

Sundays of Pentecost 2025 Messages

Part 3

From Pastor Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)

Russell, Kentucky

Seventeenth Sunday After – Oct. 5 – *“What Does God
Owe Me?”*

Eighteenth Sunday After – Oct. 12 – *“Only One Came Back”*

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“508 And Still Counting-Martin Luther And The Reformation”

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By: Roberta Messner and Presented By: Carol Scott

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So What??!”*

“WHAT DOES GOD OWE ME?”


Message for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

October 5, 2025

HABAKKUK 1: 1-4; 2: 1-4 ** 2 TIMOTHY 1: 1-14 ** LUKE 17: 5-10

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

 Suppose that we all have driven by people standing on the corner of an entrance or exit ramp to the freeway holding a sign, "Will Work For Food" or something similar. I heard of one man who was more honest than most, his sign read, "I Need A Beer, Not Work."

Many of the others in reality only wanted a handout or money for something to drink, but tried to appear to have a genuine need and thus the offer to work if given the opportunity. If you were to stop and offer many of them a job I suspect that you would get many excuses why they needed cash and could not work right at that moment.

In the opening words of today's Gospel text, the 'apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" We can identify with that, can't we? How good that would be, especially when we find ourselves wavering. How comforting that would be, especially when we feel overwhelmed or when we face daunting challenges. Throughout the Gospel, we have watched the disciples grapple with what it means to follow Jesus. From the moment that they have left their fish nets in response to Jesus' invitation, the disciples have faced a steep learning curve. They have heard Jesus' challenge to 'take up their cross daily and follow me.' The disciples have been learning what Jesus' call to follow him entails. They are discovering that being called to follow Jesus isn't a 'one and done' event, but a lifelong pilgrimage of growing, learning, practicing, with challenges and failures along the way.

I remember when I was growing up, I would always open up the fridge and look for something to eat. I would stand there and just stare into the fridge, and wait to see if anything appealed to me. I think Mom had an alarm on the door, some light

or sound that only she could hear. It wouldn't matter if I had the fridge open for a second or a minute, she would always manage to yell out, "what are you looking for?" before I closed the door. And I always answered, "Something to eat." So she would say, "hurry up and find something!" She didn't want me wasting electricity. I wasn't worried about electricity; I was hungry and wanted something to eat!

People are doing the same thing today. They are searching for something to eat, spiritually. They want the satisfaction of knowing that they are doing the right thing, that they are loved by God. What they really want is God's approval, God's approval.

We need to remember something here. You and I don't deserve to be in this church building. We don't deserve to have the body and blood of the Lord touch our lips in the Lord's Supper as we will shortly. We don't deserve to be in God's presence. Some folks will ask, 'what does God owe me?' News bulletin, He doesn't owe us anything. The more we remember this, the more we will also need to trust in the blood of Christ for our forgiveness. With a deep understanding of our sin and unworthiness, we will also have a deep appreciation of our salvation in Christ.

We're Number 1!!! We have the largest Sunday School! We have a dynamic ministry! Dr. Good-Words is the world's leading authority on the Bible. We had the largest number of baptisms for the year! We support 500 missionaries! Our seminary has the most graduates of any other seminary in the world! Our annual budget is \$3 million dollars!

What if you were hearing that from someone in the church? Me, sometimes I feel like I am hearing a corporation's report to the Chairman of the Board or some sales pitch when I hear Christians or a Christian organization speak of themselves like that. Frankly, it often sounds like bragging. It also sounds like they have a handle on God's blessing that no one else has and that they are breaking their arm patting themselves on the back. Have you ever met someone like that?

We live in a society where bigger is better, more is better. Go into a fast food place, and we're invited to 'super-size' our order. Two for the price of one is common advertising in grocery stores. At most restaurants, the amount of food served is often more than a person can or ought to eat.

In the Bible, David got into trouble for numbering the people and I have some concern that in counting our "blessings" that we are suffering from the same pride

when we have such a grandiose spiel about our sheep, shekels and service.
'Umbleness does not seem to be one of our strong suits.

In fact "peer pressure" among pastors leads to some really strange accounting systems. This was several years ago but I once overheard a pastor who told another pastor that attendance at his church was 160 that week. I nearly fainted, but kept quiet. I was trying to figure where he was all week and this was Holy Week and I had not seen that kind of attendance the day I was there and I was sure that he was in the pulpit. Later, I asked him how he came up with that figure. As I said, this was Holy Week, and he was counting the attendance for each service including Sunday School. The total was 160. I thought, Duh, that is "correct," but they were the same 40 people not 160 unique individuals, which was what I was positive that the other guy was thinking when he heard 160. That is what is spawned when churches are run like a business rather than a ministry, but that is a different sermon. There's even a church in the area called God, Inc. for crying out loud!! God, Inc; don't get me started or I won't get this sermon done for another hundred pages.

There are huge homes going up, one trying to build a bigger house than his/her neighbor; bigger cars, SUVs because the bigger they are, the safer they are and it used to be that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, now SUVs are parked in driveways so big, there's little room for a lawn.

But bigger isn't always better. Some things we dread when it comes to more or bigger. Taxes, gas prices, utility bills.

Maybe that's why the apostles said, "Increase our faith." They wanted something more and measurable something better, but more than what? Better than what? And how do you measure something like faith?

We hear some people today talk as if increasing one's faith is the way to Spirit-filled bliss. Pray more and you will be blessed. Have joy in your heart and you will find riches.

A recent survey found that a majority of people agree that God wants us to be financially prosperous, the so-called prosperity gospel, where more is good and there is a measure of faith involved. Jesus' answer seems to take an opposite tack, smaller is better even faith as small as a mustard seed.

We know about smallness. We live in a world where mini and micro mean just as much as macro and mega. If fuel economy is on your mind, you can get a small car. You can get your name written on a grain of rice and it that's not small enough, I heard that experts can put a computer on a grain of sand, yes, you heard that correctly, a computer on a grain of sand.

So is smaller better when it comes to faith? It may seem that Jesus is advocating for a smaller faith. The apostles wanted mega faith. Jesus talks about micro faith. Regardless, mega faith, micro faith, or everything in between, are all good, size is not important. To put it another way, faith, pure and simple, is good. Hey we already have treasures in heaven, and great things can happen.

As followers of Jesus, there is no need for desperate quests for more faith. It is God's spirit working through the means of faith that makes all things possible.

I find it very interesting that the Lord starts this passage off by saying what a marvelous and miraculous thing we could do with mustard seed faith. A mustard seed is a mighty small thing. A mountain is well, a mountain. If I possess a puny thing, I can do a mountainous thing. Where does the glory lie, in what I possess or in what God can do with it? And all God's people would answer correctly and say, "Why, in what God does with my meager faith, of course!"

Our theology is often letter perfect but the application of it is pitiful. If all the glory is in what God can do with our puniness, then why do we strut and puff like we are so wonderful? Indeed, since none of us have tossed a mountain yet it appears that we do not even have mustard seed size faith. Therefore if any of the things that I mentioned in the opening paragraph are true, it only stands to reason that God should get even greater glory since what we possess is obviously microscopic and yet He brings about such huge results.

It is not All Saints' Sunday but the church, this church, has been blessed with persons who have inherited the faith and passed it on throughout the centuries. If you're thinking Bethel hasn't been around for a century, I know that and you do to, but we've been blessed. Yes, we may call some of them great in their faith but others are just 'normal' people who quietly lived their lives of faith. We can think of both kinds of people, I'm sure, as we look at the history of this congregation, the history of our own families, and the history of the whole church. Thanks to them, we have inherited faith, small as a mustard seed, but with the strength to move mountains to the sea.

Faith comes in all sizes, and God meets us where our faith is, whether it is as small as an atom or as big as Mount Everest. Our prayer is to grow in that faith as it points to one thing; our trust in the Lord. And for this, we are blessed as Christ walks with us as we live our lives, strengthening each of us in our own ways to be salt for the earth, light for the hill, seed of the word, and disciples of the mercy and justice of God.

