

Sundays of Pentecost 2025 Messages

Part 2

From Pastor Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Russell, Kentucky

Ninth Sunday After – Aug. 10 – *“What Are You In Charge Of”*

Tenth Sunday After – Aug. 17 – *“Prophets And Looses”*

Eleventh Sunday After – Aug. 24 – *“When You Get Bent Out Of Shape”*

Twelfth Sunday After – Aug. 31 – *“When Your EGO Makes A Fool Out Of You”*

Thirteenth Sunday After – Sept. 7 – *“Sell Out Or Sold Out”*

Fourteenth Sunday After (*Holy Cross Day*)– Sept 14 –
“When He Was On The Cross”

Fifteenth Sunday After – Sept. 21 – *“Can God Trust Me?”*

Sixteenth Sunday After – Sept. 28 – *“Eat Drink And Be Sorry”*

“WHAT ARE YOU IN CHARGE OF?”

Message for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

August 10, 2025

GENESIS 15: 1-6 ** HEBREWS 11: 1-3, 8-16 ** LUKE 12: 32-40

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



teacher asked the children in her Sunday school class, "If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would I get into Heaven?" "NO," the children all answered. "If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the church yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would I get into Heaven?" Again, the answer was "NO!" "Well," the teacher continued, "then how can I get to Heaven?" In the back of the room, a 5 yr. old boy shouted out, "You gotta be dead!"

Frederick Faber wrote a hymn that is very familiar to all of us; we recently sang it on Father's Day and a version of it on Mother's Day, "Faith of Our Fathers." While it is more traditional to sing it on Father's Day, it includes a phrase that we regularly sing: 'We will be true to thee till death.' That is a very nervy promise to make; we will be true to thee till death. But without our ability to be true, where would our religious conviction take us? Or do we just sing it because it's the next line in the hymn like we do different lines in the Lord's Prayer? Do we mean what we sing in this case? It is faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ and God's faith in God's people that makes a divine-human relationship possible.

This is what the writer of Hebrews addresses when he writes that 'by faith our ancestors received approval.' Faith is a cord that binds us to God and God to us. Chapter 11 turns to the subject of faith, or maybe a better term would be faithfulness.

This morning I would like to talk about something that seems to have a hold on each and every one of us from time to time: worry, stress, and anxieties. They

affect everyone at some point.

Money, health, family, friends, and so many other issues cause a very negative impact on our lives.

In this morning's scriptures, Jesus is telling us that we have no reason to worry! None at all! "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." And he says that is for a good reason. He points out that God the Father already knows our every need and even assures us that he will supply all that we need!

Actually, Jesus is commanding us not to worry! We all know that is easier said than done. We all worry. Isn't it a fixed part of life? I would bet that there are some kids who have seen their families worry so much; they think that it is a real part of life! We worry about our finances; we worry about our health; our friends, our homes. our cars etc. We worry about so much! I bet that our lack of faith is a real letdown to the Father!

You see, he promised so many times that he would take care of all of our needs. And yet we still fret! Why? Why do we lose sleep over such things as our finances? Why does our health scare us so much?

I believe that people should focus more on his promises. We need to put our concerns into his hands. He can handle them much better than we can. 'It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'

In fact, I believe that only through faith in him and his promises can we find freedom from stress. You see, anxiety is caused by greed and by covetousness. We need to plan and work responsibly. It is detrimental to focus on the things that can go wrong. We need to focus on what God has in store for us.

Can anyone here remember having any of their needs fulfilled by worrying? Worrying guarantees you to make any situation even worse.

Fact is, the Mayo Clinic claims 80-85% of their total caseload is due directly to worry and anxiety. Many experts say that coping with stress is the #1 health priority of our day. One leading physician has stated that, in his opinion, 70% of all medical patients could cure themselves if only they got rid of their worries and fears.

We know that medical science has closely tied worry to heart trouble, blood pressure problems, ulcers, thyroid malfunction, migraine headaches, a host of stomach disorders, among others. For example 25 million Americans have high blood pressure due to stress/anxiety; 1 million more develop high blood pressure each year. 8 million have stomach ulcers every week; 112 million people take medication for stress related symptoms.

Kind of scary how they connect, isn't it?

Worry has blinded us to the truth so many times in our lives. When we spend our time worrying, we don't notice when our needs have already been filled. We spend way too much time worrying, when we should be trusting his word!

Worrying is complete and utter foolishness. God the Creator of all the Universe both loves us and knows our every need! Sometimes, we think that what we desire is what we need! He promises to us that he will meet our every need if we have faith in him to do so. We must turn our very lives over to him. Every aspect of our lives. Then he will fulfill our needs, not our desires! It has to be in his will, otherwise, "Dear Lord, I think I should be a millionaire!" "I want to buy a car that I cannot afford; I want to live in a mansion on pauper's earnings!"

Just because we want does not mean we need!

How many of us have unanswered prayers that we prayed so hard for? And when we did get what we asked for, we were upset? I have. What a lesson learned.

In verse 31, seeking the kingdom refers to making Jesus Christ the Lord and King of your life. All of your life. Not just part of your life. Not just on Sunday morning. Not just when you are doing "Church Things."

He must be allowed to control every part of your life everyday. You must hand over to God every facet of your life: your work, your play, your plans and your relationships!

You need to ask yourself if "seeking the kingdom of God" is the central theme of your life? If you stay focused on his will, he will undoubtedly watch over every aspect of your life.

You need to read this letter each and every day of your life: trust me it's better than the last conversation I had with God from this pulpit! And if you want a copy,

I'll get it to you!

"Good afternoon,

I am God. Today I will be handling all of your problems. Please remember that I do not need your help. If the devil happens to deliver a situation to you that you cannot handle, DO NOT attempt to resolve it. Kindly put it in the SFJTD (something for Jesus to do) box. It will be addressed in MY time, not yours.

