungers to eat or to him who thirsts to drink except Jesus, and that no one can defend and protect his sheep except he who has overcome the devil and taken his armor from him—for him it is in faith both rightly intelligible and exceedingly precious that Jesus calls himself at once the door and the shepherd of the sheep and the doorkeeper.

For first, there is only one door to the kingdom of heaven; human reason, self-righteousness, and pride have indeed continually labored to fashion new and more convenient doors into the kingdom of God; yet there is but one through which one may enter and be saved: it is Jesus. Whoever comes into the house through him belongs there. He shall go in and go out. He is no longer under the yoke and bondage of the Law; he has the rights of a son and may claim his inheritance. Think what it means to be a child of God—a sheep of Jesus! To have God's heaven as our house and home even while we are still here on earth, in this mortal life, so that whether we consider God's Word or perform our earthly vocation, whether we pray or keep house, whether we go in or go out, sleep or wake, live or die—we belong to the Lord, have the full rights of children, and find our nourishment in the house. O why do so many

seek for themselves other and deceptive doors of salvation, when this one stands open to them, if only they will go beneath the Cross and follow with Jesus from the tree of the curse to the opened grave! Jesus is not a door that is merely opened and shut. He gives the power to pass through. He is a living door, which gives new life to the dead, leads them through crucifixion and grave to resurrection and eternal life, not sparingly, but as grace upon grace, so that if sin has abounded, grace has abounded much more.

The Lord is therefore more than a door; he is a shepherd. Entering the Father's house through Jesus isn't like walking through an ordinary door. It's not mechanical or impersonal. On the contrary, it is a living, personal relationship because he is a shepherd. He goes out into the wilderness to seek the lost sheep. When he has found them, he lays them upon his shoulders and bears them home with joy. There is a deep, personal bond between Jesus and those whom he saves, as between father and son, between brother and brother. Salvation doesn't happen by belonging to a congregation or a society; it is nothing external, such as, for example, circumcision or belonging to an orthodox church or the like, that decides one's matter of salvation. As the prophet Ezekiel taught his countrymen that he who eats sour grapes shall himself have sore teeth, so it is also in the new covenant that only he who believes in the Son has eternal life. We must each come to him, the precious Savior, and wait until he calls us by name and says: "Be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven." Then you are his own; he calls you thereafter always by the same name; you may meet with him whenever you wish, more easily and intimately than with your closest friend, and he leads you out upon his beautiful pastures. Consider if a king or the President of the United States should seek you out, mention you by name, and speak familiarly and personally with you—how exalted you would feel, and how people round about would admire you and perhaps envy you! Now it is he who is King of kings, highly, highly exalted above them all, who comes to you, the most miserable and wretched of all his subjects, calls you by name, lifts you up to his throne, and says: "All this now belongs to you; you are my brother and shall inherit with me."—The angels themselves marvel and sing for joy, and should it have taken place without your knowing it—you, whom it most nearly concerns? O friend, we do not come sleeping into Christ's sheepfold; he calls us by name; have you heard it? Have you answered him? Or have you despised him, crucified him anew, and trampled his holy blood beneath your feet? O no, friend, there is nothing impersonal in salvation; it concerns you—to be called by name, and to cast yourself upon the Savior's breast as upon a good shepherd and a dear Brother, and thereafter to follow him.

For he goes before and shows us the green pastures; as he has made himself known to us, so must we become familiar with him, know him and obey his blessed voice as the bride when she is called by her bridegroom. There is a deep bond of love and trust between Jesus and the pardoned sinner; they do not mistake his voice; when they follow him, they do not stray, as it is written that not even the fool shall err therein; and now that we know God, yea rather are known of him, how should we again turn back to the weak and beggarly elements to be once more in bondage under them? (Gal. 4:9.)

But he is also "the doorkeeper." Wolves and dogs pursue the soul and would devour it; thieves and robbers seek after it; strangers and deceivers would lead it astray; and where shall the poor, miserable, helpless sheep go? "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure

to give you the kingdom.” Only come, fearful soul, and flee close up to Jesus when the enemies press upon you—hide yourself by his bosom, in his wounds, when the enemies persecute you. He stands guard at the door, and no one can enter without his permission; once you are within his enclosure, you are secure. In temptation, in the struggle of the flesh, under the anxiety of losing the inheritance of life, he is as a rock and a horn for Israel. For who shall separate me from the love of Christ? Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? O no, I am persuaded that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities nor powers nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Truly, he is both the door and the shepherd and the doorkeeper, a strong and loving doorkeeper who can preserve my soul until he brings it home in incorruptibility. Friend, have you gone through the door—is Jesus your shepherd and your doorkeeper?

32 Third Sunday after Easter: Many Rooms in My Father's House

John 14:1–12: Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, and when I have gone and prepared a place for you, I come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, you also shall be. And where I go, you know, and the way you know." Thomas says to him: "Lord, we do not know where you go; how then can we know the way?" Jesus says to him: "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would also have known my Father; from now on you know him and have seen him." Philip says to him: "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus says to him: "So long a time have I been with you, and you have not known me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how then do you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak from myself; but the Father who abides in me, he does the works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if not, then believe for the sake of the works themselves. Truly, truly I say to you: he who believes in me shall also do the works that I do, and greater than these shall he do, because I go to my Father.

Our text belongs to Jesus' farewell discourses to the disciples; he prepares them for his departure through the death of the cross to the Father.

His departure struck the disciples like a dreadful blow. We cannot comprehend the sorrow it caused. Of all that bears the name of love on earth, there has never been anything truer or more intimate than the disciples' love for Jesus. Drawn by him, they had let go of all else; him they had followed; by his word and works they had been lifted up into an entirely new life, of which they had never before had any foreboding; called by him, they had become partakers in a work and a ministry that filled them with the most blessed joy, with the most glorious expectations. They were sent out by him, and they returned to him; in his look they saw approval or rejection of their works, words, and thoughts; by his word their hearts were filled with joy and their souls with new life.

Because no life of love had ever been more blessed, no separation had ever been heavier or more solemn than the one now before them. The beloved Master, the faithful Friend, was to suffer the death of a criminal upon the cross; the little band of disciples was to be left utterly forsaken and alone in the world.

They needed comfort—strong and blessed consolation—the kind only the Lord could give. And richly and abundantly he gives the consolation in these farewell discourses which we read in the Gospel of John in chapters 14–17.

The first great consolation which Jesus gives the disciples, and which he gives us, is this:

"In my Father's house there are many rooms."

The mighty Savior, the heavenly Friend, points upward to the eternal dwellings prepared for those who have left all for his sake and have no abiding place here on earth. He himself, by his wondrous call, has torn them loose from the earthly home and broken the bonds that bound them. Now in the hour of separation, he would keep the eyes of their hearts fixed on the home above, that they may not sink back into the bondage of corruption: "In my Father's house there are many rooms."

Praised and blessed be the Lord for this mighty word of consolation. You lonely, forsaken soul, who have become a stranger in the world because you followed the calling voice of Jesus and have lost all in the world for his sake — there is room for you in the home above, room enough; room for all who love the Lord Jesus.

Let me then let go all in the world and love him who loved me; if I have no longer any home here, there above is the Father's house with many rooms.

"I go to prepare a place for you."

This is the second great ground of consolation for the Christian soul. He who is Son in the house has himself gone home to prepare a place for his friends. The Son comes home, blood-sprinkled from the battle with sin and with the power of death and of hell. Then the doors are opened, then lock and bar spring open, then the reconciled Father embraces the Reconciler, the Son of Man, our Brother and our Friend. The wrath is gone, for sin is atoned, and our flesh and blood is set at the Father's right hand.

He who has the key of David, and who opens and no one shuts, he himself opens the door to the Father's house for the company of friends upon earth, for every poor and needy sinner who in faith flees to him.

Friend, a place is prepared for you in the Father's house. The door stands open; will you not go in? Why do you wander homeless in the desert of this world, where yet the thorns pierce and the heart suffers? Look upward to the blessed home that is opened for you. Why do you sit solitary in a foreign land with tear-wet eye and stare toward the earth, while the soul hungers and thirsts and cannot be satisfied with the swine's food? O come to yourself and say in your heart: "I will arise and go to my Father."

See, the home beckons; see, the Father is ready to receive you. O come, come and find your place prepared for you.

Why does your gaze sink so dark and heavy toward the earth? Why will you not lift it freely and boldly toward the light? O I know what you lack: sin, sin, sin. You dare not, you still shrink back; you know that you are unclean from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head; then you draw your rags together about you and sink down in bitter despair and shame: "I cannot, I dare not show myself there in the blessed home of light, a wretched sinner as I am." Then it is worse than before. Heaven stands open. Blessedness beckons. But I do not belong there; for me it is impossible to take a place in the kingdom of light; for me the darkness is a hiding place for my misery.

Yet there is still a word of consolation:

"I come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, you also shall be."

Jesus will not leave any sinful and sorrowing soul behind in despair. He who has prepared heaven for us will also prepare us for heaven. He has made our cause clear before the Father; he has opened heaven for us; then he comes again and speaks kindly to the soul about the reconciled Father's love. Now he will help you home, you poor, wandering child. You are so unclean and sinful, you dare not come along. But see, he bends down over your grief-worn head, and from his blood-sprinkled brow there flows a drop of the sacrificial blood that was shed for you; it is the forgiveness of sins, it is cleansing from all your uncleanness. "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses from all sin." It runs like fire through your bones, and for the first time, you dare to lift your eye boldly toward heaven. Blessed sight; it is the Father who stretches out his arms toward you; it is the Son who stands at your side, ready to lead you home to blessed meeting with the Father: "I will take you to myself."

You feel so weary; you cannot walk to the home. Jesus has strong arms; he himself has said that he will carry the strayed lambs back to the sheepfold; fear not, he does not grow weary, he does not fail; if he has found you, he shall lay you upon his shoulders with joy, and you poor lamb shall come safely home. Safely home — yes — that is the point; safely home, for Jesus has prepared the home, Jesus has opened the home, Jesus himself comes and brings you home.

Blessed is the life of Christians when Jesus goes at their side and leads them so safely on the way; but their death is more blessed still, when they go with him from a foreign land to the Father's house:

Then the door is opened to heaven's city, There the redeemed are called by name.
God grant that we all may meet in gladness, And none of ours be missing! May
God grant this to us for Christ's blood, That we may find harbor in heaven.⁵

⁵Magnus Brostrup Landstad *Jeg veed mig en Sønn i Jesu Navn*, 6th verses

32.1 Hymn: I Know a Sleep in Jesus' Name

By Magnus Brostrup Landstad (1802—1880) Original Danish (Landstad, 1861) Translation (2026)

1) I know a sleep in Jesus' name, It soothes my weary frame; A bed is made in earth's embrace, She keeps me in her gentle care; My soul with God in heaven shall be, And all its sorrows flee.

2) I know a blessed evening hour, I long for it at times, When I am weary from the road And heavy moves the day; I gladly would lie down to rest And sweetly fall asleep.

3) I know a morning bright and fair, Where songs of life resound; Then comes the blessed Son of God With joyful words upon his lips; He wakes us from our sleep In that most happy hour.

4) That morning is so dear to me, I often call it to mind; Then I shall sing and see draw near The sun that gilds the heights, Like a small bird at break of day Beneath the towering lindens.