Sure it may be difficult to live as a Christian – but it's also exhilarating, exciting, and eternally fulfilling! What exhilaration to hear and to taste and to feel the great things that God has done for us. How fulfilling to be used in his service! How exciting to be called to deal with sin seriously as he assesses our lives honestly! May we glorify his name for all that he has done for us and desires to do through us as he increases our faith in Him!

AMEN!!

“ONLY ONE CAME BACK”


Message for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

October 12, 2025

2 KINGS 5: 1-3, 7-15C ** 2 TIMOTHY 2: 8-15 ** LUKE 17: 11-19

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

ule Huffman is a name synonymous with WSAZ. He was the weatherman there; he was a voice for WSAZ ads; he had a great singing voice, I once heard him sing at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Barboursville but more importantly, to children of all ages, including adults, he was none other than Mr Cartoon and served in that capacity for about 26 years. When I was Cubmaster with Pack 19 at St John, we took the Cub Scouts to Huntington for what would be Jule Huffman's last taping as Mr Cartoon and he didn't let the kids down or my wife and me; we loved the show that day. Every day he would end his episode with a series of instructions for his audience which included specific directions on hygiene, like brushing teeth after meals, saying prayers before going to bed, manners like yes ma'am and yes sir; and courtesy, the magic words like 'please, thank you, and excuse me.' On Friday's episode, he would encourage his viewers and those in the studio audience taping to attend the church or synagogue of their choice with their grown ups. All of that, and I'm sure most of you adults remember Jule Huffman/Mr Cartoon but his magic words, especially 'thank you' shows that a great need exists for the people of God to say thank you but specifically to thank God.

Today we are going to examine some verses in the scripture that contain a very important message. I want to warn you now that not only is the message a very important one, but it is also very strong. It's a message that will make us analyze ourselves and it may very well be that when we are done, we may not like what we have found. It may very well be that what we find is not what we were looking for. Sounds a bit confusing, doesn't it? Today we are going to examine a lesson that all Christians must learn. Today we are going to learn about the need to be thankful.

In our text from Luke 17: “On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ When he saw them, he said to them, Go and show yourselves to the priests. And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.” But wait, weren’t there ten men; where are the other nine?

Jesus doesn’t need a calculator to see that one out of ten is not a good showing especially when all ten got the same treatment and were healed. What gives!

How often do you hear someone say, ‘God, please help me!’ Even coming from the most immoral, ungodly person in our society is not all together unfamiliar. We hear people using the name of God all the time, but especially when there is a crisis. It is in these times when even the vilest people turn to God because if He doesn’t help them now, there is no hope for another solution. God is diminished into a convenient bellhop whom people call out for in times of great need. But isn’t God more than that?

In the story of the ten lepers we find a very familiar scene, not because we know people with leprosy, but because we know many people who find themselves in desperate situations crying out to God. As it was custom in those days the lepers were put outside of the city to live outcast because of their disease. Often there were whole communities of lepers and so to find 10 of them together here in this story is nothing out of the ordinary. Theirs was a lonely and rejected existence and so the thought of being healed and freed from this life was great indeed, but Jesus was doing more than healing, He opened their eyes to something far greater than that.

The first thing we see here is that Jesus met these ten men who suffered from leprosy and he met them face to face. I am sure that many of us here have heard about leprosy, that we have read numerous Bible verses about this devastating affliction, but actually we do not really know what this illness really is. When we talk about leprosy we are talking about an illness that was the most feared of illnesses in that era. As we can all very well imagine, this was a terrible illness. This illness begins with small growths in the eye lids and the palms of the hand. Then it starts to spread gradually through out the entire body, causing discoloration of the hair, the growth of scales in the parts of the body that have become affected which cause very painful open sores and inflammation. Look at how terrible this illness is, it starts with the skin, causing open sores and swelling, but it does not

stop there. It then begins eating away the skin, the flesh and the bone; in other words, it rots away the body part by part. During the last stages of this disease body parts just simply and literally fall off.

Leprosy is a disease that is feared around the world. We have tried to dress it up just a little and alleviate some of the fear by giving it a different name. We now call it “Hansen’s Disease.” From 1894 to 1999 one of the greatest treatment centers in the world was located not very far from here at an abandoned and remodeled plantation at Carville, Louisiana. The hospital in Carville closed its doors in 1999 and no longer treats patients for Hansen’s Disease.

Today, we have learned a lot about leprosy and how it is treated. It is not as contagious as many once thought and there are treatments and medications to cure it, usually several rounds of antibiotics and steroids. But for those who are susceptible to catching it, the disease is spread pretty much the same way as the flu or a cold is spread – through sneezing and coughing around other people. The good thing is that the vast majority of people will never catch it because their immune systems prevent it from developing. The sad thing is that there are still a lot of people who contract leprosy every year and most of them are children.

The Jews saw this disease as a curse from God, therefore, only God could heal people suffering from this affliction. It was a horrible disease! It’s no wonder that the Jewish people had such strict laws when it came to the people who were suffering from this affliction. The leper was considered as an unclean person both spiritually and physically. They were not allowed to come near any persons; they had to keep a distance of a minimum of six feet from other people including their wives or husbands, their children, and any other family members.

Lepers were not allowed to live within the walls of any city. They were cast out and completely rebuked by everyone. Let’s imagine this for a second or two. Imagine how these people must have felt. I am sure that their hearts were completely full of sorrow having been banished from society and particularly from their families.

Then, here we have Jesus on His way to Jerusalem and He meets these people who are suffering from this terrible affliction. These people were desperate. Jesus tells them, “Hey guys, go and show yourselves to the priests.” And before they even got to the priests, they were made clean. All traces of leprosy had disappeared!

All the lepers in this verse were greatly blessed and should have been thankful. They should have all come back to thank Him for the blessing, thank Him for His mercy. They were all blessed by Christ, but not all returned to Him. Only one returned, the rest just continued on their way and overlooked what God had done for them. This is not too different from what happens now a days. Let me put it this way. If we start to analyze what a church really is, I think that all of us here would more or less agree that it is just like a hospital. How is that? Easy, let's think about it, let's think about a hospital's function. I am sure that none of us here have ever admitted ourselves to a hospital without having something seriously wrong, without suffering from an illness that weakened us in such a way that we needed immediate help and medical attention. Correct? I am not sure what everyone here thinks of hospitals, but I can tell you that for me to be admitted to one it has to be that I am very seriously ill. Then, what happens after we receive the treatment? We begin to feel better, we start regaining our strength or we are healed, until finally the day comes when we are discharged and we go back home. Can you see what I am talking about? In other words, what happens is that we leave the hospital and we continue on our way. We have been healed, therefore, we no longer think about the doctors or all the other members of the staff that labored so diligently and arduously for us to be healed.

Can you see the similarity between a hospital and the church now? I tell you that there is not too much of a difference, just like ill people are admitted to hospitals, we were admitted into the church gravely ill. We did not come to church because we were strong, it wasn't because we had no needs. It was because our spirits were sick, we found ourselves in situations that we could not resolve. In other words, we came to the church with spiritual leprosy. We arrived before the presence of our Lord full of open sores and deep wounds, we came to our Lord pretty much in the same way that these ten men did. We came asking for His mercy and grace, asking to be healed. We came before the feet of our Lord asking Him to free us from our sufferings. Just like these men, we then receive instructions of what we need to do. I say this because these men received specific instructions of what they had to do when the Lord told them: "Go show yourselves to the priests." We have also received specific instructions, we have been called to repentance, to be baptized, to have faith, trusting that God will take care of it all. What happened next? "And it came to pass, that, as they went, they were cleansed." Folks, we too have been cleansed, have been blessed, the Lord in His great and divine mercy has liberated us from what oppressed us.

But the sad part about all of this is that it is at this point that we begin to see the ungratefulness of men. All ten were healed, all ten were blessed, but only one

returned to thank Him. Only one returned to recognize what He had done, only one gave the glory to God. It is for this reason that Jesus said: "And Jesus answering said, Were not ten made clean? But the other nine; where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? And he said unto him, Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.