Once the matter is placed into the box, do not hold on to it or attempt to remove it. Holding on or removal will delay the resolution of your problem.

If it is a situation that you think you are capable of handling, please consult me in prayer to be sure that is the proper assumption.

Because I do not sleep, there is no need for you to lose any sleep. Rest, my child. If you need to contact me, I am only a prayer away."

You cannot hold back any part of your life. You must give it all to him. If you hold back, he will not be able to help you at all. If you would just let go and let God, he will steer you in the right direction! He will be able to bless you richly!

I'm told that a man went to the doctor complaining of a number of pains. After examining him the doctor said, "I can't find anything organically wrong with you. But sometimes physical problems are the result of worry or stress. Maybe you need to find a good counselor and tell him your troubles. He might be able to advise you and make you feel better."

"In fact," he said, "last week I had a fellow who was complaining of pains similar to yours and I couldn't find anything wrong with him, either. But after talking a while, he told me that he was worried sick about a \$5,000 debt he owed and couldn't pay. Well, we talked about it and I was able to help him."

The man asked, "How did you help him?" "Oh, I told him that life was too short to worry about a piece of paper that said he owed \$5,000. I suggested that he tear up the paper and throw it away, and stop worrying about the debt, and get on with his life. So he did. And now he feels great!"

"Yes, I know," said the guy. "I'm the one he owes the \$5,000 to."

Cheap advice. The help God gives is so much more meaningful, for all those involved!

As our Lord and as our Creator, God wants to help us and provide for our every need, as well as guide us how to use just what he provides in our lives. He is our Loving Father!

Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” As I say that word ‘treasure,’ I’m wondering if you are thinking ‘The preacher is talking about money again. ‘ You might have the urge to just hold on a little tighter to your wallet. But, hey, Jesus brought up the subject not me. He even counsels us all to sell our possessions and give to the poor. Sounds like Jesus, doesn’t it?

Jesus is not trying to separate us from our treasure at all. Instead, he is telling us the truth about ourselves, ‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.’ Jesus is simply telling us that treasure and heart go together; where the treasure goes, the heart follows.

We need to keep our eyes off the worldly things, and keep our eyes focused on Jesus and all that he came and taught us.

I think that we all know that God will and does provide for his people. He more than provides the basics to his faithful.

I think that people are more concerned with worldly possessions than they should be. They want their televisions, vacations, jewelry, and materialistic things without thinking about the real value of these things. That is just what they are, things, things of this world.

When you think about our eternal life with God the Father, are your present concerns and worries justified? If you could have everything that you want in this world, but it cost you an eternity with God, would these things still be desirable?

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” What is your treasure? Can Jesus be that treasure? When he is, the poor are fed and we are set free. When Jesus is our treasure, then in him our hearts can dwell. May the Lord bless each and everyone of you!

AMEN!!

“PROPHETS AND LOSSES”


Message for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

August 17, 2025

JEREMIAH 23: 23-29 ** HEBREWS 11: 29 – 12:2 ** LUKE 12: 49-56

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

hree men died and were waiting to receive entrance through the Pearly Gates. The first man said to St. Peter, "I was a preacher of the gospel, serving faithfully for over 50 years". Peter told him to step aside for further consideration. The second man said, "I was also a preacher of the gospel; I served my church faithfully for 40 years". Peter told him to step aside for further consideration. The third man stepped up and said, "I was not a preacher, just a government worker with the Internal Revenue Service for 6 months". Peter told him to step right in. The first minister objected, "Why does he get to go in before two ministers?" Peter said, "The truth is, in six months the IRS agent scared the devil out of more people than either of you did in a lifetime of service!"

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

False prophets are not just an Old Testament problem. We have them in full force today, in all denominations, telling us that God is "doing a new thing."

They claim to prayerfully consider their actions, but really just decide among themselves and then tell God to bless their decision. Each denomination has its own share of false prophets leading people astray, and none of us are immune from their effects.

In today's reading from the prophet Jeremiah, we see that God is rather displeased with people spreading lies in his name. He has a special, severe punishment in store for false prophets who lead people away from the salvation of Jesus Christ through their lies.

But their lies often sound pretty convincing, so how can we tell which prophets are true and which ones are false?

“Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them, says the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth, says the Lord. I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have dreamed; I have dreamed!’ How long/ Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back, those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? They plan to make my people forget my name.”

How can we tell which prophets are true and which ones are false? The answer is consistency. Truth is consistent, or constant. It doesn't change. When you read your Bibles, you can see that God doesn't vacillate

In his decisions. Murder, stealing, injustice, are all wrong, all through the Bible.

The message of one prophet does not contradict the message of another prophet if both are speaking God's truth.

Before we get in too deep with Jesus' comments, let me ask you: what is your favorite image of Jesus, the gently babe lying in the manger? What about the Savior as he agonizes in pain hanging on the cross? Both of these seem to be swept away by the words Jesus speaks in today's Gospel reading. Far from the Prince of Peace, he sounds more like the 'master of disaster.' “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! Three against two and two against three.” What is going on here?

Okay, so right off, we need to acknowledge that our favorite images of Jesus do not necessarily form a complete picture. Jesus talking about the end times, Jesus on the subject of obedience, Jesus in the temple with a whip; these are all real dimensions of the gentle Jesus we met in Sunday School.

We must also acknowledge that the impact of Jesus on family life can lead to the kind of division he describes. The son, prepared all his life by a meddling family to

become a doctor, who comes home to his agnostic family and announces and he's found the Lord and is off to seminary might be an example. Or the young woman, sent off to college to be a teacher, who comes home to her very conservative Christian family and tells them that she found out women can be pastors too. Following Jesus can lead to familial discord, and even counseling.