5) Then God's own Son draws near the grave, His voice is heard through all the world; All bars are shattered into dust, The ocean's depths are stirred; He cries, "You dead, come forth!" And we arise in glory.

6) Then opens wide the gate of heaven, The chosen are called by name; God grant that we may meet in joy And none of ours be missing; May God grant this to us for Christ's blood: That we may find harbor in heaven.

7) O Jesus, come to my deathbed, Stretch out your hand in mercy, And say: "This boy, this little maid, She is not dead, but sleeping." Do not let go until I rise And praise you in the land of life.

33 Fourth Sunday after Easter: The Living Church

John 7:37–39: Now on the last, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying: If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, out of his inmost being shall flow, as the Scripture says, rivers of living water. But this he said concerning the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

The words of Jesus in this text point both backward to the strange experiences of old Israel during the wilderness journey with its precious promises, and forward to the birth of the new Israel, the Church, and the fulfillment of all promises on the day of Pentecost:

If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink!

The whole Feast of Tabernacles was a remembrance of the wandering through the wilderness and of the many works of love which the Lord there performed toward his people; it was Israel's great festival of joy. Throughout the feast there was such gladness and jubilation that the rabbis said: he who has not been present at a Feast of Tabernacles does not know what joy is. In particular there was on each of the seven feast days a ceremony which is intimately bound up with the words here spoken by the Lord, and which was also each day received with indescribable jubilation. One of the priests went at the head of the whole people down to the Pool of Siloam, filled a golden vessel with water from it, brought it up into the forecourt amid the shouts of the people and the sound of drums and trumpets, and offered it there together with wine as a drink offering, while the people, accompanied by drums and trumpets, sang the well-known words from the twelfth chapter of Isaiah:

You shall draw water with joy from the wells of salvation.

After these seven days of noise and jubilation there followed a day of quiet Sabbath rest; this is the day which is called the last, the great. Under excessive and clamorous joy seriousness can so easily be forgotten; therefore the Lord uses the stillness of this last day to gain a hearing and to direct the attention of the people to the true meaning of those words of Isaiah which they had sung with such great enthusiasm, and therefore says:

If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

In Jesus — Mary's and Joseph's Son from Nazareth — is the true well of salvation; in him is the fulfillment of all prophecy.

From the fleshpots of Egypt and the sweet waters of the Nile the people of Israel had been led out into the wilderness. In a moment of holy desire and longing they had let God lead them to give up all the abundance of Egypt in order to be delivered from yoke and bondage, to serve the living God in freedom, and one day to reach the promised Canaan. But many of them had not considered that there lay a long, desolate, perilous stretch between Egypt and Canaan. Hunger came, and thirst tormented them and their beasts; then the longing of the heart began to steal back toward the abundance of Egypt, and they murmured against Moses and against God.

Give us water to drink! they cried in their distress; in their need they tempted God and said: Is the Lord among us or not?—although they had seen his works in Egypt and at the Red Sea.

But the Lord had not forsaken them; he had compassion upon them and let Moses strike the Rock with the staff, and water flowed out, as Paul also says: They all drank of the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

For all God's mighty works are spiritual, because they have regard to the salvation of our souls; and when the Lord caused water to run from the Rock for the fainting people, it was not only that they should quench their bodily thirst, but that they should turn and look toward the Rock who was to come.

Most of them did not do so; and even when they had entered the promised land, they often forgot the Lord, the Rock with the living water, in order to turn to their own broken cisterns; and God's severe judgments came upon them as in the wilderness, until they again were driven out of the land which the Lord had promised them.

Then there was again hunger and thirst among the poor people. The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me, cries Zion in her distress.

Can a woman forget her child? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you, says the Lord to Zion.

And when the people were near to perishing, he caused it to be proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat; come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Oh, what a prelude to the Gospel of Jesus. All who thirst, no distinction; it is only the question whether you thirst. Then all is ready. The fountain is there, living, springing. It is he who is to come, the Messiah; only look to him as the dying in the wilderness looked to the bronze serpent, and your life shall be saved, your thirst slaked. For the prophet says further:

I will pour water upon the thirsty land and streams upon the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring and my blessing upon your descendants.

Thus he pointed for the fainting people beyond the Rock in the wilderness to the spiritual Rock, which is Christ; and thus Jesus stands here on the last, the great and quiet day of the Feast of Tabernacles, pointing both to the Rock in the wilderness and to the prophecies of the prophets, and says:

If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

Yes, much more:

The rivers of living water of which the Scripture, as cited above, speaks, shall flow out of the life of those who come to him; for he who drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst again, but it shall become in him a fountain of water springing up unto eternal life.

And yet even this, with all its blessed fulfillment, was still only a promise of yet more glorious things. For, as John says, he spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive. The Savior was not yet glorified; Gethsemane and Golgotha still lay between; he must first pass through death and the grave and hell; he must first return to his Father in heaven and sit at his right hand before he could perform the greatest of all wonders, that which no eye has seen and no ear heard and which has not arisen in the heart of man: to pour the love of God into a poor, lost soul by the Holy Spirit—himself personally present. This same Spirit sets himself at the door of a human heart, knocks and enters in, makes his dwelling there and communes with it, gives peace for strife, healing for all wounds, the right of sonship and inheritance, and with his blessed Savior's hand he strikes upon the rock-wall of the heart, so that there wells forth within an eternal fountain of life. Therefore Jesus says in the Gospel for the fourth Sunday after Easter: It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Comforter shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

To receive both the Father and the Son in one's heart through the Holy Spirit, that is what happens to everyone who believes; that is what kings and prophets desired to see, and angels longed to look into; that is what in the Word and in the Church is offered to every poor lost sinner.

And thus the Savior stands today in the midst of us and cries:

If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

Do you thirst? Will you come? As the children of Israel fainted in the wilderness and cried for water, so the soul lies wasting and dying in the wilderness of the world. In vain it seeks life and relief now in a righteous life, now in the pleasure and sin of the world; they are broken cisterns which hold no water, and the soul is tormented until the anguish of death and the fear of judgment press it into despair or numb it with the clammy cold of spiritual death, the certain foretaste of perdition.

Why will you die, O house of Israel? The Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that he turn and live.

Why will you faint and die in the wilderness of the world, poor soul? There is a Savior in Israel; you also may draw water with joy from the wells of salvation.

Shall he cry in vain, the blood-stained Savior who has trodden the winepress alone?

It is sinners he calls. Whether you are righteous before men and a hypocrite before God, or despised and cast out also by men on account of your sins—it matters not—if only you thirst; he stretches out his hand and says: Come! you shall receive the fountain of life in your own heart; relief, healing, new life, the right of sonship, if only you come—without money and without price. There is no obstacle here; Baptism has free access, for the Holy Spirit shines forth.

All is ready; all God's promises are fulfilled. They are Yes and Amen.

Come! The Lord calls.

The Spirit and the Bride say: Come! And let him who hears say: Come! And let him who

thirsts come! And whoever will, let him take the water of life freely.

34 Fifth Sunday after Easter: Our Father

Matthew 6:5–13: When you pray, you shall not be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men; truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your chamber, and shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret shall reward you openly. And when you pray, do not heap up empty words as the heathen do; for they think that they shall be heard for their many words. Therefore you shall not be like them; for your Father knows what you have need of before you ask him. Therefore you shall pray thus: Our Father, in heaven! Hallowed be your Name! Your kingdom come! Your will be done, as in heaven, so also upon earth! Give us this day our daily bread! And forgive us our debt, as we also forgive our debtors! And lead us not into temptation! But deliver us from evil! For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

Jesus warns against the prayer of the hypocrite, which is held in the synagogues and at the street corners for the sake of men. The heavenly Father does not hear such prayer. If prayer does not proceed from your heart, then it does not reach the Father's heart. Prayer belongs to the hidden man of the heart, to a quiet and imperishable spirit, which is very precious before God. Where such prayer is found, so that a human heart is turned toward God daily, early, and without ceasing, there the Apostle's exhortation is fulfilled: "Pray without ceasing." In such a life there is also a hidden power which bears up under the tribulations and toil of earthly life and gives that heart-peace which is the open recompense that accompanies the hidden life in God.

The Savior also warns against the heathen's empty words in prayer. The many words dishonor the Father; for he knows his children's needs before they ask him. It is not he who needs to hear our long explanations of all that we lack; it is we who need the Father's help. Like the disciples' cry, 'Lord, save us, we perish!' such is the prayer of those who truly cry out of the depths to the Lord. In the hour of distress the cry of need is short and piercing; and he who is not in distress does not pray. Distress is the mother of prayer; therefore prayer is so brief in words and so certain to press forward to the Father's merciful ear and compassionate heart. If you have no distress and no need, this is the greatest misery; cry to the Lord even over this, that he may show you your wretchedness, and you shall be heard.

But his disciples Jesus teaches to pray, "Our Father." And with good reason both long and short explanations have been written over this prayer; and yet its content is not exhausted and its glory not dimmed. Still it is for all needy children of God equally beautiful and equally rich, equally weighty and humbling, equally blessed and uplifting. Gladly would we also, though with stammering tongue, speak a few words concerning Our Father.

And chiefly this is to be said: he who can truly say the first words, "Our Father, in heaven," he has come far in the art of praying aright. For a poor sinner, who has every reason, like the tax collector, to strike his breast and turn his eyes toward the earth, it is an unspeakable mystery of grace to dare to turn to the Lord, who sits enthroned on high and is the Holy

One, and say: “Abba, Father.” Had he not himself taught us this, the blessed Son of God, through whom we have access to the Father; had not the Spirit of the Lord himself taught us this in our hearts’ brokenness and shame, we would never have found our way to it. It is the Son and the Spirit alone who place the Abba-cry into the sinner’s heart and give boldness to draw near to the throne of grace. O that my heart might rightly cling to this blessed, lovely Name, so that with full confidence I might lay my cause into God’s hand; then all else would be light and bright; for if he who governs all is my Father, what else can meet me but love and mercy upon all my ways? All prayer will be easy when I am asking my Father. Were there more real, sincere, and simple faith in the Father, then the life of God’s children would be less sighing and complaining, more full of heavenly peace and joy. Then all the following petitions in the Lord’s Prayer would become more truth in our heart and in our mouth.

For if we have first rightly grasped the Father-name in prayer and faith, then it is easy for the Spirit—though hard for the flesh—to pray: “Hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done!” For even though our flesh rises up in us and desires its own glory, its own power, and its own will—yet for the man of God in us, who is born of God, the only blessedness, peace, and rest lie herein: that God is glorified, that his kingdom comes, and his will is done. Bow yourself, heart, and learn to pray: Not my will, but yours be done! Though it must happen with tears and in fear and anguish as for the Savior in Gethsemane—if it is your heavenly Father’s will under which you bow, it is nevertheless your best, it is nevertheless your good. But therefore so many prayers are not fulfilled, because we pray: Our will be done! O no, Father, not my desire, but yours; not my foolish, unwise, sinful will, but your good and wise and perfect will—let that be done, let that be done now and always in me and with me; then I know it will go well with me; for you, Father, do not give your child anything evil.

But if you have truly wrestled thus far in prayer, and have received grace to believe this fully and wholly, then you shall also receive boldness to pray the four last petitions: “Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debt, as we also forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil!”