Folks, this is something that we should always have in mind, we can't be people with a short memory. I am talking about all of those people who having received the blessings did the same as those nine in this passage. They did not return to thank and glorify God. They did not return to recognize that it was only by His grace and mercy that they received the blessings, that only by His grace and love they received salvation.

Can you imagine the excitement they felt as they began to notice the leprosy was leaving? As they walked toward the priest in obedience to Jesus' command, every one of them was healed of his leprosy! Though they still had to be pronounced clean, they knew the miracle had already happened. The rest was only a ceremonial formality.

Ten lepers were healed that day, all at the same time and in the same manner, but only one turned back, before he ever reached the temple, to go back and thank the Lord for the miracle in his life.

I wonder what excuses the other nine had for not going back to give God the glory and giving thanks for their miracle?

Bottom line, we have to maintain this piece of scripture very much in mind at all times. We simply can't be like the nine that we have read about in our Gospel today. We can't stop showing our gratitude to our Lord and Savior. Now then, I want you all to humor me and in the spirit of Mr Cartoon/Jule Huffman and his memory, I want everybody to wave like mad and say 'Bye Cartooners!'

AMEN!!

“DON’T GIVE UP ON GOD”


Message for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

October 19, 2025

GENESIS 32: 22-31 ** 2 TIMOTHY 3: 14-4:5 ** LUKE 18: 1-8

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

n a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’

Have you ever heard the saying, ‘the squeaky wheel gets the grease?’ That proverb is often used dismissively. It suggests that the only reason the ‘grease’ gets applied is to remove the nagging annoyance of the squeaking sound, whether it’s a perpetual high-pitched chirping or a recurring low-pitched creaking. Used in that sense, the proverb can reveal our feelings and our responses about chronic complainers, be they customers or co-workers or children, or even fellow church folks. We never complain do we? Squeaky wheels are those who have learned that if they complain loudly and long enough, they can eventually get their way. Their tactics are effective, but unpleasant.

Have you ever felt like you had to crawl on your hands and knees to God to get Him to pay attention to you? It’s not something we so-called upright people enjoy doing. But I imagine each of us has had some time in our lives when we were like the woman in today’s Gospel story, ‘continually coming,’ begging for justice, pleading to God with urgency, banging on the doors of heaven, over and over and over again.

But is that really the point of the story Jesus uses in today’s Gospel reading? Is the widow the squeaky wheel who eventually gets the grease, because the judge finally got worn down by listening to her complaining and gave her what she

wanted to be done with her? Was she crawling on hands and knees to get God to pay attention to her? Either way, there's something uncomfortable about this. It seems to reward nagging! Even more troubling is the implication that God is like that unjust judge. Does this parable portray God as one who is unresponsive and uncaring until, finally, the wheel has squeaked enough? If that's the case, then it sounds even more troubling. It suggests that God is like an unjust judge, or that God is like the parent who finally caves to a child's clamoring at the grocery store checkout aisle for the candy bar. Does this mean that the purpose of prayer is to nag God until we get what we want? And that we are more likely to succeed if we ask others to pray, too? This parable certainly seems to be set up that way.

Today's lesson, as Luke flat out says, is 'about our need to pray always and not to lose heart.' It is about crawling, begging, and pleading to God, and trusting that God will not delay in responding.

I don't know about you but sometimes I struggle with prayer. I wonder if God can really hear me? Am I getting through? In my mind I know that prayer is the direct line to God and that with God all things are possible, but does God have time to take me seriously? Are my needs, my concerns, as important to God as the neighbor next door or the family down the street; what about that family whose child has cancer?

This week God has had a lot of people on the prayer line. People all over the country have been calling on Him; they have been praying for the troops in the Middle East; prayers have finally been answered; peace in the Middle East, all living hostages released. People worldwide have asked God to protect them, guide them, and bring them home safely and He has in different instances!

Have you ever wondered if God can really handle the sudden infusion of heavenly interest? Is He capable of processing the important from the unimportant? Does He know who has a security clearance and who does not? At times I wonder, I wonder if God really has time. Does he really care about my life?

If we are honest enough to admit it, a lot of people and probably some of us live as though God does not have the time to care. Because if we really believed that God listened to our prayers, we would take prayer more seriously.

If Jesus is trying to teach us about the importance of persevering in our prayer lives, we wish he would have done it in a less confusing and puzzling manner. Maybe his parable should have gone like this: Verily, verily I tell you that once

upon a time there was a good lady who lived next door to an atheist. Everyday, when the lady prayed, the atheist guy could hear her. He thought to himself, "She sure is crazy, praying all the time like that. Doesn't she know there is no God!" Many times while she was praying, he would go to her house and harass her, saying, "Lady, why do you pray all the time? Don't you know there is no God!" But she kept on praying. One day, she ran out of groceries. As usual, she was praying to the Lord explaining her situation and thanking Him for what He was going to do. As usual, the atheist heard her praying and thought to himself, "Humph...I'll fix her." He went to the grocery store, bought a whole bunch of groceries, took them to her house, dropped them off on the front porch, rang the door bell and then hid in the bushes to see what she would do. When she opened the door and saw the groceries, she began to praise the Lord with all her heart, jumping, singing, and shouting everywhere! The atheist then jumped out of the bushes and told her, "You crazy old lady. God didn't buy you those groceries, I bought those groceries!" Well, she broke out and started running down the street, shouting and praising the Lord. When he finally caught her, he asked what her problem was... She said "I knew the Lord would provide me with some groceries, but I didn't know he was going to make the devil pay for them!"

If Jesus' has one parable that every preacher wishes wasn't in the Bible, it is this one. What should we call it? The parable of the annoying widow and the judge who acted like a jerk? On the surface the parable appears to be telling us that if we bug God long enough with our requests that eventually God will get tired of our pestering and give in to our whining. However, the point of the parable is missed entirely if we understand the unjust judge as representative of God. Jesus' point is that God is very different from the judge who begrudgingly does what is right only after being harassed by the widow. God desires to give all good things to his children. God does not withhold blessings from us until we pray long enough for them. Our times of prayer are not intended to show God just how bad we want something. Instead the sweet hour of prayer is the moment in which we show God how much we want him and love him. Prayer is God's gift to us through which we know and worship the Provider. The focus is always intended to be the Provider, not the provisions. Even the unjust judge eventually gives to the widow what she needs. Jesus is saying to us, "How much more confident can we be that our Father, a good faithful judge, will certainly take care of us!" God is not arbitrary. God does not view our prayers as annoying requests as did the unjust judge.

In God's perfect goodness, he never deprives us of what we need unless there is some larger purpose for our good behind the poverty. Often times, it is impossible to imagine what that greater good could be. In this light, the parable seems to be

communicating something to us about the way God works in our lives. Since the beginning humanity has been struggling with this question, “How does God work in our lives?” We often are in one of two directions, neither of which is in proportion to our faith in Jesus Christ. Some of us believe in fate, an idea that began with the Greek philosophers but remains with us today. Fate is the belief that everything that will happen has already been determined. God’s creation is not free and dynamic. God is in no relationship with the world. For the one who believes in fate, God is like the watchmaker who winds the watch and simply lets it run its course. Another alternative that fails us is the belief that everything happens by random chance. Here again, God is far removed from his creation. With chance there is no purpose or reason behind anything that happens. Through Jesus Christ, the question of how God works in our lives has been answered for us. For the Christian, there is no fate; there is no random chance. There is only providence. God works in each of our lives through a particular providence.

A construction crew was building a new road through a rural area, knocking down trees as it progressed. A superintendent noticed that one tree had a nest of birds who couldn’t yet fly and he marked the tree so that it would not be cut down. Several weeks later the superintendent came back to the tree. He got into a bucket truck and was lifted up so that he could peer into the nest. The fledglings were gone. They had obviously learned to fly. The superintendent ordered the tree cut down. As the tree crashed to the ground, the nest fell clear and some of the material that the birds had gathered to make the nest was scattered about. Part of it was a scrap torn from a Sunday school pamphlet. On the scrap of paper were these words: ‘He cares for you.’