Jesus' harsh words to the crowds about not being able to interpret the signs of the times were a good wake-up call for those who were gathering to see the spectacle of this upstart preacher-man from Nazareth, but not quite seeing that He was the long-awaited Messiah. These words were meant to reorient their lives to what was important. That is, to reorient their lives to ever be seeking what God is up to right here, right now.

Jesus' words remind us that we need to set fire to the old so that the new can emerge, just like new life emerges from the destruction of a fire. The fires that burned in Hawaii caused over \$5.5 billion in damage 2 years ago. The Maui fire claimed 102 lives and leveled the town of Lahaina but even now amid the tragedy, the immediate and generous support from donors played a large role in alleviating the suffering and helping to rebuild some of the 3000 structures that were destroyed. Granted any support and help we give will not and cannot replace the 100 plus people who lost their lives but Jesus reminded the folks then and still does today that the destruction of property caused by fires can be replaced.

The gospel was compared to fire because it violently changes the face of things. Fire is the emblem of discord, contention and calamities. If fire refers to judgment, this happens when our godlessness is revealed to us as we inflicted pain and death on the innocent Son of God.

Jesus uses the metaphor of fire's destructive power to urge us to follow him and give up our earthly lives. We are materially rich and spiritually poor. Money has begun to obscure some of our more important values. Society has reached new lows in terms of public morality, whether it be sex scandals or traditional values.

God is with us regardless of what the future brings, but we have to regain our connection with Him. We need to focus less on our earthly, material resources for security and more on the Rock of Ages. God carves men and women to be with Him forever. He fills them with good things; makes them to love, care, learn and grow; and fashions them into what he was and is. We can do God's work with confidence, but we have to let go of our sinful nature. It entangles our lives, distorts our vision and robs us of spiritual vitality and stamina.

Choosing to love and follow Jesus will create division and conflict. The sword of division about which Jesus spoke is the result of Christ-like love. To love people as Jesus did is to stand for something. To stand for justice is to stand against injustice. To stand for truth is to oppose hypocrisy and falsehood. To be a Christian is to love all that Christ loved and to be an enemy of all that crucified him. To follow him is to make enemies. Jesus was awarded a cross, and he bids us to take up our cross and follow him. We all have worth in the eyes of God, regardless of social status, income, etc. He calls all of us to love each other as he loves us. If we cannot love our neighbor whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen.

Neutrality toward Jesus is not possible. Jesus said in Matthew 12:30, "He who is not with me is against me". Jesus gives us a choice-accept him or reject him. The choice we make has consequences. If we accept him, we risk alienation from friends and family. If we reject him, we face eternal damnation. Either choice causes division-either us from friends and family, or us from God. Today, Christian churches, once open to every passer-by, are being kept locked because they are being vandalized and looted with a vicious contempt.

Jesus was worked up because he knew his crucifixion was coming. He had a job to do before then-namely, to bring the message of God's Kingdom to the people and the people to God's love. As he was telling the disciples about living their lives in total commitment to God, he realized that his death was drawing near-and this stirred him up to the point where he became like one of the evangelists we see on television. In other words, he literally spoke of the fires of damnation, judgment and spirit. He brought God's judgment upon the people. He also divided families, communities and nations. What he did then is still happening today.

Jesus' demands for total allegiance divided families in his time, and can do so today. When he comes to announce the kingdom, there is division because the kingdom requires decision and commitment. The message of justice and healing was met with hostility. The fire Jesus came to kindle begins at home because our spouses and children are free to grow beyond their roles and beyond our expectations. God's way is not easy. Jesus' way and the world's way can't coexist. It's one or the other.

Jesus' baptism was nothing less than his own crucifixion and death. This baptism was baptism by fire. True baptism leads to resurrection, life and peace. Division and fire are for a season, not for an eternity. The fire of baptism leads to a new life.

If we think of Christ as our example, we realize that we need to shape up. We are in desperate need of forgiveness and moral power.

How can we live as faithful followers while keeping integrity with Christ's teachings? First, we can use the teachings as a benchmark of our faith. Does our faith cause problems with our families, friends or jobs? As we walk with God, people will disappoint us and let us down.

When we get tired of following Christ's teachings, all we have to do is follow the advice Paul gave in Hebrews 12 verse 2-"Keep your eyes on Him and keep on running to win". In other words, all we have to do is keep our eyes on the prize-namely, eternal life. Endurance doesn't mean casually accepting a setback and quitting the race of life early. Instead, it means doing whatever it takes morally and ethically to win. God wants for us the fullest, richest and deepest life we can have because he loves us. In return, he expects us to do Christ's work in this place, and in our own generation.

On an ugly hill outside the city of Jerusalem, we Christians believe that the Son of the Father in heaven was rejected by the world, beaten, condemned, and hung to die on a cross. The relationship between the Father and Son was severed by powers more violent than any sword. Father and Son were indeed torn apart. Three days later, the Father raised the Son; new life prevailed. Jesus will not bring to us anything he himself has not suffered. He will not call us to a path he has not walked. The one who breaks the bone again is the one who makes the lame walk. The one who divides us is the one who brings us back together in his body. The one who leads us into death is the one who has been raised.

lk. The one who divides us is the one who brings us back together in his body. The one who leads us into death is the one who has been raised.

These harsh words of Jesus are not a final word. They are a prelude to his goal of saving us from ourselves. Divine deconstruction prepares the way for construction of the reign of God. If this is so, then I pray, Lord come and tear me apart. Reduce me to ashes that I may rise. Bring your sword quickly, and let it bring new life.