For truly, you have nothing but need and guilt and distress to lay before God in these petitions; yet if it is to a gracious Father you come, if it is with full faith in his grace, if it is with full surrender to his will, then it is nevertheless safe to come, though you come empty-handed, indebted, tempted, and suffering. See, it is the Father’s delight and joy to give you all that you need. As it is your childlike joy that your Father be exalted and glorified, so it is his fatherly joy to be able to shower you with good gifts, according as you need and can bear. Remember well that you are a very fragile vessel so long as you live in this earthly life; and thank the Lord in humility that he does not give you according to your folly, but according to his wisdom. In his time he who must now cautiously lay heavenly gifts into your soul shall bestow upon you an eternal and beyond all measure weighty glory, when all danger is over, when all temptation is past.

Then you may confidently set Amen to this prayer. If you prayed it in faith as a child to his Father, it is fulfilled and it shall be fulfilled. Ask all God’s children, and they will tell you so. With shame and blushing they will confess that it often happened to them that they did not make it through their Our Father, because it became too great for them and their

heart became too full; but so long as they received grace to pray, so long they also found answer to prayer, and from day to day there came response from the heavenly Father to their stammering prayer.

Thus be the Lord praised for “Our Father” and for all the peace and blessedness which this prayer has given our hearts. Thanks be to the Holy Spirit, who loosed our bound tongue and taught us to cry: Abba, Father!

And as this prayer has gone with light and strength down through the centuries from the days of the Lord’s flesh until now, so shall it also remain all believers’ comfort and joy until the Lord comes again. And though the proud unbelief of the world may silence many tongues, the Lord shall nevertheless through the Lord’s Prayer raise up a power on earth from the mouths of babes and sucklings, whom a pious mother taught the Lord’s own prayer.

35 Ascension Day: He opened their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures

Luke 24:44–53: But he said to them: “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which are written in the Law of Moses and in the Prophets and in the Psalms concerning Me.” Then he opened their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures, and said to them: “It is written, and the Christ must suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but remain in the city of Jerusalem until you are clothed with power from on high.”

And he led them out as far as Bethany, and he lifted up his hands and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God. Amen.

“I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; again, I leave the world and go to the Father.”

Thus Jesus said to his disciples (John 16:28), after he had first spoken a word to them which they did not understand: “A little while and you shall not see me; and again, a little while and you shall see me, because I go to the Father.” “What is this that he says,” they said, “a little while? We do not understand what he speaks.” That was the state of the disciples’ spiritual understanding on the night before his death.

But when he then uttered the words with which this sermon begins, they declared: “Now you speak plainly; now we know that you know all things, and now we believe that you came forth from God.”

There was therefore in this word such a full and simple Gospel, such a heavenly light, that it penetrated the covering which the humbling Law had laid over their eyes, and they could glimpse something of the perfect way of salvation which the words and life of Jesus intended to open for them and for the world. Yet death still remained, which again would lay mist over their eyes; there still remained the realization of that word, “to come from the Father and to go back to the Father,” in order that they might see with their eyes and become true eyewitnesses of the glory of God, the perfection of the Gospel, and thereby be enabled to look back upon the Scriptures and see them in a new light, both to understand them themselves and to explain them to poor sinners.

This took place in the Ascension.

The Ascension, like the Resurrection, is not an event in the spiritual world alone; it is a real, perceptible fact, by which the disciples could see and verify with their own senses, in that they not only saw Jesus after he had risen, but Thomas had to put his hand into his side and feel the marks of the nails, and Jesus ate fish and honeycomb before them. And as it

happened with his Resurrection, so also with his Ascension; it is expressly written that “he was taken up while they beheld, and a cloud received him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9). This event had a profound effect on their spiritual understanding.

In our text, between the Resurrection and the Ascension, it is said that he opened their understanding to understand the Scriptures, as he explained to them that thus it is written—in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me—that the Christ must suffer, rise again, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem, after he had first sent them the Father’s promise and clothed them with power from on high. It was this that took place through Jesus’ Ascension, by which he, seated at the Father’s right hand, sent the Holy Spirit to the disciples.

For, as Paul says (1 Cor. 2:10): “God has revealed it to us by his Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God; for who knows what is in a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows what is in God except the Spirit of God.” And the Lord himself says that “he, the Spirit of truth, whom the Father shall send, he shall guide you into all truth.”

This is the meaning of Christ’s Ascension: that through it Jesus sent and sends his Holy Spirit, who opens our understanding, that we understand the Scriptures according to the word: “You have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things.”

Did the disciples then not understand the Scriptures? No. For Jesus says to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:25): “O fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken; must not the Christ suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning from Moses and from all the Prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Herein lay a veil over the Law for the Jews, as it does to this day for all men according to their natural understanding. For “My words,” says the Lord, “are spirit and are life,” and the natural man does not receive the things that belong to the Spirit of God; they are foolishness to him, and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

All that is written in the Old Testament concerning God’s dealings with the evil and rebellious yet chosen people—that all this truly is a prophecy of Christ; that not only God’s glorious deeds with them in Egypt and in the wilderness, but also their deep humiliation and heavy judgments, which they had indeed deserved on account of their sins, were a promise of Christ, his suffering and exaltation; that every single thing in Israel’s history—the Tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, the worship, yes, that the Rock from which the water flowed was Christ (1 Cor. 10:4), and that the bronze serpent was Christ (John 3:14), and that the Law was not a way of salvation but only a tutor leading to Christ (Gal. 3:24)—this was hidden even from the disciples, so that they were offended and terrified at his shameful suffering and death, until the Ascension cast light upon the whole, and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost thereafter entirely removed the veil, so that they could see clearly.

Therefore that same Peter, who in carnal fear had denied his Savior, could on that day stand forth before the whole people and say: “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel,” and that God had thus made Jesus of Nazareth both Lord and Christ, until the people had

their eyes opened with terror and asked, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” And thus Stephen could in his speech review the whole history of Israel and show that it all pointed to Christ, and cry out: “You stiff-necked, you always resist the Holy Spirit.” And Paul in his first sermon (Acts 13:38) concludes thus: “Be it known to you therefore, that through Jesus of Nazareth forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; and from all things from which you could not be justified by the Law of Moses, by him everyone who believes is justified.”

Thus was their understanding opened by the Ascension and the outpouring of the Spirit to understand the Scriptures, and “we have therefore the prophetic word made more sure, and you do well to give heed to it as to a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts” (2 Pet. 1:19).

And now, brothers and sisters, has the Ascension accomplished this in your heart—not only to make you heavenly-minded, so that you desire to be with Christ, but that you also daily, by the powerful working of God’s Spirit, truly ascend with Christ, where he sits at the right hand of the Father, and from that place with the Spirit’s light look back upon all that God has said and done in his Word, and thus more and more have the eyes of your understanding opened to understand the Scriptures, so that you see that it is all about Christ and about his body on earth, his congregation, his new, holy Israel—and that you therefore, whoever you are, as a witness must both in word and life in his name proclaim forgiveness of sins to all nations and carry the message to the ends of the world, as it began from Jerusalem? If you daily receive such blessing from the Ascension of the Son of God, then you shall also daily from these heavenly heights receive all light and all power, not only to see and know the spiritual host of wickedness under heaven, but also to overcome all the powers of Satan that stir in and around you; and one day you shall stand saved and blessed at Jesus’ side, after having overcome all. And you will not lack those who receive you into the heavenly dwellings.

But if Christ’s Ascension remains for anyone a doubtful or indifferent thing, then there will gradually be laid a thicker and darker veil over the Scriptures; and all that you read and hear without the heavenly light of God’s Spirit will only further close the Scriptures to you and darken your eye. See therefore that the light which is in you is not darkness! But come, just as you are, and look up to the Ascended One, and he shall send you by his Spirit the light of faith and of life into your heart.

36 Sixth Sunday after Easter: Fear! Fear not!

Luke 12:4–12: I tell you, my friends: do not fear those who kill the body and after that can do nothing more. But I will show you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into Hell. Yes, I tell you: Fear him!

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are of more worth than many sparrows.

I tell you: everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. But he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, will not be forgiven.

And when they bring you before synagogues and rulers and authorities, do not be anxious how or what you will answer in your defense, or what you will say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you must say.

In this passage, ‘fear’ is not used in the sense of reverence, of rendering worship, as when we say to fear God, but simply in the sense of being afraid—of real anxiety and dread.

Fear, as well as shame, has since the Fall become part of human nature. The sigh that passes through creation also pierces the human soul, filling it with bodily fear and spiritual anguish—as with Cain. The purpose of this stirring of conscience, which like a trembling moves the innermost being of man, was to drive him, ashamed and humbled, to God, to cry for grace. You can see this impulse even among the wildest pagans.

But as men in their corruption through sin and under the continued influence of the Devilish powers have perverted all things, so we find also that the pagans exchanged the incorruptible God for an image made like corruptible man and even birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things, and in their anguish bent the knee and brought atoning sacrifices to these self-made gods.

So it is today. What men ought not to fear, that they fear; and they make light of the things for which they ought to bear the most serious anxiety. See, here is a young man who has risen into high and wealthy society, where his vanity is flattered, his abilities and riches praised. His affairs, however, are declining without anyone yet knowing it; it will not be possible for him to maintain his brilliant position without becoming a deceiver. What shall he do? If he openly confesses his condition, he knows that laughter and contempt will be his portion, and that his friends will turn their backs upon him. He cannot endure this thought. He fears honesty more than death—and chooses crime. For a short time he still enjoys, as in a frenzy, the brief glitter of self-regard, until all collapses, and he does not truly come to himself until he wakes up in prison.

It is but one of a thousand examples which everyone has occasion to observe in all the fields of life, in small as in great, and not least in one’s own deceitful heart. It is a devilish distortion

of the voice of conscience, which daily intrudes even into the Christian's life. And in truth, it is there above all other places that Satan gladly would do harm.

Therefore the Lord speaks these warning words to his disciples. A disciple of Christ must confess. No one knows the Father except through the Son, and no one can call Jesus Lord except by the Holy Spirit. But it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, in order that men should not die in their sin but turn and live; therefore Jesus says that when the Advocate comes, he shall testify about me; and you also shall testify.

So it is. The Holy Spirit gives his testimony through men; therefore he dwells in a human heart, that this heart, by the same word through which it was given new life, should testify of the Father and the Son. To testify together with the Holy Spirit concerning the truth of the Gospel, that is to confess Jesus before men. To keep silent about such testimony—or to distort it—is to act against the Spirit's conviction in the heart. That is the first step toward sinning against the Spirit. For the Christian, it is the first step back toward eternal perdition. That is why it is so dreadful, and why the Lord warns his disciples so earnestly; for it is precisely what Satan desires, what he works at day and night, to cause the Christian to keep silent about or distort or even deny the testimony of God's Spirit before men; then he gains complete dominion and produces what Jesus in the first verse of this chapter calls the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

And to this the disciples are exposed: to fear men more than Satan and his deceit.

Jesus knew that the disciples would have to step forward before men with that same testimony for which he himself must suffer the death of reproach upon the cross. He knew that they should stand before synagogues and rulers and those who have authority, that shame and persecution, indeed death, would be their portion; and he knew that they were weak and might come to fear those who have power to kill them, as they themselves fled in Gethsemane. Therefore he opens their eyes to what they should fear and what they should not fear; he knew their deceitful heart.

Fear only one thing, he says; fear the one who can destroy your soul, infect you with the leaven of the Pharisees, and drive you to sin against the Spirit, for which there is no forgiveness either in this world or in the one to come.