God cares about you, and he cares about you particularly. God loves you, and he loves you particularly. The power and beauty of the gospel is that Jesus Christ comes to each and every one of us announcing salvation. The good news of Jesus Christ is not an abstraction. The good news is not simply that God has redeemed people through Christ. God has called each of us by name. Jesus did not die for people. He died for you. He died for me. This is the intensely personal and poignant gospel of truth and salvation, that we are not lost in a crowd of chaos, but we are found in a community of grace and love.

Because God works in our lives through this particular providence, we must see just how different God is from the unjust judge in Jesus’ parable. The God who has providentially joined himself to you through Jesus Christ does not consider your prayers a nuisance. God treasures our prayers because it is through prayer that we recognize and worship our Provider. We pray because we must. It doesn’t

matter whether or not we think we pray well or pray correctly. The only entirely inadequate prayer is the lack of prayer. God teaches us to pray even while we are praying. God waits for us to call. God longs for us to call. God never considers our beckoning an invasion of privacy. God is willing to listen to our complaining. God weeps with us in tragedy. God rejoices with us in triumph. You'll never get a busy signal, and it's not even long distance. God wants you to call.

Jesus concludes his parable with a commission that we should trust God and endure. Jesus is, in fact, admitting that though God is always just and righteous that God might appear unjust to us at times. There will be many days God just doesn't make sense to us. We will have moments in which we wonder if God's providence has taken a leave of absence. We might have seasons where we quit calling upon God because all our prayers and crying out to God day and night appear useless and futile. Jesus is challenging us to hold on to faith and to trust God always. Jesus knows there will be many obstacles that will drive us close to giving up. Jesus says, "Don't give up!" Why not? Because there is a guaranteed future hope. The Son of Man will come again, and Jesus asks his listeners, "When he returns, will he find faith on the earth?" When Christ returns will he find us faithful or will he find us in a state of sore disappointment, having given up on the hope that was secure all along?

God never gives up on us even though we often fail to be faithful. Don't give up on God. He is ever-faithful. The widow came to the judge requesting justice against an opponent. She had to come to him several times before justice was given. I wonder who her opponent was. I wonder what it was that was trying to overcome her. Was it the death of her husband? Was it a stack of bills she couldn't pay? Was it kids and grandkids who seemed to have forgotten about her? I don't know, but each of us knows who our many opponents are we face today, and the Righteous Judge of heaven and earth beckons us to come unto him and not to lose heart. He has made a promise of his providential care for us all, and that is a promise that shall remain unbroken into eternity. Let us never give up on God.

Amen!!

“508 AND STILL COUNTING-MARTIN LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION”

Message for Reformation Sunday

From Pastor Norman Staker

October 26, 2025

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 ** ROMANS 3:19-28 ** JOHN 8:31-36

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

Happy Reformation Sunday!

Years ago, I took a class in Chillicothe at the Lay School of Theology in sermon preparation led by Professor Hank Langknecht from Trinity. One of the things he mentioned right off was the suggestion that you shouldn't preach a sermon using all four of the lessons for the day. I've tried to live by that in my career at Bethel but I have deviated from it on a couple of occasions. Today I'm going to do that again, deviate from the norm and use all four of our lessons. They are always the same for this special day of the church calendar, Reformation Sunday: Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3: 19-28, and John 8: 31-36. And before you all go into a panic trying to figure just how long this message will be, let me reassure you I won't go over an hour!

Our story begins as the baby's first cries echoed from wall to wall, warming the whole house on that cold November 10th, 1483. Hans Luther, copper miner in little Eisleben, Germany, smiled nervously at his wife, Margaret. Her tired eyes returned his smile, even as they mirrored her prayer of thanks for having safely given birth to a second child, a son, no less.

On the very next day, Hans carefully bundled his newborn boy in the warmest blankets he could find. He quickly walked the two windy blocks to St Peter's Church. Here, on November 11, the proud father handed his son to the priest. "Martin Luther," chanted the priest as he three times poured water on the child's wrinkled forehead. "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Once the Baptism was over, Hans headed for home, snugly cradling little Martin in his brawny arms. Walking to his wife's bedside, he gently

handed her the whimpering baby. “Here Margaret, take our Martin and care for him. And pray that no evil will come to him. For who knows what plans God has for him?”

Have you ever wondered what would have happened if Martin Luther had not been born, or if he had died in his cradle? Would we still have a Reformation, led by someone else, maybe one of his friends, or would this day be like any other day, just another Sunday? They might be interesting thoughts to entertain but God had a plan and God’s plans always come through, especially when they involve the heart, our heart!

Many of our metaphors involve the heart. For instance, you can learn something by heart. When you learn something by heart, it means that you’ve repeated it so often that you absolutely know it. It’s deeply embedded in you, like the words to the Pledge of Allegiance. You just know it.

Some of the things we know by heart are very, very significant to us, like the Lord’s Prayer. We know the Lord’s Prayer by heart. But there are also some really silly things we know by heart. For instance, if you were born before 1970, and I know that at least a couple of you were, then you know that “two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame seed bun” are the makings of a Big Mac. I know that by heart but it doesn’t edify my life in any way!

So we may know something by heart, but that doesn’t guarantee it’s something worth knowing. However, if we say that we take something to heart, now, this is much more significant. When we take something to heart, we’ve embraced it deeply. It touches us, not just intellectually, but emotionally, too. We feel it through and through.

In our reading from the prophet Jeremiah, he writes about the new covenant God will establish with God’s people:

“This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

This covenant would be written on their hearts and on our hearts!

Jeremiah looks to a day when Israel will take to heart God's covenant love for them. They'll never have to teach one another, they'll never have to say, "Know the Lord." They just will because it's written on their heart.

God's covenant of steadfast love is not grounded in the fickle winds of worldly whims. It's based on the one thing of lasting value and unshakable truth. And that is the character – not of ourselves – but of God. God's character. And God's character is love. This is the truth that will never lead us astray.

And this divine love has chosen US. Not because we've measured up to a standard of divine acceptability, but because that is what flows from the heart of God! Love comes from God. This is what Jesus was trying to explain to the crowd who was following him. They were starting to take heed of his message. He said, "Hey, if you keep this up, if you keep centering your heart on my message, then you will be free."

Free from that devilish, worldly covenant based on judgment and measuring up. Free from judging yourself, judging others. Free of judgment because God's love will be written on your heart! The truth of your identity lies in this unceasing love of God for you! And to the degree that you dwell in that truth, you are truly free.

God first wrote on your heart at your baptism. God said, "You are mine, and I love you! And nothing can ever change that." And for the rest of our lives meditate on that simple truth. It's so very basic and uncomplicated that it evades us. And that's why we continue in the word, so that we can remember who we truly are – we are beloved children of God. Every day, God etches that a little more clearly in our hearts. And the more you take that to heart, you dwell in the freedom and peace and joy in the one who is our home.

God says in Jeremiah: 'and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'

God's forgiveness and mercy are just like that. God didn't take the easy way out. He didn't kick around the closets of heaven in search of some old tarnished trinket to hand to us. He gave the very best. He offered a gift that had never been handled, never been seen, never been experienced before, namely, he gave himself.

So, whenever you feel disappointed, disheartened, worn out, or abused, the Lord will come to you and say, "Surprise! I've carried all of that pain for you." Whenever you feel despised or alone, your Savior will come and say, "Surprise!

I've been hated and disowned for you!" Whenever you feel filthy dirty, as if you are the worst sinner on earth, you will feel the tender love of Christ as he embraces you. But don't be surprised when he does.

We opened this morning's service with 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God!' You knew it was the Lutheran fight song, didn't you? Schools have their own fight songs; why can't churches? I love that hymn and I know you do too. There's a line in it that says "God's judgment must prevail." I always emphasize that word 'must.' God's judgment must prevail; in the end, folks, it will prevail!!