Give us courage to take our stand with all victims of bloodshed and greed, and, following your servants and prophets, to look to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

“WHEN YOU GET BENT OUT OF SHAPE”


Message for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

August 24, 2025

ISAIAH 58: 9b-14 ** HEBREWS 12: 18-29 ** LUKE 13: 10-17

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

 recently read a funny story that illustrates how most of us are never satisfied. Frank and Mabel had been married for 40 years. Frank turned 60 a few months earlier and they were celebrating Mabel's 60th birthday. During the birthday party, Frank walked into another room and was surprised to see a fairy godmother appear before him. She said, "Frank, this is your lucky day. I'm here to grant you one wish—what would you like?" He thought for a moment, and said, "Well, I would really like to have a wife who was thirty years younger than me." The fairy godmother said, "No problem." She waved her wand, and "poof," suddenly Frank was 90 years old.

I imagine old Frank was a little bent out of shape by the way that turned out!

"Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God."

How did that happen which is a rhetorical question because we know how it happened and who made it happen and we know that too, don't we? In the passage of scripture today we are going to meet two people who were bent out of shape; one was the woman I just read about who was physically bent out of shape and the other was a religious man who was spiritually bent out of shape; one was crippled by a spirit of weakness and the other was crippled by a spirit of legalism and bitterness. Jesus was able to help one of them, but the other one stayed bent out of shape.

Outraged because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, this leader of the synagogue said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” Aren’t you glad those people aren’t around today; none of us would go to the doctor or the ER or even Urgent Care!

The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”

I love to study what Jesus did and what He said because He is still doing the same things today, and His words are still fresh and powerful for us. Many of you may be “bent out of shape” today for a variety of reasons. If you will pay attention to Jesus today, He can set you free. First, let’s consider the woman:

Jesus was still trying to teach the Jews, so we find Him teaching in this synagogue. The Jewish Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday, and most synagogues still have services on Friday evening, so this is probably on a Friday night. The opposition against Jesus is growing, and this is the last time in Luke’s gospel that we find Jesus in a synagogue.

He saw a poor woman who was so bent out of shape she couldn’t stand up straight. This was more than just a case of osteoporosis; she had been this way for 18 years. I can just picture her bent over so she couldn’t look up and see the sky. She had spent the last 18 years looking down into the dirt at her feet and everyone else’s feet. No doubt, eating and drinking were difficult and she could only rest curled up in a fetal position.

Remember, Luke is a physician. Dr. Luke uses interesting words to diagnose her condition. He doesn’t use the word that would mean “illness, disease, or injury.” In verse 11 he uses the phrase “crippled by a spirit.” Then in verse 12 Jesus uses the word “infirmity.”

It’s probable her weakness was caused by demonic influence because Jesus says in verse 16 she had been “bound by Satan” for 18 years. Demonic spirits can provoke physical problems but not every illness or disease is caused by demons. There are 26 recorded miracles where Jesus heals someone of a physical problem and only seven of those are caused by demonic influence.

Demonic spirits can influence a person in a variety of ways. Remember, the term “demon possession” doesn’t appear once in the New Testament; it’s simply the word “demonized.” Jesus cast demons out of many people but this encounter is different. First, elsewhere when Jesus cast a demon out of a person, he never touched the person; He simply commanded the demon spirit to depart. In this passage Jesus touches the poor woman. A second difference is when demons are cast out, it is always a dramatic, almost scary experience. Remember the demons that entered the pigs and they did the “swine dive” and committed “sooie-cide? In this case, the woman simply stands up straight.

A lying spirit had convinced this poor woman that she couldn’t stand up. From the language Dr. Luke uses it seems she had no physiological cause for her affliction. Physicians today can testify of the amazing connection between the mind and the body. Some people are literally sick because they think they are sick and there is no organic or physical reason to explain their illness. They are just as sick as someone who has an infection but the illness started in their mind.

For years, people told the woman, “Stand up!” And she would say, “I can’t!”

“Look up!”

“I can’t!”

“Lift up your eyes!”

“I can’t!”

When asked why not, she would say, “I just can’t!”

Some of you have a good case of the “can’ts” too. Stop drinking! “I can’t!” Stop looking at pornography! “I can’t!” Stop abusing drugs! “I can’t!” Stop being bitter! “I can’t!” Forgive that person who hurt you! “I can’t!”

You need Jesus to deliver you from your “can’ts” today.

One of the devil’s greatest tools is to try to erect a stronghold in your mind to make you think you can’t do something God has told you to do. That’s why the Bible says in Ephesians 4:27, “Do not give the devil a foothold.” If you give the devil an inch, he’ll take your smile; he will rob you of your joy. If you give the devil an inch, you make him a ruler!

Meanwhile, back at the synagogue, notice the steps Jesus follows to deliver this woman. First He looks at her, and then He calls her. I wonder if Jesus bent down and looked into her eyes? I imagine Him as He looks into those fearful but hopeful eyes. He smiles and says, “Ma’am, you are set free from your infirmity.” She is still bent over, so Jesus reaches out and touches her. I love verse 13. You know my feelings about the word ‘immediately’ any time we read it in the Bible. It says, “Immediately she straightened up and praised God.” I don’t know what she said or sang; it just says she started praising God. If she were around today, maybe she would have sung, “Love lifted me, love lifted me! When nothing else could help, love lifted me.”

Now, that leads us to our Life Lesson: When Jesus touches you, you’ll straighten up and praise Him! Maybe you feel the weight of the world has doubled you over. You feel bent out of shape because of the burdens you have to carry. Worry and anxiety can bend you over. Heartache, pain, frustration, and suffering can bend you over. You may be trapped in some sin, or carrying around some deep, dark secret and you feel bent out of shape. People say, “Just look up!” And your reply is “I can’t!” They say, “Just shake it off!” You say, “I can’t!”