Fear him!

But don't fear men; at most they can kill the body, which in any case one day must die; more they cannot do. So do not let fear of men drive you away from what God requires of you: that you let the Spirit bear witness through you of sin and righteousness and judgment, of grace and love and eternal salvation, that soul after soul may be saved; confess me before men!

Yet if the Lord's word concerning Satan's seduction and concerning eternal condemnation should be warning enough against the dreadful danger of acting, in small as in great, against the conviction of God's Spirit and failing to confess Jesus before men, there is in the Lord's word to the disciples also a glorious and heavenly encouragement to lay aside all false fear and step forward with the testimony in word and life before men.

First: how should he for whom Jesus was crucified, who has heard his cry of anguish upon the cross, and through the Holy Spirit and a living faith knows that Jesus has paid for all his sins, how should such a soul, so richly graced be able to deny the Lord, his Savior, this one request: Confess me before men! and fear not?

Second: is not the Lord strong enough to defend and protect his own both against men and against the devil? Fear not, you worm Jacob, you little flock of Israel! Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom! He who numbers your hairs and cares for the little sparrows, should he forget you, whom he has engraved on his hands?

Therefore: Confess Jesus before men and fear not!

Third: if there is an eternal danger of damnation in keeping silent about and denying Jesus before men, then there is—strange to say—a reward, an eternal, heavenly reward, for those who fulfill his loving request to us: to confess him before men. For he says that he will then confess them before the angels of God, before the Father in his glory. O what a reward for bearing the testimony of salvation through the blood of Jesus among men, risking everything—in word and in life—to be glorified with him, to live and reign with him in his kingdom, as he himself rose from the dead, lives, and reigns for all eternity!

This then is his warning and promise to the disciples; it is a warning and promise to all disciples: Fear the devil and the leaven of the Pharisees!—fear not men, but confess my name before them!

Friend, have you had courage to confess Jesus before men? Has it burned in your heart when you have heard his name reviled, as when your dearest or you yourself were mocked or mistreated? Have you wished to be accursed for Christ, if thereby sinners might be drawn to Jesus and saved through his blood? Or do you pass so quietly through the world, so unnoticed, that the world itself loves you and praises you, so that you could not bear in your heart to offend it by testifying to it of sin and righteousness and judgment, or by going to the sinner fallen among robbers, bearing him away and bringing him to shelter with Jesus, the crucified?

O friend, fear not men, but confess Jesus and fear the devil!

For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of them when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Fear therefore him who can destroy both body and soul in Hell! Fear not men, but confess Jesus before the world!

37 First Day of Pentecost: The Spirit of Truth

John 14:15–21. If you love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray to the Father, and he will give you another Advocate so that he may be with you forever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, for it neither sees him nor knows him; but you know him, for he abides with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I come to you. Yet a little while, and the world sees me no more, but you see me; for I live, and you will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, that is the one who loves me. And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him.

Jesus is the truth and the life; therefore the Spirit whom he sends is the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of life.

A human life without Jesus and the Spirit of Jesus is a life without God; for Jesus alone is the mediator between God and men; therefore it is only through Jesus that we can receive life and Spirit from God.

Therefore a human life without Jesus is a life without truth, a life of falsehood. You seem to live, yet you do not live in truth. Only the appearance remains of that life which God gave the man he had created. Instead of fellowship with the eternal fountain of life, the heavenly Father, there has come surrender to the world with its vain desire, which flares up and quickly burns out like a fire in thorns. What is this but deception and falsehood, when man seeks to satisfy the hunger and thirst of his immortal soul with the perishable things of the world? It is more offensive than the prodigal son who filled his belly with swine's food.

In falsehood lives the one who sinks an immortal soul into the perishableness of the world. Therefore he wins only death. In a little while he is separated from the world and the world from him, and eternal hunger and thirst become the lot of the soul, if through endless ages it has nothing but the consuming longing after the perishable and sensual things which can no longer be had.

Therefore, if you love the world, you deceive yourself; for the world passes away with its desire; and when the world is gone, what then have you to love? You are left with nothing — nothing but eternal torment and eternal death.

But Jesus is the truth and the life. And as the soul is united with the world when it loves the world, so also love for Jesus is the way to take part in his truth and his life.

Love Jesus!

You know very well how this happens. For he has loved you first and has given his life for you upon the cross. He has stretched out his arms and hands toward you and said: come to me, you poor, sinful man, I will give you forgiveness of sins and rest for your soul. If you have cast yourself into his arms and found peace with God, then you have learned to love him who drew you up out of perdition and gave you eternal salvation.

Love Jesus!

It consists in keeping his commandments; and his commandments are not burdensome, for it is this: to believe in his name and love one another, as he commanded us.

If this love for Jesus is in you, then you are partaker of his Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of life. Whoever loves the world receives the Spirit of the world. Whoever loves Jesus receives the Spirit of Jesus. It is the mighty Spirit of truth who tears away from our soul the deceit of sin and shows us the abyss of perdition which hides itself behind the smiling mask of sinful desire. It is the Spirit of truth who lets the soul see the terror of sin, yet also points to him who is the Savior of sins, and who shows us all the way to the Father's heart and lets us taste eternal life from the eternal fountain of life.

For this is the truth, the eternal, life-giving truth, which the heart appropriates only by the Spirit of truth: that Jesus has gone forth from the Father and come into the world; and he has left the world again and gone to the Father; he came with life from God to a race of men who had lost the life of God; he returned to the Father in order to lead those whom he saved into eternal glory. The regained, restored, and given back image of God — this is God's truth in Jesus Christ and in us through the Spirit of Jesus.

Therefore the Spirit of truth is also the Spirit of life. "I live, and you will live," says Jesus. The same Spirit who is the Spirit of truth, and whom the world does not know because it lives in the deceit of sin, the same Spirit is also the Spirit of life. For if the truth is the image of God renewed in our hearts, then this is life, that we become children of God when the Father's image is impressed upon our soul.

Love Jesus!

And you are partaker of his Spirit; the truth will shine into your heart, and the life will penetrate your whole being. The old has passed away, and all has become new by the Spirit of truth.

On that day you will experience that Jesus is in the Father, and you in him and he in you. Then you have fellowship in the light with the Father and the Son by the Holy Spirit. Your soul, which has gone forth from God, has found its way back to him; and you are blessed in the fellowship of love with God.

It is your Pentecost day, O soul. It is as a gentle and blessed spring after a long winter. It is as the clear morning after black night. It is as lovely dew upon dry field, as refreshing rain after drought. Blessed is he whose life has had such a Pentecost day.

It is time, friends, for us to awake and arise from sleep, that it may be evident that we are children of the light, and that the night is now past.

This is Pentecost—the hour when God's church was born on earth. Shall it be for us only a dead memory of long-vanished greatness? O no, let us awake as is right, and give the Spirit room in our hearts, each one and all together, and then God's church will again take form among us, the Body of Jesus Christ again receive its growth among us, the Bride of Jesus again be adorned for her heavenly Bridegroom.

Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city. Shake yourself from the dust, arise, sit upon your throne, O Jerusalem; loose

yourself from the bonds of your neck, you captive daughter of Zion.

Long enough has the glory of God's church been dimmed among us; step forth again in the strength of the Spirit and new life from God. Then there will be a new Pentecost on earth, and your light will shine to the ends of the world.

38 Second Day of Pentecost: The Firm Foundation of Faith

John 12:44–50. Jesus cried out: Whoever believes in me does not believe only in me, but in him who sent me; and whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in me will not remain in darkness. And if anyone hears my words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. Whoever rejects me and does not receive my words has his judge already: the word I have spoken will judge him on the last day. For I have not spoken on my own authority; but the Father who sent me has given me command what I am to say and speak; and I know that his commandment is eternal life. So what I speak, I speak as the Father has told me.

This word, which Jesus cried out among the Jews, is of particular and solemn significance. It concerns the firm foundation upon which faith builds when it builds upon Jesus. It therefore also concerns the dreadful responsibility that follows upon despising and rejecting him.

A human soul requires firm ground on which to build. It is immortal, and if it is to find a lasting foundation on which to build, it cannot be something that perishes. Take all the best and strongest that the world has to offer, and it will soon show itself, under honest testing, that however good it may seem, yet it is not something upon which one may rely for eternity. The world passes away with its desires; and either the world leaves us, or we leave the world, and in either case our trust is gone and our confidence in vain. Blessed therefore is he who can say with the Psalmist: Though my flesh and my heart fail, God is the rock of my heart and my portion forever.

Thus the rock of the heart is the Lord himself. Nothing less is required. Therefore Jesus testifies this so powerfully, that whoever believes in him does not believe in a man, but in God who sent him. Jesus is sent into the world to reveal the Father and the Father's eternal counsel of salvation for souls. Sin had made a separation between God and men, between the Father and his children. And sin blinded the eyes with the false glory of the world and closed them to the true and real beauty of heaven and of the Father's home; and instead of seeking the eternal and imperishable things, the hearts of men are drawn to the sinful and the sensual. Then God sent his Son, that he should be the Light of the world. What was hidden from men by their sin and by the threats of their evil conscience — God's eternal love, the Father's compassionate grace — this was to be revealed through the Son. And in the midst of the restless, deceitful, faithless, and disappointing world, Jesus should be the firm rock and the true light.

It is God's own eternal heart that is revealed in Jesus. Now we may look into the Father's love, if only we turn with heart and eye toward the eternal Light. So long as we walk turned away from God, with our back toward the Light, we remain in darkness; and without peace and without faith we walk uncertain and insecure forward toward a dark and hopeless night of eternity. The rock is there, but we do not know it. The Light is there, but we do not see

it. But the day we turn, and the Light from Jesus' loving eye falls into our heart, and we come to see that the Father loves us, then everything becomes different.

For Jesus has not come that we should remain in sin and in darkness, but that we should be saved from them. If he is the rock, then we must build on him; if he is the light, then we must walk in its brightness. It does you no good to know that the rock of salvation is there quite near you if you never set foot on it. It does you no good that the light shines around you, if you close your eyes and deliberately walk in blindness.

If the eternal rock is here in Jesus and in his eternal word — the word of God's love sealed with Jesus' own blood and death and resurrection from the dead — then this is what matters for us: that we build upon this foundation and take hold of this salvation. The firm foundation of faith is neither our feelings nor our understanding nor our conversion nor our prayer; the firm foundation of faith is Jesus himself; for he who believes in him believes in God who sent him. Can there be anything firmer or more reliable? Impossible; he who has the Son has also the Father; and he who has the Son has eternal life in him.

With anything less the soul cannot be satisfied. For when the form of this world passes away, and when all that is visible and of the senses disappears for us in death, then this alone is our consolation: Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Will you then, O soul, have firm ground for your faith? Give yourself wholly over to Jesus. He has come to save the world; he has come to save you. You are welcome as you are, however you may appear when you come. Jesus will save you; that is his unchangeable promise, and upon that you may come in full assurance. All who have ever come to him have experienced this, that he casts none out.

But do not soothe yourself with this, that Jesus has come to save the world, and therefore there is no danger. If you despise his word, which came to save you and which loves you with eternal love, then be certain that you have that which judges you. The rejected Savior and the rejected love will become your judgment and an eternally burning fire for your lost soul. God willed to save you, and you would not be saved — who then will be able to rescue you from destruction? Can your sin and the pride of your heart, or the devil, save you? On the day the Lord is revealed you will experience that the word which he has spoken, and which you have despised, that will judge you, and none will save you from its judgment.