That hymn which is one of the most popular Reformation hymns was based on the words of Psalm 46. Martin Luther combined the thoughts of this psalm with a popular beer drinking song and wrote the powerful hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." The hymn and Psalm have been tools of comfort and strength for countless people of faith as they have faced the challenges and tragedies of life.

In times of trouble, God is indeed our refuge and fortress. A fortress is a defensive structure that allows its occupants to withstand the attacks of enemies. A refuge is a place where one flees for protection and healing. God moves this way in our lives as we face the trials and tribulations of life.

God is a mighty fortress. The walls of this fortress are impenetrable. Life, Satan, even our enemies cannot overcome us, if we remain safe in God's presence. God's presence as our refuge and fortress is effective.

Some people brag that they have no fear; 'I'm not afraid of anything.' They kid themselves. They might not be afraid of snakes or spiders, heights or speed, but each of us has our fears.

The psalmist rejoices that we have no reason to fear when God is present in our lives.

The degree of turmoil that the psalmist and Luther write about surprises us. We think that God's strength will get us through traffic jams, bad meetings at work, and school troubles with the kids. The psalmist writes about worldwide changes, earthquakes, and tempestuous seas. Martin Luther writes about the loss of home, goods, honor, child or spouse and loss of life—still God will prevail and we have no reason to fear.

God's love and presence in our lives is the one thing that no one and nothing can take away from us. We might lose everything else, but we still have Jesus.

One of the hardest things for a Christian is to learn to be still and wait for God. It takes trust and faith that God is true to his promises and that God really will not forsake us. As our fortress and refuge, though, God invites us to have no fear and to be still.

God doesn't guarantee successes and a stress free life. God does promise that his love and presence will always be a part of our lives. As such, we can face life with courage and a certain fearlessness, because God is a mighty fortress.

Be still and know that I am God. Have you forgotten the atheist tells us they do not believe in the existence of God?

I read about an atheist who was hiking in the woods when he stumbled across a huge hungry grizzly bear. The bear reared up to its full height eight feet tall and gave a roar as it leaned in toward the man. The atheist screamed in terror "Oh God, help me!!!" God said to him, "So all your life, you denied My existence, but now you call for My aid since death is upon you? I am sorry, my son, but it is too late; I cannot save you." The atheist thought quickly. "Well, God, if it is too late for me to become a Christian, how about you just convert the bear?" Time began moving again, and the bear immediately stopped its roaring, knelt quietly and respectfully, and began speaking. "O Lord, bless this meal in which I am about to partake!"

"Come now, regard the works of the Lord, what desolations God has brought upon the earth." Did you notice there are none, not one, of our faults and failings listed next? No, we hear God's promise to make wars cease, to break the bow and shatter the spear, to create an atmosphere in which people can 'Be still and know that I am God!'

We are not very inclined to think of Martin Luther as a hymn-writer, and yet, the great Reformer also had the gift of music and wrote some 37 hymns including "Away in a Manger." By 1523—a mere six years after the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses—Luther was committed to providing German-language hymns for the people to sing and was actively seeking gifted poets to work with him on this project. Luther would often say to his friends: "let us defy the devil and sing a hymn."

Luther, like everyone in his generation, knew that he was a sinner. He tried, desperately not to be one, but he was. He fasted until he fainted; he confessed his transgressions until his priest got bored with the endless and repetitious list of wrongdoings. Luther knew he was a sinner, even as he knew a perfect God was committed to punishing men like himself. Fear of Divine anger became Luther's motivating force to try to please God with perfect behavior.

Today, people in our culture still want the answer to this question: Does God love me? How can I be sure I have peace with God? These eternal questions that plagued Martin Luther still remain.

In the classic Latin phrase of the Reformation, *sola gratia*, "Grace alone," there are actually four and some suggest a fifth one: *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*, *sola Christus*, and *solī Deo Gloria*, to the glory of God alone. Folks, we are not saved by our intentions, good wishes, exemplary deeds, or right thinking. We are saved only by God's grace. Unfortunately we Americans have been raised to depend on ourselves. We value our personal freedom to choose our own destiny. We don't like to think that we can't save ourselves, that we need to rely on God's grace alone for salvation.

In the book of Romans, the third chapter, Luther read that while all have sinned and fallen far short of God's expectations, we are declared forgiven and free of our broken commandments if our repentant hearts are connected by faith to God's Son. Luther learned what had been forgotten for centuries and blurred by the "Church": that while God is a God of justice, He is also a God of grace. Thus, sinful human beings could be saved because God sent His Son to redeem us, to pay the price which would buy us back from sin, the devil, and death. How can I have peace with God? These were the questions for the ordinary man on the street in the 16th century. It remains the questions today. The answer: "Only believe that Jesus died on the cross for you." Accept the work already accomplished at the cross "therefore we have been justified through faith...and we now have peace with God through Jesus Christ." It's that simple. It's that easy. But there was nothing easy about the cross on which Jesus died. The cross was heavy, the blood was real and the price to set us free was extravagant. God paid the price to bring us back to himself so that we would know his love and acceptance.

After 500 years, does the Reformation still matter? Do we still need a day every year to remind us of the Reformation? After all, a recent poll showed that over half of American Protestants didn't even know that Martin Luther's writings and actions inspired the Reformation. And this was a multiple-choice question with

only three choices! So, most Christians today say, “No, the Reformation doesn’t matter.”

If Reformation Day only celebrated Lutheranism, then it shouldn’t matter. If Reformation Day only celebrated the pride we have in being Lutheran, then it shouldn’t matter. But if Reformation Day is about the truth that Martin Luther dusted off in all its shining glory, hidden by centuries of faulty doctrines, then the Reformation does matter.

Jesus said to the Jews and his disciples who believed in Him, “If you continue in my Word, you are truly my disciples. And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

That’s why there was a Reformation. That’s why we still have Reformation Day. That’s why the Reformation still matters. It matters because confessing the truth still matters!

I want to close with a quote from Martin Luther that expressed how he truly felt, and it’s a quote that applies to all of us here today: he said “When I look at myself, I don’t know how I can be saved; when I look at Jesus, I don’t know how I could be lost!”

Amen!!

“THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NAIL”


Message for All Saints Day

From Pastor Norman Staker

November 2, 2025

DANIEL 7: 1-3, 15-18 ** EPHESIANS 1: 11-23 ** LUKE 6: 20-31

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

hen Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But I say to you that listen, Love you enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

As the story goes, they built a new church building and people came from far and wide to see it. They admired its beauty! Up on the roof, a little nail heard the people praising everything about the lovely structure-except the nail! No one even knew he was there, and he became angry and jealous.

“If I am that insignificant, nobody will miss me if I quit!” So the nail then released its hold, slid down the roof, and fell in the mud.

That night it rained and rained. Soon, the shingle that had no nail blew away, and the roof began to leak. The water streaked the walls and the beautiful murals. The plaster began to fall, the carpet was stained, and the pulpit Bible was ruined by water. All this because a little nail decided to quit!

But what of the nail? While holding the shingle, it was obscure but it was also useful. Buried in the mud it was just as obscure, but now it was useless and would soon be eaten up by rust!

The moral of the story – every member is important to the church! You may, like the nail, feel obscure at times, but just like the nail, your absence is felt. When you are not present for worship, in some way the body of Christ hurts. We are ALL, capital A-L-L, ALL a part of the Lord's ministry.

The importance of the nail is the theme of my message this Sunday. A small nail holding one shingle on the church roof has a very important part to do in the body of Christ. And if that nail has an important work to do, imagine what you and I have to do in the body of Christ.

Jesus, in our gospel lesson this morning, is speaking about the body of Christ. This is Luke's version of the Beatitudes; you probably recognized the similar words from Matthew.