Jesus wants to do the same for you that He did for this woman. First, He sees you and He knows your pain. You can hide your pain from others behind a smile, but Jesus sees you. Next, He calls you to Himself. “Come to me all you who labor and are bent over with care, and I’ll give you rest.” Next, He speaks to you to let you know that you can be set free from your weakness. But, best of all He touches you. Every time you encounter Jesus in worship, He touches you. Let Him touch you and deliver you today.

Now, this poor woman was not the only crippled person there that day. We also see a man who was: Bent out of shape by religious rules. He’s not listed in our text, or is he?

The poor woman who had been set free was praising the Lord, and all her friends were rejoicing and shouting, “Hallelujah, Praise the Lord!” But the leader of the synagogue couldn’t stand it. This was out of the ordinary, and he didn’t like it one bit. He became indignant—bent all out of shape. In the midst of the rejoicing, he jumped to his feet and ordered everyone to be quiet and stop rejoicing. Things are NOT going to get out of hand in his synagogue! He even quoted Exodus 20:9-10 to justify his action: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath day to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work, you,

your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.”

There wasn't going to be any healing in HIS synagogue on the Sabbath. No siree! It's one thing to quote scripture; it's another thing to correctly apply it!

Apparently, the synagogue ruler had a few others who agreed with his action because Jesus addressed His words to a group. I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases it in *The Message*: “You frauds! Each Sabbath every one of you unties your cow or donkey from its stall, leads it out for water and thinks nothing of it. So why isn't it all right for me to untie this daughter of Abraham and lead her from the stall where Satan has had her tied these eighteen years? The Jews had made so many loopholes in the Sabbath laws; they had figured out a way to untie their livestock and lead them to water, even if the water was more than a Sabbath's walk away. Jesus accused them of treating their animals better than they treated people!

Sadly, the descendants of this self-appointed religious expert are still with us today. These up-tight folks are relying more on a set of strict religious rules than on a liberating, joyous relationship with God. These people are often called legalists or religious traditionalists. You can usually spot them when other folks get happy in the Lord and start praising God. Like the man in our text, they are quick to complain. They still get upset when they see someone having a good time in the Lord: why? I guess it's because they think religion ought to make you miserable, and if you are enjoying yourself, you can't be very spiritual. Most of them have perfected what I call the “Lutheran Holy Look;” that is an expression that looks like a cross between acid indigestion and a migraine headache. Maybe that's why we don't laugh much in church!!

Those who have been set free by Jesus are under the constant scrutiny of these legalists who are ready to condemn any unexpected exuberance. It's nothing new. It was happening 3,000 years ago and it still is today.

Sam Jones was a Methodist Evangelist who lived and preached in the late 1800s. He was known to be extremely plain spoken. Once he was preaching about how some people refuse to get enthusiastic about God because they were afraid they might lose their “dignity.” He said: “Dignity is the starch of the shroud. The more dignity a fellow has the nearer dead he is. I expect to be as dignified as some of you when they put me in my coffin.”

These two simple parables of the Kingdom explain why we should be full of joy. The Kingdom of God is not a bunch of rules; it's having a personal relationship with the King.

Whatever is broken in your life, Jesus can fix it. If you are bent out of shape by suffering, Jesus sees you and calls you. He came to set you free from Satan's bondage, and when He touches you, you will never be the same again! You may be bent out of shape by religious rules, a miserable legalist. Jesus came to set you free from the chains and weights of the law. Will you let Him?

He wants you to be delighted in what He is doing right now—and that can only happen when you allow His Kingdom to be real in your life.

Some of you know the problem: you've fallen and you can't get up. We live in a world of broken people. Life is fragile; it should be handled with care, because people break easily. All the self-help programs, and the religious rules can't fix the broken hearts, broken hopes, and broken homes of people around us.

Jesus Christ was the only person who ever claimed to be able to heal broken hearts. As our Gospel text concludes: "When he had said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." Let him do them in your life.

AMEN!!

“WHEN YOUR EGO MAKES A FOOL OUT OF YOU”


Message for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

August 31, 2025

PROVERBS 25: 6-7A ** HEBREWS 13: 1-8, 15-16 ** LUKE 14: 1, 7-14

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

 small commercial plane was carrying only four passengers: a doctor, a trial lawyer, a minister and a Boy Scout. Suddenly, one of the engines made a loud bang and started to smoke. A few moments later, the pilot rushed into the main cabin. He had a parachute strapped on his back. He said to his four passengers, “The plane is going down. Unfortunately, there are only four parachutes but there are five of us. I have a wife and three children so I think I should get one of the chutes.”

With that, he opened the exit door and jumped out of the plane.

The doctor said, “I’m a doctor and I save lives. I need to stay alive so I can help more people.” He took one of the remaining chutes, strapped it on and jumped out of the plane.

Next, the trial lawyer said, now pay attention because this is a crucial piece of testimony, the trial lawyer said, “I’m one of the smartest people alive. I’ve won hundreds of cases and I deserve one of these chutes!” With that, he strapped a pack on his back and jumped out of the plane.

The minister turned to the Boy Scout and said, “Son, I’ve lived a long and happy life. I know what awaits me in the life to come and I have no fear of death. You take the last chute and I’ll go down with the plane.”

The Boy Scout replied, “That’s okay, pastor, there are still two parachutes left, one for you and one for me. The smartest man in the world just jumped out of the plane wearing my backpack.”

Who’s first, not who’s on first but who’s first? Where do we fit in? We jostle for the best seats if we can get them. The view is definitely better at the 50-yard line at a football game or right behind home plate at a baseball game. You’re much more into the flow of a concert in the front row than at the back of the balcony in the nosebleed section!

Where do we fit in? What’s our place? One of the big tasks for a wedding couple is to determine the table seating chart for the reception. There are certain people who need to avoid each other. You also don’t want to exclude someone from their circle of friends. Figuring who sits where and with whom can lead to gnashing of teeth and even tears. It’s very serious stuff! I can honestly say I had first-hand experience with this situation at both my grandson’s wedding and then more recently at my great nephew’s wedding.