For Jesus' word is not from himself, but from the Father. Therefore the word is also eternal life. Jesus is both the Light that shines in the darkness and the Life that overcomes death. Have you room for him in your heart; have you faith in him in your soul? This is what matters. For as many as received him, to them he gave authority to become children of God and to have eternal life.

Build therefore upon the rock and believe in Jesus without wavering. Do not be satisfied that you have heard about the rock, but set your foot upon it without fear, and you will stand firm when all falls. Let death come, let the heart break, let hell threaten, let the world perish — if you stand upon the rock, then know that you are secure and will not be shaken; for the rock of the heart is the Lord himself.

Amen.

39 Trinity Sunday: Jesus Has the Authority

Matthew 28:16–20. But the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus said to them: All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you all days to the end of the age. Amen.

Strange indeed! The disciples did what Jesus had commanded them; they went to Galilee to meet him there after his resurrection; and behold, while the others worshiped him, there were still some of the eleven who doubted.

So it is written of the Lord's own disciples in this grave and holy hour: some doubted!

How narrow and hard this road must be—to believe that the Crucified is risen! What power Satan and the flesh must wield over us frail children of men, when even in such a glorious hour of revelation doubt could steal into some hearts!

How many among us have not said or thought: Yes, if only I could see Jesus alive before me, then I would surely believe! — and perhaps added: Had I been in the place of the disciples, I would not have doubted.

Friend, be not proud, but fear!

When Mary Magdalene came to the eleven and declared to them that Jesus lived and had been seen by her, they did not believe it (Mark 16:11); and when the two from Emmaus also came and told the same, neither did they believe (Mark 16:13), so that Jesus, when he revealed himself to them as they sat at table, reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart. And when Thomas would not believe unless he might see and touch the Savior, he was crushed when the Lord showed himself to him and reproved his unbelief; My Lord and my God! — that was all he could say. But the Lord says: Because you have seen me, you have believed, Thomas; blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed.

You who would not have doubted had you been in the disciples' place — bow and see who stands before you! It is the same who stood before the disciples and said:

All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth.

All authority!

Who can understand this? And who would not collapse into the dust when he has grasped it and remembered his sin!

Scripture says: These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings; and

The Father raised Christ from the dead and set him at his right hand in heaven, far above all principality and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only

in this world but also in that which is to come, and put all things under his feet; and

The Father has also given the Son authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.

This is the Lord who stands before you today and stood before the disciples then and spoke his Word of authority.

When the disciples remembered their doubt and unbelief, how must they have felt themselves shaken with fear and awe, like Moses before the bush and Elijah when the still small voice passed by his cave and God himself spoke to him.

But how must they also have felt themselves exalted and blessed when they remembered that this almighty God and Lord was their Savior, their Friend, their Brother! He did not use his authority to judge them—though he had every right—but to crush their doubt and to lift them up in grace and trust them with a task holy beyond measure: to be Christ's messengers and warriors, to overcome kings and nations and to subject to him the whole world — not with human might nor with the sword, but with the power of the Holy Spirit, with Christ's cross, with the power of the Word and with the quiet message of peace of the gospel.

Because he has all authority, Jesus gives his disciples this command and this commission:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations by baptism into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you.

Baptism and the Word!

Baptism, according to the Word: He who believes and is baptized shall be saved; and

The Word, the two-edged sword which reveals the secret counsels of hearts — the incorruptible seed of God which begets anew and renews lost children of men; the Word which is Christ himself near my heart and my mouth, the Word of faith which we preach.

These are the two means the Father and the Son, through the Holy Spirit, have entrusted to his disciples in order thereby to subject to Jesus all the peoples of the world through repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

They look small. Powerless. Just as unimpressive as Jesus himself appeared when he walked among the Jewish people, and as he still stands today exposed to mockery and contempt.

From that hour on, there was no more doubt among the disciples; quietly they gathered in Jerusalem; trustfully they chose the twelfth apostle, ready when the hour should come for God's power to be revealed in them; calmly and expectantly they awaited the feast of Pentecost; and when the Spirit had filled them as with a consuming fire, they boldly struck the first blow with the Word among the peoples and won a glorious victory: Three thousand souls who received the Word were baptized and were added to the congregation.

And thus the Lord's disciples have gone forward in the power of the Holy Spirit, from century to century, from people to people with baptism and the Word, and have laid the nations

under the kingdom of Jesus, until their beautiful feet that proclaimed peace and good tidings have also reached down to our time and to our hearts.

What is it that can give God's servants, the Lord's disciples with David's simple weapons, courage and power to go against the whole world and subdue it? What is it that gives God's children boldness when they are mocked, when they are trampled underfoot, when they are persecuted and slain, so that even when they die they sing and conquer? It is this Word from the mouth of Jesus that he not only has all authority in heaven and on earth, but that with this authority he will be with his disciples all days unto the end of the world.

If God is for us, who can be against us?

That is the secret. The hidden and yet before the world so gloriously manifested power of Christ's Church and of his disciples; this is the Christian's hidden strength, which gives joy in sorrow, victory in defeat, and life in death: that the almighty Son of God by his Holy Spirit dwells in my heart and gives to me, poor frail child of sin, through faith his authority and his protection.

Who, then, could harm me?

For nearly two thousand years the Lord's disciples have gone forward to fulfill this entrusted commission to all peoples; mockery and persecution have often been their lot; fire and blood have often marked their path; where Satan has been compelled to lie under Christ's cross, he has again and again pressed in as an angel of light into the congregation itself to rob the cross of its offense and the gospel of its foolishness and simplicity. Craft and power, together with princes and leaders of the world, he employed to make void this Word of God: All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth, and behold, I am with you all days unto the end of the world.

But to no avail; the blood of witnesses has become the Church's seed; and where the world slew one disciple and seduced ten, there the Lord has raised up hundreds in their place; nation after nation has been subjected to the gospel; from north to south, toward east and west the Word has pressed forward, until today it is proclaimed in nearly three hundred different languages. Instead of weakening and being exhausted with the course of centuries, the power of Christ's word has become mightier, so that in our century there has even occurred as it were a new Pentecostal wonder, and the gospel is now proclaimed with greater zeal and in wider extent than ever since the days of the apostles.

But you who doubt Christ's divine authority, what do you say? Has not his word, both concerning his authority and his preservation, been gloriously confirmed? Be not proud, but fear! For to him is also given authority to judge, and soon, soon he comes!

And you who call yourself by Christ's Name and belong to his congregation, what do you say? Is it not time for you to awake out of sleep, to read the signs of the times and hasten to take part in the struggle for the spread of the kingdom to the ends of the earth before it is too late and the Lord has no other use for you than for the salt that has lost its savor?

And you servant of God, you are often downcast and fainthearted and it seems that the Word bears no fruit when you preach; lift up your eyes and see what is taking place round

about; the end of all things draws near, and the Lord confirms his word gloriously; therefore strengthen the hanging hands and the feeble knees, go with new courage and new strength into the struggle; the victory is near, and when you are weak, then you are strong; for the Lord still has all authority, he sends you, and he is still with you.

And you quiet, unnoticed child of God, man or woman, who in secret have life in God, but often grow discouraged and begin to doubt whether you may belong to the Lord, so sinful and frail you are.

Oh, how the Lord needs you!

His power is perfected precisely in weakness. Shake off all chains of sloth and come courageously into the struggle; there is a soul near you whom the Lord will win by you. For remember that if you shall have the blessing and salvation of this promise: Behold, I am with you all days — then you must not forget that the almighty Son of God also commands you: Go out and make all peoples my disciples!

Come, friends—all of you. Work. Pray. Bear witness. Give, that the gospel may press on through heathen, Jews, and slothful Christians unto the ends of the earth, and that we may soon celebrate the great feast of the Trinity in heaven and together with the innumerable multitudes of every people and tongue, with white robes and palms, sing the new song of God and of the Lamb:

Glory be to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, who has been and always remains one true God from eternity to eternity. Amen.

40 First Sunday after Trinity: Self-Denial and Renunciation of the World

Matthew 16:24–27: Then Jesus said to his disciples: If anyone wants to follow me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he will repay each according to what he has done.

The old text for the First Sunday after Trinity we all know; it is about the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man's joyful life ended in eternal torment; Lazarus's wretched existence ended in eternal blessedness. In our text today the reason is explained why it came to so different an end with the rich man and Lazarus.

Whoever seeks eternal glory must deny himself, renounce the world, and follow Jesus. These three things are required for the one who desires to reach eternal life.

Anyone who wants to satisfy his own desire and seize the world's constant pleasures cannot expect that eternal glory will crown a life which has been spent in the pleasures of sensuality and the bondage of vanity.

The narrow way of life is self-denial. But it is self-denial in the footsteps of Jesus, and it is wholly different from that self-denial which the world also knows. Many have punished themselves in many directions, made themselves suffer, relinquished pleasures and comforts for the sake of worldly aims. The world admires this, if it is crowned with success; it is often adorned with honorable names; it is called strength of character and perseverance, it is called frugality and self-sacrifice; but it is not the full and unconditional self-denial of which Jesus speaks. That goes infinitely further. It does not consist in denying oneself in certain directions in order thereby to attain greater enjoyments elsewhere; but it means giving up myself—my own will, my own claim—so that God becomes my all in all. For to deny oneself in the Christian sense is to lose one's life.

The natural man lives for his own pleasure shut up inside the sensual and the temporary. His sorrows and cares, his joys and satisfactions, his desires and strivings are all confined to that same narrow sphere. And because the natural man in all this, in work, in sorrow, in joy, in distress and in desire, lives without God and transgresses his commandments, therefore this whole natural life is a life in sin, be it ever so outwardly upright. Whoever is to be saved must lose this life; not simply by dying the bodily death; for he who by compulsion loses that to which his heart clings does not become glad, but sorrowful; he does not become happy, but miserable; he does not become blessed, but accursed; he is not saved, but lost. So it is not bodily death that frees us from the bondage of self-indulgence with its pain and its pleasure; but it is the death of self-denial at Christ's cross.

Go with him to Golgotha and learn what it means to stand as a sinner before God; see what has happened to God's Son, to the green tree, and tremble when you think what will happen

to you—the dry wood. Open your eyes and see that your life in sin and sensuality, that life which you live for your own pleasure, is a life under God's wrath and ends in eternal torment. Learn what it means that the world passes away with its lust; see what it is to fall into the hands of the living God.

Then your proud heart will be bowed and your self-willed will broken. Then you will receive a broken heart and a crushed spirit. Then you lose your old life in the service of sensuality and vanity. Then you begin to feel the dread and the shuddering of eternity. Then you see your own helplessness when chasms open around you on every side. Then you learn what true self-denial is, when you sink helpless, broken, lost down at Christ's cross and lift your praying hands to him:

Lord, save me, I perish!

That is the hour of self-denial; then the whole old life is lost. From then on it remains a life of self-denial, a life in fellowship with Christ's sufferings.