The body of Christ, the church, is made up of people who have experienced the brokenness of this world. For Jesus said that if you are poor, in sorrow, if you are hated, then you are in the body of Christ. The body of Christ is made up of those who have experienced the brokenness of this world, sorrow, grief, hunger, poverty, all those things that remind us that we are not perfect, those are the people who are in the body of Christ.

In this picture of the saints, the body of Christ, Jesus is speaking to the human condition. He is telling us that as our lives live in the brokenness of this world, we are blessed. We don't need to be perfect or to pretend that the sinfulness of this world does not affect our lives.

We are blessed regardless of what we are experiencing.

I think that thought is important in this day and age. A saint is not a perfect person here on earth, but rather, a saint is one who knows the brokenness of this world and then turns to Christ for comfort and rest. In our world, we want the best, we want fame and fortune, and if we don't get it, we think there is something wrong with us. That is the theology of prosperity. It says if you are right with God, then everything in your life should be right, too.

But Jesus is clearly saying something about the theology of the cross. Jesus knows that we are living in an in-between time. We are saved, meaning we are saints, but at the same time we are sinners, who have not been fully redeemed. Last week we would have heard it said, "Simul iustus et peccator," Martin Luther's favorite Latin line, saint and sinner at the same time. So Jesus is saying that even though you are

a saint, redeemed by the blood of Christ, your life might not be and will not be perfect. So blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are those who weep, because one day your full redemption will come.

Jesus is telling us that we are blessed now in spite of all the brokenness around us and we are to use that blessing to walk with the saints around us.

Jesus is telling us that we are like that nail; we need to hold the body of Christ together by loving each other.

Billy Graham says "Church-goers are like coals in a fire. When they cling together, they keep the flame aglow; when they separate, they die out."

We need each other in the body of Christ. Though we might think of ourselves like that nail, we are indeed important in the body of Christ. When we cling together the body grows and the light shines.

This is demonstrated very clearly in the following: Randy Frazee wrote a book called "The Connecting Church." He has a son who was born without a left hand. One day in Sunday School the teacher was talking with the children about the church. To illustrate her point she folded her hands together and said, "Here's the church, here's the steeple; open the doors and see all the people."

She asked the class to do it along with her – obviously not thinking about the little Frazee boy's inability to pull this exercise off. Then it dawned on her that the boy wouldn't be able to join in.

Before she could do anything about it, the little boy sitting next to Frazee's son, a friend of his from the time they were babies, reached out his left hand and said, "Let's do it together." The two boys proceeded to join their hands together to make the church and the steeple.

Let's do it together is the key phrase here. As the body of Christ, we must do it together. We must help each other in our faith. We must touch each other with the Spirit of Christ. We in the body of Christ are important to each other. WE touch each other in that body of Christ. WE touch when we pass the peace. We touch when we reach out our hand and say good morning. We touch when we offer a shoulder for one to lean on. We touch when we extend a hand to help another through grief.

This is exactly what Jesus commands us to do... love in a way that goes against human nature. But how do we do that?

In our text this morning, you and I are called to love. Jesus doesn't say if you have enemies, He draws on the assumption that you will have enemies and people who are against you. And I must admit His command is a little hard to swallow, this is what He says: "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse."

He isn't just telling us to avoid retaliation; Jesus is telling us to do good instead of seeking revenge, He's telling us to speak blessings instead of insults, and to pray for those who do us wrong.

Loving our enemies means that we will refuse to let hatred take root in our hearts. It means that we will recognize that even those who harm us are still people made in the image of God. This kind of love requires a supernatural strength that can come only from walking closely with Jesus, and when we choose to love, well, that's when we truly reflect the character of Christ.

Folks, love is not a feeling; love is a choice.

If anybody has ever wronged you, Jesus isn't asking you if you feel like loving them; He's commanding you to act in love. He says pray for them, forgive them; love them.

Then we are called to radical kindness. What's that? "If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also."

The world says, "Get even," but Jesus says, "Give grace." It's not weakness to extend grace ... it's breaking the cycle of retaliation. Instead of responding in kind, we respond with kindness.

Radical kindness means loving beyond what's convenient. It means stepping outside of our comfort zones to extend grace to those that we think might not deserve it. Unexpected kindness leaves a powerful impact; it reveals God's love in a tangible way. It isn't about being passive; it's about demonstrating a strength that comes from the confidence we have in God's justice.

Who is the hardest person in your life to love? What if God is calling you to take the first step of kindness? Will you do it? Would you extend the hand of

forgiveness or offer help even when it was undeserved? Small acts of kindness can transform relationships.

As Jesus hung on the cross, He didn't curse His enemies—He prayed, “Father, forgive them.” That's the kind of love we are called to reflect. If Jesus, in His suffering, could show mercy to those who crucified Him, can't we do the same in our daily lives?

When we love like Jesus, we reveal God's heart to the world. Is there someone you need to forgive today? Maybe it's a family member or a co-worker; maybe you need to forgive yourself. Who do you need to forgive? Who is God calling you to love in a radical way this week?

“In the greatest act of mercy, Jesus hung on the cross and prayed, ‘Father, forgive them.’ He didn't just talk about loving enemies; He lived it. If He could love like that, what's stopping us from doing the same?”

Today is All Saints' Sunday. I read in one of my commentaries that the Roman Catholics count the saints by the hundreds! Lutherans number them by the tens of thousands! You heard that correctly, the tens of thousands! Are you one of them? You ought to be! You are called to be a saint! Today as we honor the saints, we remind you of this high calling. I have come to know and I remember so many saints who have gone on to their heavenly reward; I'm talking about so many here whom I remember that have been saintly in my ministry and I can think of so many others at my home church. I'm sure all of you can think of not only members here at Bethel but at other churches that you've attended over the course of your lifetimes. And while we still count those who have gone on as saints, today we look in the mirror and say, Happy All Saints' Day to ourselves.

AMEN!!

“A Special Heaven-Sent Laundromat Gathering”

Message for the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost


by: Roberta Messner and Presented by: Carol Scott

November 9, 2025

Exodus 3:1-15 ** 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8,13-17 ** Luke 20:27-40

Matthew 18:20

“For when two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I among them.” This verse promises that Christ is present even when a small group of people gather in His name.”

ash. Rinse. Spin. That’s what was on my menu early in the morning one Thanksgiving a few years back. With no kids of my own, and my siblings out of town with their families, it was just another Thursday for me. “Might as well have clean clothes,” I muttered, walking into the laundromat. High up on the wall, where the television was mounted, a newscaster reported on the already clogged traffic conditions.

I headed to a pair of unoccupied machines, passing a few other unlucky people. I didn’t see any of the usuals. Sometimes I chatted with a new mother whose baby napped in a plastic laundry basket, while her onesies were washed. She was probably sitting around a big table right now, her baby smooshing peas in a high chair. I glanced at a man in a grubby T-shirt that read, “How can I ignore you today?”

I separated my colors and whites. Lord, what would my grandmother think if she saw me here today? When I was growing up, Thanksgiving meant turkey baked to golden-brown perfection served on Mamaw’s best tablecloth. Mashed potatoes. Creamed corn. Green beans she’d put up in Mason jars. Pumpkin pie with whipped cream. The food was delicious, but the secret ingredient was togetherness. That’s what made Thanksgiving special.

Beside me, a mother loaded a dryer with sheets and blankets. Her kids ran around behind her. I counted six of them in all. They reminded me of the family in that old TV show, The Waltons. The series was a spinoff of a classic television special called, The Homecoming, which still sometimes aired. I’d watched the premier

with Mamaw one Thanksgiving when I was ill. I'd kept to myself most of the day, but when Mamaw sat with me to watch, A Walton's Family Reunion, I got that same warm, fuzzy feeling being amidst my own family gave me. We were long past the era of the Walton's with families often spread far and wide at too far a distance to come together at Thanksgiving.

While I transferred my clothes from the washing machine to the dryer, the six kids peppered their mom with questions. "Can we go to a movie when we get there?" The mom sighed wearily and addressed them all together. "If I've told you once, I've told you a dozen times. There's just enough money to get us to Grandma's. No movies. No ice cream. And", she added for the child whose nose was pressed against the glass of a claw machine, "no new toys."