I remember when I was young and my family would go to a relative’s house for a large family gathering. We small kids would be relegated to “the children’s table.” Actually, the children’s table was a lot of fun! But I also remember how proud I felt when I graduated to sitting with the grown-ups! Just curious, anyone else here ever have to sit at the ‘children’s table?’

We hear about an episode from Jesus’ life. “On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.” Jesus had been invited to the home of a leading Pharisee for the Sabbath dinner. It was a big occasion to be on the leader’s invite list! When the meal time came, Jesus watched as the various guests all jockeyed for position at the dinner table.

It would have been a large, U-shaped dining area. People reclined on pillows around very short platforms. The host reclined at the center of the U’s bottom edge. The nearer your position was to the host, the more important your status was. The least important people dined at the two far ends of the U.

As Jesus watched the guests scuttle about, elbowing for the best position, he tells a thinly-veiled parable. When you’re invited to a dinner party, he says, don’t jockey for the best seats. Just think how embarrassing it would be if someone more important than you showed up. And the host approached you and said, “Hey, I

need you to move down to the far end. I have a very important person who needs to sit here.”

“How much better it would be,” Jesus says, if the reverse happened. The host sees you sitting at the far end and he says, ‘Oh! You don’t have to sit way down here! You come with me! I’ve got a spot at my table reserved just for you!’”

Jesus doesn’t tell this parable just to fill them in on proper etiquette. He isn’t playing Miss Manners; he hasn’t read ‘Hints from Heloise’ or Ann Landers’ latest advice column. Jesus is getting at something much deeper, something that has spiritual implications.

Where is your place? Are you secure, do you feel that you belong, that you matter? Do you feel that you are a valued person, for who you are, just as you are?

There are few things as distressing as the feeling that you don’t belong, that you’re unwanted and unimportant. It cuts you to the core. It leaves you with the feeling that you’re somehow less substantial than others, that you’re less of a person. You’re somehow internally flawed.

How much are our words and actions tied to jockeying for esteem? How do we try to prove to the world and to ourselves that we have value?

There are many voices trying to tell us what our place is. Who do you listen to? Which voice reveals your true identity, who you are and where your place is in the world and the universe? The root of what Jesus is getting at in this parable is about a whole lot more than just good manners. It’s about our core essence and our spiritual journey through this world.

Do you know your place, your real place? Jesus is stating that we do not need to jockey for position. We can let go of the unceasing pursuit of angling for position. We can let it go because our seat is already secure! You are already God’s beloved. There is nothing you have to do or not do to safeguard your position.

You are God’s beloved. Your place and your value were firmly established long ago, long before you were born. You were born belonging. You are God’s beloved creation; you reflect the image of the creator. And together we reflect the many-splendored facets of God’s wondrous character.

Your permanent place of belonging was secured long ago at Jesus' cross. He took the worst seat so that you might have the best. He took the cross, the worst seat, and his dead body was laid in a borrowed grave. All this was done so that you might have the everlasting seat of worth and belonging.

And the knowledge of that most valued status came to you at your baptism. Baptism has been called the sacrament of belonging. In those waters, God said, "You are mine...forever!"

No one can change that, no words, no alternate perception of reality, no earthly forces, no polarized politics, especially no Executive Orders, nothing in all of creation can change this truth, this declaration of your precious value to God! This is who you are, this is your value, your place, and don't let anyone tell you any differently!

When we dwell, when we abide in this sacred perception of our inherent worth, then our place is secure. We know our value! We can let go of all of the jockeying, of pulling others down so that we can gain an upper advantage. And most importantly, at last we can have peace even – and especially – in our broken places.

It's in our poverty that we come to know our true worth and importance to God. Where we are broken, when we have nothing to offer, it's there and then that the divine words of grace come to us. It declares that our intrinsic worth stems from the love of our creator. It sprouted from the very heart of brokenness, from the cross of Jesus. We received everything, all that there is of value, when we had no way of repaying good for good. We were the poor, the crippled; we were the lame, the blind. This was when we were invited to the banquet of abundance. And that has changed everything for us.

Several times in the book of Luke, we see that Jesus goes to eat in the house of a Pharisee. Here in Luke 14, we see the last of these encounters. What's really interesting about this passage is that, during this one dinner, Jesus teaches on three of the most important themes from the book of Luke: (1) the danger of tradition; (2) the need to reach out to the outcasts of the world; (3) the universality of the gospel.

Where most English versions say the Pharisees were "watching" Jesus, the Spanish versions reflect better the force of the Greek verb, in that they were "spying" on Jesus or "stalking" Jesus, like an animal stalks its prey.

The custom of the day said that seats close to the host or special guest were more important than seats farther away. Something like the concept of the “head table” today.

“He who exalts himself will be humbled. He who humbles himself will be exalted.” Jesus takes this beyond dinner etiquette and teaches a life lesson. If we build ourselves up, we are setting ourselves up for a fall.

Jesus calls us to include those the world rejects. Not just in the context of our assemblies, but in our personal lives. I have to say, this is a struggle for me; maybe it is for you too. I am much more apt to welcome the homeless and drug addicts and other “outcasts” into our worship service than I am to invite them to my home! But we’re promised that those who do will receive an eternal reward. It’s striking how many times Jesus teaches that our response to our fellow man will affect our eternal reward.

People would announce a dinner for a certain time frame without giving a specific day or time. Then when everything was ready, they would call together those who had been invited. These people had valid excuses, but the point is, the dinner was not a priority with them.

Those who were invited refused to go. The Jews, who had been called by God to be his own people, occupied themselves with other things. They didn’t make a relationship with God the center of their religion.