Thus the narrow way of life becomes also a way of renunciation of the world, a way of the cross. For he who dies with Christ to his old self, he also dies to the world. Eternity has become his all; to escape eternal ruin, to attain eternal blessedness, that is what matters, and nothing else. He has become a child of God. Heaven is his homeland, and in order to reach it he turns his back upon the world. But to live outside the world and yet be in the world, that is the inner cross which belongs to all Christians. And to bear the world's contempt and scorn because one has despised the world, that is the outer cross at which no Christian should be scandalized. For if you turned your back upon the world in order to go toward heaven's blessedness, can you expect anything else than that the world rages and hates, when it has spread out its glory before you in vain and enticed you with its pleasure?

And it is not enough that the Christian feels what it costs to renounce the world. It is not only this that a Christian must bear, that inwardly loosed from the world he becomes the world's mockery and men's contempt. But since it will often happen that the deceitful heart again fastens itself upon the temporal and perishable things, the Lord deals graciously with his children and spares them temptations and chastens them for falls, in that he lets poverty and sickness and sorrow fall upon them, so that they become as Lazarus, full of sores. This is no burden for the one who presses on toward eternity's glory; it is a relief for the spirit because it oppresses the flesh. It drives away from this perishable world forward toward the glory, if it is borne in Christ's spirit. The Lord takes away what has become for us a temptation which we could not endure; let us beware lest sorrow over the loss become a new temptation in which we fall and are lost.

But the third thing which belongs to the narrow way of life is to follow Jesus. Without this there is no gain either in self-denial or in renunciation of the world. For to follow Jesus is to live the life of love after him; to love the Father in heaven, to love the people on earth; to love God who hates sin, to love sinners who are perishing in their sins under God's wrath. If our self-denial and renunciation of the world are not borne and governed, not permeated and animated by Christ's love, then they are nothing; as Paul says: If I distribute all my goods to the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but do not have love, it does me no good.

It is a wretched life to live in self-denial and renunciation of the world without Christ's love. It becomes a hard and cold, a bitter and evil, a heartless and spiritless existence, which confidently claims to be Christianity, but alas, alas, it is not. It has Christianity's pain, but it lacks its joy; it has taken the bitter, but it has neglected the sweet; it has learned to know sin and death and perdition; but it has not experienced grace and restoration and blessedness.

O what misery—what a wretched state!

You have halted halfway, dear soul; you have let go of the world, but you have not grasped Christ; you have lost your life, but you have not received God's life instead. For God's life is the life of love in the Holy Spirit.

It is not enough to deny yourself; you must also sacrifice yourself for Christ's cause; it is not enough to renounce the world, you must also take all the worldly and earthly things you have and use them in Christ's service. It is useless if you do not delight in riches and the world's goods, if you let your wealth lie unused where it could clothe the naked and feed the hungry. It does no good if you live simply and frugally, if you only let it be a dead treasure with you, which others consume in their pleasures. O no, follow Jesus' example and step in his footsteps! See how they are marked by blessing! Then your life in self-denial and renunciation of the world will also become a blessed life, when it is also a life in following Christ.

When your heart closes itself seriously, with courage and firm resolve against the world's pleasure, O let it spread itself freely and blessedly in living love toward your heavenly Father and toward your fellow human beings. When you are as a bronze wall and an iron pillar against the powers of evil, O be loving and gentle toward the poor sinner, man or woman, whom Satan has bound in his chains and ensnared in his nets. When you hate sin, yet have compassion on the sinner. When you rebuke Jerusalem's sin, O do it with tears in your eyes and weeping in your heart, because Jerusalem did not know the time of its visitation.

Self-denial and renunciation of the world must be purified and understood in following Christ; for it is no Christianity to die with him if we do not also live with him. But Christ's life is Christ's love. May it become our life, and then it will also become our blessedness, when the Son of Man will come in his Father's glory with his angels and repay each according to what he has done.

41 Second Sunday after Trinity: On Following Christ

Luke 9:51–62: When the time drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face toward Jerusalem. He sent messengers ahead of him, and they went into a Samaritan village to prepare for him. But the people did not receive him, because he was on his way to Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, as Elijah did?” But he turned and rebuked them. “You do not know what spirit you are of. For the Son of Man has not come to destroy souls, but to save.” And they went on to another village.

As they went along the road, someone said to him, “Lord, I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the sky have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” He said to another, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Another said, “Lord, I will follow you, but first let me say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

What is here related took place while Jesus with his disciples was on his last journey to Jerusalem. For in the fifty-first verse it stands written that "when the days were fulfilled that he should be taken up, he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem." His disciples also understood that this was a decisive going, which, according to their thought, would at last bring the expected glory. Therefore they were filled with lofty—almost proud, triumph-confident—thoughts. They already had time to consider "which of them should be greatest"; they were strangely angered at one who cast out demons in Jesus' name and "followed not with them"; and John and James were so inflamed at the boldness of the Samaritans in refusing Jesus lodging that they asked permission to command fire to fall from heaven and consume them.

Each of those words must have been like a barb in Jesus' heart, driving him to bow his head still lower! He answered them lovingly and meekly: "The Son of Man has not come to destroy men's souls, but to save,"—and continued the way with Gethsemane and Golgotha before him.

Ah, poor disciples! They were still far from understanding what a path of suffering this journey was for Jesus, still less that their own reward of "glory" should consist in following after him upon the way of the cross and of renunciation. Their thoughts were yet fleshly.

Under these circumstances, and under the influence of that tension and enthusiasm with which hearts were filled, a man comes to him and says: "Lord, I will follow you wherever you go."

In truth a fair and right confession, and surely sincere! And yet, how deceptive! Not so much for others as for oneself!

Jesus' answer shows it:

"The foxes have holes and the birds of the heaven nests; but the Son of Man has not where he may lay his head."

It is a grave answer—meant to shatter every fleshly dream about following Christ, and to force us to ask what it really means to "follow him." For there is a state of which Jesus himself says, "the last is worse than the first."

In the centuries which have run their course since Jesus laid this weighty admonition upon a hasty confessor's, a newly awakened disciple's heart, human nature has not changed a hair's breadth. While it may swiftly be brought to rejoice and be exalted by faith that Christ by his suffering and death upon the cross has paid for all sin, it recoils and withdraws when the Lord reminds: What I have given up, you also must give up; what I have suffered, you also must suffer.

And so, even in our own days there are multitudes of awakened Christians who after a shorter or longer time fall away—amiable, eager, sincere confessors, for whom the cross and renunciation have come so unexpectedly upon their longings for heaven and their hallelujah cries that they have become a stumbling-block to them, and the last has become worse than the first. They did not heed this weighty word of Jesus: "Whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." The Son of Man has not where he may lay his head.

But have you considered this?

In contrast to the hasty and fervent yet unreflecting confession which does not reckon "what it will cost to finish a tower," and therefore runs the danger of soon falling away, there is presented in the two following examples a class of Christ's followers who are also ready and willing, but who are still governed by considerations which in themselves are wholly justified, yet which become a snare, a stumbling-block, and a rock of offense when they are placed alongside of, or even before, the following of Christ.

The Lord says to one: "Follow me." He is ready, but he will be allowed "first to go and bury his father."

It is not wrong to bury one's deceased father; on the contrary, among heathen and Jews and Christians, among all peoples who yet retain the poorest remnant of religion, it has been regarded as one of the holiest duties to give one's nearest and dearest a seemly burial. The greatest disgrace—more dreaded by the noblest men than death itself—was to remain unburied, a prey to dogs and wild beasts. The history of Ahab and of Tobit shows fully how highly a seemly burial was esteemed among the Jews.

Nothing is more dangerous or more difficult to break with than customs handed down from the fathers. Nothing angered the most zealous Jews more than that Jesus healed on the Sabbath; and within almost every Church there are customs, mere and simple customs, which have awakened more bitter strife than the most important truths.

But fearlessly Jesus breaks every regard to custom when it comes side by side with, or even in the way of, following him. "One thing is necessary; and first the kingdom of God and his righteousness"—this is his doctrine.

"Let the dead bury their dead," he said. You need not trouble yourself about your dead father; there will be enough others to see that he is buried decently. The more one is dead in himself and without hope for eternity, the more he seeks to deceive others and himself by trying to dress up death with a fine funeral. You must even be ready to bear the shame of neglecting so sacred a duty as burying your own father; for you, everything else must be set aside for these two necessary things: to "follow me" and "to proclaim the kingdom of God."

It was a hard saying; and we are not told that the disciple could accept it. But as Jesus says to one, "Give all that you have to the poor," to another, "Let your father lie unburied," so there is for you, whoever you are, one thing which you either reluctantly or not at all will give up, which by every conceivable means you seek to place beside or in harmony with your Christianity, one thing to which your heart clings more than you will confess or know, so that this thing becomes first, and Jesus second. But the Lord asks for that very thing. Search your heart. Be honest with yourself, so that you are not cheated out of the hope of eternity.

"Let the dead bury their dead!"

There is no bond so holy, no love so strong, no object so precious, that you must not be ready to relinquish it in order wholly and undividedly to follow Jesus. This is what Jesus declares in the third example, where another disciple expressed his willingness to follow Jesus if only he might first take leave of those in his house. It is not mentioned whether they were parents, wife, or children; it is the same. Jesus' answer is like a two-edged sword exposing the hidden counsels of the heart. It shows in this case that the disciple, perhaps himself unaware, had his first, his strongest love in his home; that he at once beforehand must become clear about this, receive grace to relinquish it according to that word from Jesus' mouth: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple," and count even the dearest things on earth among what will be added, and for which a follower of Christ should be free of anxious care; else he would come into the same danger as Lot's wife, look back to the glory of Sodom and become a pillar of salt.

"No one who lays his hand upon the plow and looks back to what is behind him is fit for the kingdom of God."

After incomprehensible sufferings and mighty manifestations of God's power, the Israelites found courage to break free from Egypt's bondage and went forth bravely until they came to the Red Sea. There they stood: the sea before and Pharaoh's host behind. It might well bring the bravest to despondency. "Go forward," said the Lord; and they went straight into the sea and sang the Lord's praise on the other side, while Pharaoh's host lay buried in the deep. But soon it was all forgotten, and hearts stole back to Egypt's flesh-pots and rebelled and hardened themselves against the Lord. "They were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; they all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; but with most of them God was not well pleased; they were overthrown in the wilderness."

They had put their hand upon the plow, but looked back.

Remember Lot's wife. Remember the serpent-bitten Israelites. Remember your own deceitful heart, and follow Paul's counsel:

Forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.

42 Third Sunday after Trinity: The Publican Matthew

Matthew 9:9–13. And as Jesus went on from there, he saw a man sitting at the toll booth, called Matthew; and he said to him: Follow me! And he rose and followed him. While he was at table in the house, many publicans and sinners came and sat at table with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to his disciples: Why does your Master eat with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard it, he said to them: The healthy have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Matthew was a publican; and from the toll booth Jesus called him with a gracious yet authoritative word: Follow me! From the toll booth Matthew rose and followed Jesus.

It is not with many or grand words that Matthew relates this serious moment in his life. He is not like those preachers whose pleasure it seems to be to proclaim their own history of conversion. He passes over it so swiftly, as though he were afraid to dwell upon himself, in order to hasten to tell what Jesus further did and said on this occasion. For it is the person and word and work of Jesus which so seized Matthew that it was impossible for him to remain sitting in the toll booth when the call sounded: Follow me! With a ready and willing heart, the poor sinner followed him who had just said to the afflicted sufferer upon the bed of pain: Son, take courage! Your sins are forgiven you. Rise, take your bed, and go to your house! The word of Jesus swept through Matthew's heart — swift as thought, powerful as love. The toll booth and the accounts saw him no more. He rose and left it all. From that moment he was Jesus' disciple and would become his apostle. He belonged to Jesus, and Jesus to him. Therefore his speech and writing are about Jesus, not about himself.