I turned my back to my dryer. I'd thought spending the day with other lonely people in a near-empty Laundromat would be sad. Spending it with people on their way to somewhere special was worse. The youngest child sidled up beside me to watch his blankie go round and round in the dryer window next to mine. A scraping noise made us both turn around. His brothers were pulling chairs across the floor, setting us rows facing the TV. One of his sisters tore a magazine page into squares. "This ticket is for you," she said to me, and motioned to a chair. Before I knew what I was doing, I was seated in the front row looking up at a toothpaste commercial. The kids took their places around me.

"Shh!" the littlest boy said, "The movie is starting."

I glanced over at my dryer, wondering how long this "movie" would take. A familiar strain of music caught my attention. It took me a moment to place it. The theme to The Waltons! The kids probably had no idea what they were watching, but the theme song slowly drew customers in.

"I just remembered, I've got candy in my pickup!", a man said, jumping up. I'll go grab it." Not to be outdone, a lady hauled in a cooler of soft drinks from her car. "They'll have plenty at the grandkids' house", she said. The man in the grubby T-shirt held the door for her. He wasn't ignoring anyone anymore. When my laundry was done, he brought me over my favorite paisley sock that I'd drop on the way from the dryer to my movie seat. I watched as I folded my still-warm clothes, feeling thankful. There was no other word for it.

Without turkey or home-made pumpkin pie, our little group had found the secret ingredient that made Thanksgiving special. In the oddest of circumstances, we'd

gathered together.

We have all had a Matthew 18:20 experience, but do we realize the significance in our own lives?

This past Spring while I was shopping in the garden center at Lowe's I noticed a woman shopping for garden plants as well. Glancing at her purchases I noticed a beautiful plant that I had not seen before, I asked her about the plant and she replied that it was a Jacob's Ladder. In the Bible Jacob sees a ladder or stairway connecting Earth to Heaven.

At a recent visit to a farm stand a few of us strangers were standing around remarking about the beautiful vegetables that were for sale when all of a sudden a woman shouted, "I recognize your voice!", pointing to me and adding, "You taught my son and nephew." It had been more than twenty years since Tammy and I had seen each other and we commenced to catch up.

Upon entering Bethel for the first time a few years ago I saw five people I knew and they called me by name. And the conversation began!

Maybe you can recall a time when you and others were gathered together in good conversation, experiencing new discoveries together.

Take a personal moment to reflect on a Matthew 18:20 experience in your life and its secret ingredient, togetherness.

Amen!

“Seedtime and Harvest”


Message for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

From Sylvia Gardner

November 16, 2025

Malachi 4:1-6 ✨ 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5,6-13 ✨ Luke 21:5-8,29-36

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN!!

he first thing Noah did after the Flood was to build an altar and make a sacrifice to the Lord. God was pleased with Noah and made promises to the human family through the faith of Noah. One of the promises given was the Law of Seedtime and Harvest: “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest ... shall not cease.”

Everything starts as a seed. That’s the first law of the harvest. When God created the first living thing, He gave it the ability to grow and multiply through the principle of sowing and reaping.

If you sow a mango seed, you will reap mango fruits.

If you sow an orange seed, you will reap orange fruits.

If you sow seeds of righteousness, generosity and faithfulness, you will reap a harvest of joy, abundance and blessings.

The harvest is always greater than the seed sown.

Our harvest springs from the good or bad seeds we have sown, whether or not we were consciously aware of our seed-planting.

The concept of seedtime and harvest calls us to be intentional about the seeds we sow in our lives.

Every achievement starts as a seed. Bethel Lutheran Church started as a seed when ordinary people like you and me wanted to share with other believers the common union we have with Christ and with each other. They wanted a place

where they could help people meet Jesus. Their pictures are on the wall in the hallway.

It all starts as a seed, whether it's your time, money, appreciation, attention, wisdom, or energy. You don't plant a seed one day and the plant pops up the next. You have to keep tending to the seeds you plant - nurturing them, watering them and cultivating them before you reap the harvest. You need patience and perseverance while waiting for the harvest.

The potential of your seed is never known until it is planted.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Things might look very small at the beginning, but just wait – someday, they can be very, very, very big! Just keep doing the little things, and God will make them grow.

While we sow the seeds, God is the one who brings the harvest.

This principle of sowing and reaping reflects a spiritual truth: the rewards of diligent sowing far exceed the initial effort. God ensures that the fruits of our labor multiply.

Your words can be seeds that you plant in people's minds. They grow, and they bear fruit for those you love the most—your children, your spouse, and your friends—but also the people you meet in your everyday life.

Even the smallest amount of genuine, trusting faith is enough to accomplish great things. Just as a tiny mustard seed grows into a large plant, the power of faith is not measured by its size, but by its quality of deep trust and dependence on God, enabling believers to overcome seemingly impossible challenges.

Jesus prayed that we will be one, so that we will know him. We plant seeds to fulfill Jesus' desire for us to be one. The phrase from Mathew states that "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them".

We practice oneness every single time we come to Church on Sunday.

We sing with one voice. We sing in harmony because we are all different, but we all sing the same words of praise to our God.

We listen to God's word. Scripture comes to us and through us and gathers us together as one as our seeds mature.

We say prayers together with one voice. The prayers link us together as we talk to our God. Scripture and Christian History tell us clearly that God loves to communicate with his people.

As we enter into guided prayer, we take time to quiet our heart and listen to the voice of the Spirit. We pray that the seeds we plant bring forth a bountiful harvest.

Together we say, WE believe. Whether it is the Nicene or Apostles Creed, we hold each other safe. We are the trellis that supports one another as we declare that it is WE who believe.

We come here and together we confess our sins. We are sorry. We have not loved YOU with our whole heart and we have not loved others as ourselves. And together we hear that our sins are forgiven and that we can go in Peace.

We hold hands in Communion. We eat one bread and drink one cup. We share in one body - The Body of Christ.

This is a great place to be. We love one another. We care about one another. At Bethel, we bring people together that are different. We come in all shapes, sizes, ages, colors, and cultures. God's amazing creativity made sure of that! Sowers of seeds are the children, the good Samaritans, the Marys and Marthas, and people like Peter and Paul who turned their lives 180 degrees to be able to serve Christ fully and unconditionally.

Through fellowship, we have an opportunity to listen. The God in each of us listening to one another because God speaks to us through the community of believers. In fellowship we plant seeds in our relationships and with the people God brings into our lives and we watch them grow and plant seeds themselves.

At Bethel, we love as a family. In fellowship, with good food, we tell stories. We tell of our "God Finds" - the moments or the ordinary places and with ordinary people where we found God. Our shared stories help others see how Jesus cares.

With courage we plant seeds of trust and kindness. We plant seeds that build people up and keep believing while the seed grows. Then we reap a harvest of

blessing.

We learn through problems and pain that we need other people.

In the Garden of Eden God said that it is not good for man to be alone. Challenging times are the most powerful reminders that we are not meant to go through life alone. As we share our joys, our sorrows, our hardships or grief, we receive support and love. We can be helpful to others as we pass on lessons learned. None of us will live long enough to learn everything we need to know first hand.

God wants us to learn to plant in small ways to reap larger benefits.

A Doctor Friend of mine cared for her husband with dementia. She organized a church service for patients with memory loss. Yes, there were disruptions, but in the singing of old familiar hymns and familiar rituals, all became one. Love and unity reached the world where Jesus lives.

God's Word is not going to change. Genesis 8:22 says that as long as the earth remains, there shall be seedtime and harvest.

Plant the seed. Be patient and keep believing while the seed grows. When we plant seeds, we may get some dirt on our hands, but we should be courageous in planting our seeds.

When you give away praise, good advice, your time, your money, when you share your experiences to help other people, when you give your love, you will reap a bountiful harvest.