The hall was filled with unexpected guests. Will we be surprised when we see who is included on the last day?

The Pharisees had built up a system that could exclude and discriminate and even refuse to do good, all in the name of serving God.

Are we doing the same with our traditions?

Have the outcasts of the world found a home in our churches?

Have we made outreach to the less fortunate a priority?

We can give as freely as we have received. We can give without thought of return. We give from the seat of joy. We know our place, and that place is good.

Jesus met unbelievers where they were. And He met them most often in the marketplace, not in a place of worship. He realized what many Christians today still don't seem to understand. Cultivators must get out in the field. According to one count, the Gospels record 132 contacts that Jesus had with people. Six were in the Temple, four in the synagogues and 122 were out with the people in the mainstream of life. Lost people aren't commanded to come to church, but the Church is commanded to go to the lost. Be like Jesus and find the lost by ministering in the marketplace. Remember what Jesus said: "You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." What could be better than that?

AMEN!!

“SELL OUT OR SOLD OUT?”


Message for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

September 7, 2025

DEUTERONOMY 30: 15-20 ** PHILEMON 1-21 ** LUKE 14: 25-33

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

 man from the mountains of Tennessee found himself one day in a large city and, for the first time, standing outside an elevator. He watched as an old, haggard woman hobbled on, and the doors closed. A few minutes later the doors opened and a young, very attractive woman walked off the elevator. The father hollered to his youngest son, “Billy, go get your mother!”

If somebody asked you, on a scale of one to 10, with one being very low and 10 being the highest rating you could have, “how sold out to Jesus are you”, what number would you give yourself? Now, if the same question was given to Jesus about you, would Jesus give you a higher number or a lower one?

Before you answer that, what if, what if, Jesus told you as he said that day, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Hard words from the very lips of Jesus. He essentially said, “Do you people have any idea what you are getting into?” Chances are, they did not. Yikes, what did he just ask me? And the excitement dampens; the fun dissipates.

We know how crowds can be, beginning small and growing very quickly. As people get word that a celebrity is close by, they gather around out of curiosity mostly. But then, the excitement that comes from growing numbers of people begins to draw even more folks, until the crowd takes on the festive nature of a parade, which then follows the notable person wherever he or she goes. We see

that in the political arena for sure, and even more when a celebrity is recognized on the street.

It was kind of like that for Jesus. He often gathered with just his disciples or possibly with others at a dinner party, but here we see him in the public arena. People notice. Uninvited, people follow. Maybe clueless to his destination or even purpose, they eagerly await what might happen next. The scripture really does not tell us what they were hoping for, what they expected. Maybe they didn't know either. But Jesus' reputation was growing and I would guess most of them did not want to miss anything. So they stayed with him as he traveled, likely oblivious to any cost they may be asked to bear. Then came those hard words from the very lips of Jesus. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

In my mind's eye, I can just see people beginning to peel away from the outer edges of the crowd, people beginning to elbow their way through clusters of strangers in their eagerness to distance themselves from such harsh words. Would I have stayed; would you have stayed?

We don't know how many left, disappointed that the fun was over so soon. And we don't know how many stayed because finally, finally, someone important was asking something of them, requiring something of them, calling them to something beyond themselves. I would like to think that you and I would be among those who leaned forward toward Christ's challenge, rather than retreating in search of something easier.

In light of that statement from Jesus, now then, how sold out to Jesus are you?

What keeps us from being sold out to Jesus, is that all of us are tempted to sell him out. Have you ever put confidence in another person, and just knew they were going to come through for you only to have them sell you out in the end? What feeling did it leave you with inside? Do you think Jesus ever feels that way about us?

We saw what was a sold out situation turn into a sell out. Rebekah was one fine and good looking sister. When Isaac first saw her, there was not a happier man anywhere around. He was sold out on his wife. Then one day, a famine came to his country and he went to the land of the Philistines. He was tempted to go down to Egypt like his father Abraham had done many years earlier. But God told him,

“Do not go to Egypt. I will take care of you in this land. Stay in this land for a while and I will bless you. Because of a promise I made with your father Abraham, I will make your descendants too many to count.”

Now with a direct word from God like that, you would have thought Isaac would have been sold out to God. He was in the place that God had told him to be. Yet, the temptation to sell out God was still there. Isaac got to thinking, “Ok, God I’ll do what you told me to do, but I’ve got to have some room to fix this thing up.” Isaac looked at his wife, and how beautiful she was, and decided, he loved her, but he loved his own life a little more.

When the men asked him, who was that fine looking woman traveling with him, he would say, “that’s my sister.” He was afraid if he told them that was his wife, they would kill him in order to get to her. But to save his own skin, he put his wife at risk of being raped or kidnapped by the men of the community. His fear of what might happen to him, turned him into a sellout rather than being sold out for God and his wife. If you were Rebekah, how would you have felt about this? How do you think God felt?

The thing Isaac thought God couldn’t handle, the moment it became known that she was his wife, God touched the king’s heart to give special protection to Isaac and to Rebekah. This was God’s plan from the beginning, but whenever we choose to sell out, we miss out on God’s best for us.

Are there limits to what Jesus should ask of those who would follow him? Are there limits to what we should ask of those who would follow the way of Jesus? Hate father and mother? Really?

There’s good news if you will in that word ‘hate.’ The word ‘hate’ that is translated in this passage was used in Jesus’ time as an expression for letting go or detaching yourself from something. It was not that word that conjures up all sorts of negative emotions that repels people today when we hear of ‘hate groups’ or when we hear someone say ‘I hate you!’ No, the crowd that heard Jesus would have had a sense of him saying “Unless you let go of your father and mother and give following me your highest priority, even above your own well-being, your own life, you cannot be my disciple. Unless you realize this journey you are on will cost you something, that others may discredit you, that your entertainment and your success and your being liked are not the highest priority, you will not be able to follow me.”