This is one of the small beginnings of that which is great in the Kingdom of God. For indeed we do not know much about Matthew; but this we know, that the forgiven publican has written the Gospel according to Matthew; and when we know this, then we know also that the Lord has made the publican Matthew one of the chief instruments in the service of his Kingdom.

Or perhaps you are one of the world's careless skeptics who disdainfully says or thinks: The Gospel of Matthew—is that anything great? Friend, have you read what you despise? Begin to read; continue to read; read until you come to the end; read until every section and every narrative stands living before your thought; read until the whole Gospel becomes one mighty testimony for your heart concerning the Kingdom of God and its power to overcome sin and death and to give the life of love and the hope of the resurrection; then you shall learn to think otherwise both of the Gospel of Matthew and of the power of God which is therein revealed.

If the Gospel of Matthew is a poem, as the wise of the world now say, then Matthew is a great poet, behind whom the other poets of the world may creep into hiding and conceal themselves, shrinking into their own smallness; but if the Gospel of Matthew is God's living

truth, as the Spirit clearly bears witness, then Matthew is nothing other than a humble instrument in the service of Jesus' love and in the surpassing greatness of his Spirit's power.

Matthew himself surely felt that it was a great day for him when Jesus looked upon him and called him; for from Luke we hear that Matthew, who is also called Levi, made a great feast for Jesus in his house, and that thus Jesus came to sit at table with many publicans and sinners.

Then the Pharisees murmured. They felt anger — the sharp sense that their honor was being diminished, that here matters were unfolding which deprived them of their honor and their praise. Should publicans and sinners perhaps receive a share in the Kingdom of God? Would the new Prophet truly not keep company with the Pharisees and bow to their party?

But to the Pharisees' murmuring question to the disciples: Why does your Master eat with publicans and sinners? Jesus himself answers with words which to this day have become a flowing fountain of consolation for all poor sinners; but also a stumbling stone and a rock of offense for all proud and self-righteous hearts:

The healthy have no need of a physician; but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice! For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Jesus is a physician; therefore it is not strange to see him with the sick and among the sick. There he is in his proper place. It is strange that anyone can take offense at so self-evident a matter. But where love has departed from the hearts, compassionate love becomes offensive and intolerable. The "pure" cannot associate with the "impure"; the "righteous" cannot draw near to sinners; pride and self-righteousness are sinners which thrive best in their own company, and which are even capable of imagining that this company is also that of God and of Jesus Christ.

But Jesus is a physician; therefore do not fear, you who are sick! Remember that it is precisely for the sake of your sickness that Jesus has come; were you whole and sound, then you would have nothing to do with him, and he nothing with you. Therefore fear the sickness; for truly it is a sickness unto death, and hasten to send prayerful word for the physician; he will quickly come and heal you.

For this is his will, as it is written: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

In these words the whole blessedness of Christianity is contained. Take these words to heart, and you will grow as a Christian the more they fill your mind and your whole soul. God will give, not take. That is the point. Our own understanding and all pagan religions and all Jewish Phariseeism and all human moralism would persuade us that God requires sacrifice from us, requires that we should give him something, that we should show him worship, that we should serve him, that we should do something for him, then God will be satisfied with us, then he will reward us, then he will do something for us again, when we have first done something for him.

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ is this, that God desires mercy and not sacrifice. Go and learn what this means, says Jesus.

This is a blessed, saving doctrine which strikes down all Pharisaic pride.

God desires mercy.

Do not come with sacrifice and gift to him.

He is the one who will give; he is the one who will help.

Therefore come with a broken heart and a contrite spirit and hear what the Spirit says: In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and has sent his Son to be an atonement for our sins. That is mercy. All is gift, all is grace; the only thing with which you can come before God is an emptied heart, the poverty of spirit. Come poor and hungry and thirsty as you are. The Kingdom of Heaven will be yours; righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit will fill your soul.

Then you turn from your sins. For Jesus' grace and mercy, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, do not serve that you should remain in sin, but that you should be freed from sin. Christ's call to sinners is a call to repentance. He seeks the company of sinners, not in order to partake in their sinful joy, but in order to make sinners penitent, that they might partake in his heavenly and holy joy.

May the Lord grant that we know our sickness, so that we may know our physician and his healing.

43 Fourth Sunday after Trinity: A New Righteousness

Matthew 7:1–6. Do not judge, so that you will not be judged. For the judgment you pronounce will be pronounced on you, and the measure you use will be used on you. Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye but fail to notice the beam in your own? How can you say to your brother, "Hold still, I will remove the speck from your eye," when there is a beam in your own? You hypocrite! First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. Do not give what is holy to dogs or throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them and turn on you and tear you apart.

There are three things which the Savior through these words admonishes the disciples and all Christians against: to judge others hastily; to blame the faults of others before one has seen and corrected one's own; and to deal lightly with what is holy.

All three are useful and necessary admonitions; and with good reason every preacher will employ this text earnestly to rebuke that censoriousness, fault-finding spirit, and irreverence in the handling of holy things which, not only among members of the congregation in general but also among converted children of God, often appear in grievous measure.

Mutual suspicion and distrust are not unknown in the congregations. Among those who bear Christ's name and have been baptized into him, people speak about one another, judge one another, and explain one another's actions. At times there is a heartlessness—a spirit of self-satisfaction, even of bitterness. It is enough to make one recoil, remembering the Master's command to love one another and the doctrine of Christianity that its confessors belong to the same Father's house.

The children of God therefore often divide themselves into small circles and cliques, which mutually sigh over one another, shake their heads over one another, and are continually anxious and troubled with doubt whether "the others" are in truth children of God; one can imagine what becomes of love under such conditions.

Many members of the congregation go to the Holy Supper twice a year just as regularly as they attend to spring sowing and autumn harvest, and not with a tenth part so much seriousness. They send for God's servants an hour before a near relative dies and are yet fearful that they have "troubled" the pastor too early; and while in many places they stand outside the church door after the service has begun and chatter and trifle and trade, and breathe easier once the sermon is finished, yet they fear that the Baptism over their children has not had the proper power if the pastor has forgotten to make the sign of the cross over them.

Such half-heathen, half-Catholic remnants of superstition often come to light, coupled with indifference toward that which in truth can save a man: the Word of God and faith. So much rashness, self-righteousness, and Christian untruth confront a servant of God that he often does not know where to begin or where to end when he considers this text.

And yet not even the strictest moral sermon, held without respect of persons, can be all that Jesus intended by these remarkable words about judging and measuring and correcting one's

neighbor. We must look deeper. The Savior has assuredly another purpose than merely to admonish against the daily faults and falls to which we are all exposed.

Rational Christianity would gladly see in the Sermon on the Mount a collection of moral precepts of the highest and purest kind, and therein places Christ's merit, that he, like Confucius, Buddha, and other founders of religion, was able both in life and teaching to present a purer morality than his age. The Rationalists have therefore always confessed that in Jesus of Nazareth they saw an ideal moral teacher. Already this will make it evident to every Christian that Jesus by the Sermon on the Mount intended something altogether different than composing a moral textbook, even a very lofty one. One does not come to know Jesus and his teaching by reason alone.

But first of all it was precisely in opposition to the Pharisees and their moral precepts, stretched into the finest consequences, that the Lord appeared and spoke. It is a misunderstanding when anyone supposes that after an almost two-thousand-year study of the Law of Moses the Pharisees lacked moral commandments of the highest and purest kind as well as of the more ordinary sort. Their error was not that they lacked commandments—indeed, they had plenty, and many of them holy and excellent. That is why Jesus says, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat; therefore do and observe whatever they tell you” (Matt. 23:2–3).

Their fundamental error, their spiritual blindness, lay here. They meant and taught that when anyone kept the commandments, as they had earnestly and extensively expounded and interpreted them, such a one thereby became righteous before God.

And as particularly the commandments here mentioned by Jesus, about judging and finding fault with others, are concerned, they are, considered merely morally, neither of higher nor purer sort than that they are incorporated into the common moral consciousness of most peoples in the form of proverbs and the like, such as: Sweep first before your own door; do not stir in other men's refuse, and so forth.

The Savior intended neither to give, as it were, a brief compendium of the best and noblest found in humanity's moral consciousness — as the Rationalists assert — nor to supplement the Pharisees' already overfilled collection of laws with some new commandments.

He came to proclaim a new righteousness.

Therefore he says to his disciples at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount: Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall by no means enter into the kingdom of heaven. And the righteousness of a Gamaliel, a Hillel, even a Paul was, humanly speaking, not to be despised; there are many today who believe that it can even stand before God and only wish that they were so pure and blameless as those named. And immediately before he says: I have not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill.

That is the point. He has come to fulfill the Law—to present it in its full measure, in its true, holy, divine content, an image of God's own holy being, realized in human form in the person of Jesus Christ.

In this form the Law is presented not so that men might have a moral ideal to dream

about, and the best of them chase after it with abstinence, mortification, and extraordinary worship—things that may have a show of wisdom, but in reality serve only the flesh.

Jesus presents the Law as he does in order to convict of sin, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. He would have us understand that if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the Law; but now Scripture has shut up all under sin. The Law cannot save. Therefore the merciful God has prepared a way of salvation by sending his only-begotten Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, to suffer and die for us—so that by the Holy Spirit and faith in us the Law's demand may be fulfilled in us.

Therefore Jesus set forth the Law as he did in the Sermon on the Mount, in order to bring men to the knowledge of sin, to repentance, and to faith in a new righteousness, the righteousness by faith in Christ.

When we compare our text with the old one for the same Sunday in Luke (6:36–42), we find the same. For there the admonition against judging is introduced with these words: Therefore be merciful, as your heavenly Father also is merciful, and judge not. What man can be merciful as God without one: the man Jesus? And God in heaven can admit into his fellowship none but him who is perfect like him. Thus there is required a greater righteousness than that of the Law, than that of the Pharisees, than that of the highest moral teacher; there is required nothing less than Christ's righteousness, the righteousness of faith.

The parable of the mote in the brother's eye is in Luke introduced with this question: Can a blind man lead a blind man? Shall they not both fall into the pit?

This casts light over the whole passage. It is precisely in opposition to the Pharisees' self-righteousness that Jesus gives the Law the interpretation which necessitates a new righteousness. It is the scribes and Pharisees who are blind; the Law, instead of being to them a mirror of God's holiness to bring them to the knowledge of sin, has in their eyes become a beam that makes them spiritually stone-blind, so that they know not sin, but only faults, transgressions, and trivialities, indeed of the very finest kind, yet still only human, and especially in "others."

But in this condition there arises precisely the greatest frivolity toward what is holy and the bitterest intolerance toward those who think differently. Where God's Law is transformed into — be it thousands of — human commandments, or where God's doctrine of salvation is transformed into human learning, there what is holy is thrown to dogs and pearls have come to swine; and if you dare to say this to them, they will turn on you and tear you apart, as they also did to Jesus when they hung him on the cross.

Well then, Brother and Sister, where do you stand? Have you used God's Word and God's holy things as a cloak for your self-righteousness and trampled the blood of the Son of God under your feet?