By following God's law of seedtime and harvest, you will be able to reach your full potential, and see your life become fruitful, multiplied and replenished.

Let us remember these key truths:

1. God's promise of harvest is certain.
2. The harvest will come in its due time.
3. We must not grow weary in sowing good seeds.

The blessings of seedtime and harvest are rooted in God's eternal principles. As we sow with faith, patience, and diligence, and trust in the Lord of the harvest, He

will reward us in ways beyond what we can imagine.

God demonstrated this when He sowed His best seed, His Son, Jesus Christ, to receive you and me into the kingdom as His harvest.

Sow the seed of His promise in the soil of your need!

Amen

“CHRIST IS THE KING .. SO WHAT?!!”

Message for the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

(Last Sunday of the Calendar Year)

From Pastor Norman Staker

November 23, 2025

JEREMIAH 23: 1-6 ** COLOSSIANS 1: 11-20 ** LUKE 23: 33-43

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

When they came to the place that is called ‘The Skull,’ they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, “Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” It continues, “The soldiers mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself! There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’

Maybe you’re thinking, as I was when I was preparing this message, “what a strange lesson we have this morning to remember “Christ the King.” How can the picture of Jesus hanging on a Cross, with a jeering Roman sign above his head: “The King of the Jews” be appropriate for “Christ the King Sunday?” Surely we should be remembering something mighty. What about Jesus and the whip of cords in the temple? Maybe it would have been more appropriate to read the passage from John 2:12-16, the scene where Jesus makes a whip of cords and drives the moneychangers and their animals out of the Temple. At least that would show Jesus in power! After all – isn’t kingship all about showing off one’s power? Pomp and ceremony?

I would like to suggest to you this morning that Jesus’ kingdom is different from worldly kingdoms. Jesus’ kingdom is made up of the weak and the brokenhearted – not the powerful and the strong. Jesus’ kingdom is made up of those who realize their unworthiness to stand in the presence of almighty God. Jesus’ Kingdom came through the power of the Cross – for it is through the Cross that Jesus would draw those who the Father gave him to himself. The more I thought and mulled over the passage I realized that this was exactly the right passage. Christ’s kingship was shown on the Cross. By the way, how many actual kings died while hanging on a tree? Well, six were killed but only one died while hanging on a tree, hanging on

the cross, Jesus. The other five were killed by Joshua, all kings, but they were killed before being hanged on a tree: the kings of Jerusalem, of Hebron, of Jarmuth, of Lachish, and the king of Eglon. The book of Joshua says that 'Joshua struck them down and put them to death, and he hung them on five trees. And they hung on the trees until evening. At sunset, Joshua commanded that their bodies be taken down and they "threw them into the cave where they had hidden themselves; they set large stones against the mouth of the cave, which remain to this very day.' Our King Jesus came out of the tomb after only three days; the others are still rotting away. Just a small history lesson from the OT book of Joshua, in the 10th chapter.

Our lesson this morning showing Jesus in humiliating circumstances, hanging naked on a Cross, challenges us to sit up and think about the nature of God's kingdom. And for me the key to Jesus' kingship is found in Jesus immortal words: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

That was the key to why Jesus came to earth in the first place.

His death enabled us to become Children of God.

That is why Communion is so central to our faith. For it is there that we remember his death that opened the gates of heaven to let us in. Jesus took simple everyday elements, bread and wine, to help us remember.

If I was to ask you, 'who is Jesus,' how would you answer that question? Son of God, Immanuel, the King of kings and Lord of lords, Prince of Peace, so many formal names for Him but just who is Jesus?

Several years ago, the Gallup conducted a poll and asked Americans this very question: 'Who is Jesus?' 42% stated that Jesus was God among mankind, 27% felt Jesus was a great man, divinely called. Most Christians consider Jesus to be the incarnation of God the Son and awaited messiah, a descendant from the Davidic line that is prophesied in the Old Testament. Virtually all modern scholars of antiquity agree that Jesus existed historically. I would hope so!

Sure, it's an old survey and I'm sure the numbers have changed. It is a timeless question. Who is Jesus? It is a question that even the disciples had to answer.

"When Jesus and his disciples were at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples the question. "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples replied: "Some say

John the Baptist, others Elijah or one of the prophets.” Then Jesus asked, “But what about you?” “Who do you say that I am?” If you have been in church long enough, and nothing personal, but looking around the sanctuary, that would apply to all of you, so I’m sure you are familiar with Peter’s answer. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

Sadly the disciples did not always give that answer. Earlier in the ministry of Jesus, we find this event from the life of Jesus and his disciples recorded in Matthew 8: Jesus and his disciples were in a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee. A storm came up suddenly. The disciples, fearing for their lives, woke Jesus who was sleeping. Jesus simply speaks to the wind and the raging waves became as smooth as glass. Instantly, the disciples look at each other and exclaim: “What kind of man is this that even the wind and waves obey him?”

The Jewish religious theologians, the experts, the Pharisees and Sadducees, also question the authority of Jesus. ‘Jesus entered the temple courts and while he was teaching, the chief priests and elders questioned him. By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you authority?’ They understood his words; they just didn’t believe!

Here we are, a couple of thousand years later, and times and people have not changed. The question, “Who is Jesus?” must still be answered in every generation, by every individual.

The Gospel of John states: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The glory of God which filled the tabernacle in the wilderness was now in Jesus. The glory of God that filled the temple when Solomon dedicated the new temple in Jerusalem, was now in Jesus. On the banks of the Jordan River John the Baptizer said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Who is Jesus?

Only a just and holy God could satisfy the demands of a holy and just God. John Stott in his book “The Cross of Christ” writes: “If God had sent a man to us, as he sent prophets to Israel, we would have been grateful. If he had sent an angel as he did to Mary, we would have counted it a great privilege. Yet men and angels are creatures of his creative hand. By sending his own son, eternally begotten of His own Being, he was not sending a creature by giving Himself.” “How could the Father’s love have been demonstrated if he had sent somebody else to us? No, since love is in essence self-giving, God gave himself in His Son.” “God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son.”

There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." Today is the last day of the Christian Year known as Christ the King Sunday; we recognize today that Christ is indeed King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Of course for many of us there is a distinct problem, namely we don't know a whole lot about kings, except of course what we read in the papers and see on the news about the Queen of England and her 75 year reign and her very extravagant funeral when she passed away and Prince Charles who is now King Charles and his sons who are in line to each become the future King of England when his father or brother passes away or abdicates the throne.

When we read the gospel accounts of Jesus, we come to this reading in each of the gospels and find that he did not act very much like a king either. He died as a criminal on that cross at Calvary, not as a king going into battle. The people of his day did not recognize him as a king either. It is interesting that just a week earlier he had entered Jerusalem riding on a colt of a donkey, which was the traditional way of entering the city for the kings of old. It meant that they came not as conquerors but in peace to accept the mantle of King of Israel. They also came as saviors not as destroyers.

Next Sunday is the first Sunday in a new Church Year, Advent is a time of preparation for it all to begin. For the Christ to enter into the world as a man, a baby, totally dependent upon his parents, growing up in a small town, learning a trade at Joseph's side. In every way our God became as we are, so we could become as He is. His death in our stead, gives us eternity in the presence of the glory of God. Let us always remember that it is His leadership that began this whole thing we refer to as Church, but He referred to as discipleship. You and I are still called out from our lives as ranchers, business persons, bankers, whatever it is we do as our normal human way of making a living. We are called out to be disciples, followers of a unique way of living, a way that calls us to give of ourselves, to be willing to step out, when others will not. To touch hearts and lives with the gospel of Jesus Christ. A gospel that calls all mankind to return to our creator God and to walk in holiness once more.

One unknown writer had this to say about Jesus: nineteen centuries have come and gone and today he remains the central figure of the human race, and the leader of mankind's progress.

All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life

of man on this planet so much as that one solitary life.

Yes, Jesus Christ was someone special –unlike Elvis Presley – Jesus Christ is the KING!!!

AMEN!!