Or have you by God's Spirit allowed the two-edged sword of his Law to pierce your heart to reveal sin and bear witness of righteousness and judgment? Has he given you grace to remove the beam from your own eye and truly see? In the shame of your nakedness and under the

weight of condemnation, have you fled to Golgotha, to be washed in Jesus' precious blood and receive a new righteousness?

Have you thus had Christ's love poured out in you by the Holy Spirit, so that you no longer judge your brother, but love him and would even be willing to be cut off, if only one heart might be won for Jesus?

How different things would be among us then.

Brother and Sister, where do you stand?

44 Fifth Sunday after Trinity: Peter's Confession

Matthew 16:13–19: When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But you—who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

In this text we are told how Jesus asks what fruit his words and works have borne. Yet he divides his hearers into two groups. He first asks what the people say, and then what the disciples say. He expects a better answer from the latter, and he receives it. But in both cases the question is the same: Who do they say that I am? Or more briefly: Who am I? This, therefore, is his true question to all. It is also the question of life and eternity for each one of us. Here every soul on earth must pause and consider: Who is Jesus? What do I know of him, not according to memorized books and sermons, but according to my own personal experience?

Have you ever attempted to give an honest answer to this question? If you have not, then test yourself now and answer before God what your personal knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth really is.

It is striking what the people say about the Son of Man. When Jesus says: What do the people say of me, who am the Son of Man, then it is surely his meaning that people ought to know the Son of Man. He, the true Man who is born into the world, should not be unknown or a stranger among men. People ought to recognize him again, just as a mother knows her son, even if he has been away a long time; just as childhood memories return upon the soil of home when we tread it once more after long, long absence.

But the people did not know the Son of Man. And yet, when they call him John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah, it is clear enough that this wondrous Son of Man awakens the human conscience. A consciousness arose in them: they stood face to face with a man who made them think of sin, the Fall, and lost glory. For what are John the Baptist and Elijah and Jeremiah but the mightiest voices of repentance that have sounded in the human race? Of them people must think when they see and hear Jesus of Nazareth. His presence compels them to feel, whether they wish to or not, that their sin separates them from him and from God, that their sin is their corruption and perdition. Where does that come from, that Jesus' quiet and blessed activity awakens such thoughts? Why do people hear in his speech a voice of judgment that brings them to remember their sin?

It is because he is what we ought to be, and are not. It is because the Son of Man is true Man, perfect Man, a Man who still bears the crown that belonged to man from the beginning; he still has the image of God which we have lost. Therefore consciences awaken wherever

Jesus draws near; therefore his most gracious words and works are felt as strong testimonies of sin, as powerful reminders of a glory which once was ours, but is no more. Every feature of his life becomes a sharp sword in the heart of the one who loves sin and lives in it.

But when Jesus then turns to the disciples and asks them: But you, who do you say that I am? then there is one of them who can answer rightly. It is he who once in his fishing boat had fallen down at Jesus' feet and cried: Lord, depart from me; for I am a sinful man. Simon, son of Jonah, had experienced the same as those people who had come into contact with Jesus; and with Simon it had become a complete and full brokenness and surrender, so that Jesus had also raised him up and made him a new man. Therefore he knew Jesus better and altogether differently than the people; he could answer with rock-firm faith: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. That was the sum of Peter's spiritual experience. He could speak words no one had yet spoken. It is a word of overwhelming force; therefore it also receives from Jesus an even mightier answer: Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah; for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you, that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Thus has no human being ever spoken. And indeed one might think and write about each of these words without ever reaching the depths of them. Also, in the history of the Church they have, through misuse and misinterpretation, exercised a distinct influence. That would deserve closer examination. But we must here confine ourselves to what is most essential. And then above all there are three things to observe in these words of Jesus to Simon, which are as serious and as edifying for every other true confessor as for him who first heard them from Jesus.

The first is this, that the right and true confession of Jesus is not produced by flesh and blood, but is a revelation from the Father who is in heaven. Flesh and blood signifies all human ability and human power of whatever name it may be called, whether learning or acuteness, thinking or feeling. All of it falls short. The confession unto salvation of which Jesus here speaks, and of which Paul testifies in Romans, must be grounded in revelation from the Father in heaven. When we learn from the Father to go to the Son and from the Son to go to the Father, and thus driven to the cross and drawn to the mercy seat, find peace with God, and become his children, then only do we rightly know by personal experience and by God's revelation that Jesus, the crucified and risen one, is the Son of the living God. Then we can confess with the mouth unto salvation.

Friend, has it been so with you? Have you come to the Son drawn and driven by the Father? Have you come to the Father lovingly led by the Son? Have you received the witness of the Spirit in your heart that you are a child of God? Then you can confess with joy like Simon, son of Jonah: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God; you live and I live in you.

The second is this, that the genuine and true confession of Jesus also makes every confessor a rock and pillar in God's Church. As Simon, son of Jonah, became Peter through his confession and his testimony, so also will everyone who confesses Jesus to be the Savior, the Christ,

the Son of the living God, become a pillar of the truth and a foundation upon earth; and though the storms of hell rage about this rock, they will not overthrow it. Out of the mouth of infants and nursing children the Lord prepares praise and power upon earth, when they with stammering tongue confess Jesus to be the Savior. And this heavenly wisdom, which is hidden from the wise and understanding of the earth, is the Church's firm and invincible defense against hell's wickedness and falsehood. This truth prevails at last; blessed is the one who has built upon it in life, for it will not fail him in death.

The third is this, that the true confessor of Jesus Christ receives the keys of the kingdom of heaven to bind and to loose upon earth, so that it also is bound and loosed in heaven. It is a solemn word and a great power. It is the glorious power of God's liberated children; who can fully describe it? They themselves are Christ's bound ones and yet Christ's freed ones, thus they know both bonds and freedom. They belong to Christ, that is their only bond; they are delivered out of the bondage of sin and of the world and of Satan, that is their freedom. Therefore they also can bind and loose with the imperishable keys of the kingdom of heaven. They can testify to the one who without God and without Christ flounders in the life of the world and sin, that there is no salvation in any other, and that there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved, except the name of Jesus alone. That is the bond which binds heaven and earth together, and with which every heart must be bound that will be saved. It is a key of the kingdom of heaven which opens and no one shuts, which shuts and no one opens.

And the Heaven of Heavens will answer Yes and Amen to this bond. They can also testify to all those who seek salvation in this name, that there is freedom and blessed release from all the bonds of sin and of judgment and of hell in this name of Jesus; and that again is a key of the kingdom of heaven, to which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will bear witness in heaven that it is faithful and true. And through the simple testimony of the true confessors human hearts will be bound and human hearts loosed, and only the Lord's own Day will fully reveal what has been bound and loosed through the simple confession of the name of Jesus from believing human lips.

Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, and blessed is everyone who confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. May the Lord himself awaken in our hearts the true and living faith and place the testimony and the confession upon our lips, that we might become his instruments to bind and loose upon earth in Jesus' name, and that it may be bound and loosed in heaven.

45 *In progress*****

46 **Twenty-fourth Sunday after Trinity: They knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.**

Luke 20:27–40. Then some of the Sadducees, who deny that there is any resurrection, came to him and questioned him, saying, ‘Teacher, Moses prescribed for us that if a man’s brother dies, having a wife, and he dies childless, his brother shall take the wife and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife and died childless; and the second took the wife, and he also died childless; and the third took her, and likewise all seven; they left no children and died. Last of all the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The children of this world marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy to attain that world and the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses indicated, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.’ And some of the scribes answered and said, ‘Teacher, you have spoken well.’ For they dared not ask him anything further.

The Sadducees were of that kind of people whose whole religion was denial of the resurrection. Just as in our own day there are those who deny that Jesus is God, always ready to dispute and to use their supposed learning to demonstrate that Jesus is never expressly called God in Scripture, so the Sadducees, with their worldly wisdom, were always prepared to prove that Moses teaches nothing about the resurrection of the dead; and thus their entire religion was built on the denial of this doctrine of God.

This suited the carnal life perfectly, to be able to convince themselves and others that there is no life after this one, that they have no accountability, and to encourage one another in the service of their belly with these words: ‘Eat, drink, and be glad, for tomorrow we die.’

They imagined themselves superior, and thought they demonstrated their superiority when they could dispute with Jesus about the resurrection.

But it went with them as with most other learned religious arguers. With all their sharp-witted learning, they were ignorant of the main thing, of the catechism, so to speak; they knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (Mark 12:24). Whoever seriously applies himself to these two will have better things to do than to dispute.

A man who was not in every respect faithful to the truth wished to have an excuse and a defense for his falsehood. He thought that if he could first prove that an emergency lie was justified, then he could himself decide when a lie was an emergency lie.

He said to a friend: ‘A madman with an axe in his hand was pursuing another and stopped where the street divided in two, not knowing which way the pursued man had gone. There he met another person and said to him, “Tell me which way my enemy went, or I will kill

you.” What should this person do? If he keeps silent, he himself will be killed; if he tells the truth, the other will be killed. Was it not necessary here to use an emergency lie?’

The friend replied: ‘I will answer yes, if you will promise me never to speak an untrue word until the above-mentioned situation occurs.’

Jesus, however, answered the Sadducees in a far more grave and searching manner, when they, in order to create a semblance of proof for their fleshly denial of the resurrection, produced an equally unreasonable story about the woman and the seven brothers who had been married to her.

He did not engage in their foolish and dishonest example. As was his custom, he went straight at their hearts and souls.

You Sadducees, he would say, deny the resurrection of the dead, and the reason is not that you possess any sound proof for doing so; the reason is that in your carnality and spiritual blindness you know neither the power of God nor the Scriptures.

If you knew the power of God and were not so clouded by your own sensuality, then you would know that life in this world and life in the world to come are two entirely different things. In this world, life—even the very best—is in the flesh, corruptible, and mortal. Since we all must die here, and since God’s plans of salvation could not be realized without the continuation of the human race, the Lord from the beginning gave this command: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.’ Therefore it belongs to life in this world to marry and to give in marriage.

But there, where God has revealed his power in a man and raised him from the dead, there begins a life in Spirit, in incorruptibility and immortality. Then death is swallowed up in victory, and the man can no longer die, but becomes like the angels, with a transfigured, glorified body, whose nourishment is the vision of the Lord’s face. There they neither marry nor are given in marriage, because each has an eternal existence of his own.

But neither do you know the Scriptures, despite your imagined learning. You strain out the gnat and swallow the camel. The most important thing escapes your blinded eye. For it stands written in Moses, in a well-known place, that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Can the living God be God of dead people? Then Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are dead, must, according to Scripture’s own testimony, be risen to new life. ‘Therefore you are greatly mistaken.’

No wonder that both the people and the Pharisees marveled at his simplicity and authority, and that from that time on they did not dare to ask him anything further.

Friend, you are not like the Sadducees? You do not dare to deny that there is a life after this; you still believe in the resurrection of the dead, and you do well. But have you also considered what the resurrection of the dead means for you?

Do you know the Scriptures and the power of God?

Do you know that the Son of Man has been given authority to carry out judgment, and that the hour is coming when all who are in the graves will hear the voice of the Son of God and come forth—those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:24–29)?

Thus the Scripture sounds, and thus the power is exercised.

Friend, are you prepared?”

47 *In progress*****