Why? It's because Jesus' way is ultimately a way of confronting the powers of the world that foster injustice, inequity, oppression, racism, classism, and all the other 'isms' that set us at odds with each other. Jesus' way is ultimately about being advocates for the poor, the homeless, the sick. Jesus' way is ultimately a way of challenging even religious authorities who stand in the way of love of God and neighbor as the highest values.

It won't be easy; you cannot walk that kind of path without planning for it; without planning how you will respond when you meet resistance from family and friends who might see you as radical and crazy; without planning how you will talk with family about what is most important to you; without planning how you will let go of, hate, all the things that might prevent you from faithfulness to the Way of Jesus; without looking seriously at finances and possessions to see how they might be preventing you from living for the sake of the world rather than for your own sake.

Discipleship is for believers willing to pay a price. Discipleship means no longer looking up at the cross, but rather carrying the cross and following Jesus. Jesus cautions us not to take discipleship too lightly because there is a price to pay. There are many people who want Jesus, but do not want to pay the cost to have Him. They have Jesus for salvation, but not for sanctification. We may call the person a hypocrite, but in reality the person has not moved from the foot of the cross to being nailed on the cross.

Discipleship is the process by which we start becoming more like Jesus. Jesus never saw discipleship as an automatic process of accepting his death on the cross. He said, "If anybody comes to me and does not love me more than family and more than personal comforts and pleasures, the person simply cannot be his disciple. Jesus knew there would be those who would come to Him, but not give Him the place in their lives that he deserved.

Then he says, anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. We forget, that when Jesus called us, the call was not to come to a wonderful life. The first step is to come to the cross and die. Jesus died on the cross in our place.

The exchange is that we now die to ourselves to give Jesus the chance to live in us. We come to the cross, to be nailed to the cross, not just to feel sorry for what we have done. We come to be enabled to be sold out to Jesus.

On the cross, we identify with Christ's sufferings and Christ's complete commitment to be sold out to God. Jesus had the right and the ability to come down off the cross.

If he had of said, "nails and spikes release me, and wind gently lower me to the ground, they would have had no choice but to release him because all creation obeys his word." But it was a sold out commitment to the will of God that kept him there.

A cross is something we willingly accept from God as part of His will for our lives. It means death to self, to our plans and our ambitions. Is Jesus at the center of the goals we have for our lives for the next five years? Is He free to change them? Is He free to say, "wait on this, I want you to help out over there first?"

Is He free to say, "that's not the person for you? "Will you listen if He says, "your lifestyle leaves you very little to support the kingdom of God. Change it on your own, or I will change it for you."

It is so easy to sell out on Jesus. Everything around us cries out for us to betray God. The world can seem so beautiful at times. But nothing that it promises actually fulfills in the way that we think it will. The very people we sometimes admire and practically worship from a distance, will be willing to let us know, what they have is not all its cracked up to be.

Let's look again at how sold out we are to Jesus. Is Christ really first in our lives, even before family and self? Are we willing to make the same kind of sacrifices for the mission of Christ as we are for our own comfort and pleasure?

Do our lives actually indicate that Jesus is making a difference and would our friends or co-workers be able to say it's the case? If the answer to these questions are maybe, kind of, once in a while, or I'm not sure, then we can know that somewhere we have chosen to sell out Christ.

What does it cost us to be sold out to Christ. It costs a whole lot: it costs us our heart; it costs us our minds; it costs us our eyes; it costs us our ears; it costs us our hands; it costs us our feet; it costs us our mouth; it costs us our desires; it costs us our energy; it costs us our options.

When we consider all these things, where are we on our chart of 1 to 10 in being sold out for God? The main reason we should be sold out to God is that God

voluntarily chose to be sold out to us. From God's perspective, we may be the treasure in the field. Jesus gave up all the splendor and majesty of heaven, to purchase us out of the world. He values us, more than we value ourselves.

What does it cost to be sold out to Jesus? It costs a lot. Can you afford it?

Amen.

“WHEN HE WAS ON THE CROSS!”

Message for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

September 14, 2025

“Holy Cross Day”

NUMBERS 21: 4B-9 ** 1 CORINTHIANS 1: 18-24 ** JOHN 3: 13-17

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

2000 years ago; a crowd gathered at Golgotha's hillside. Why? To witness a crucifixion...a terrible, cruel death, the worst form of execution for any man or woman and especially the worst way to die. This day...no ordinary day by any means. The mob had gotten their wish. Earlier they had cried, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" You were there; I heard you shouting ‘Crucify him, crucify him!’ I was there! Yes I shouted it too.

Now poised...they watched the crucifixion take place. Perhaps before they had seen crucifixions, but this one was different...an innocent man was being put to death. How many times has an innocent man died? This man was; His name was Jesus.

Society would now be rid of this one who had caused quite a controversy...Blinded eyes had been touched; crooked limbs had been straightened; the dead had been brought back to life.

The crowd looked on...some with elation...some with a sense of coldness in their spines. Some thought, "He is finally out of our hair! No longer a bother to us!" Others bowed their heads in sadness...their friend had died right before their eyes.

Why did such a scene have to transpire? All because it was in keeping with God's plan. Why would such a plan have an innocent man dying? Because God so loved the world. That's why!

The death of His Son would be the only way that mankind could be released from that which enslaved him...sin!

All the while He was hanging there on the cross, His mind was not really focused as much on Himself as it was on you and me. Yes, when He was on the cross, we were on His mind! He was thinking about each of us. What ran through His mind about us?

He thought of his love for mankind. It was only "love" that would cause one to give His life to die for others.

So great a love...no greater love than to willingly give of your life for others, in order that they might live. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down His life for His friends."

Jesus agonized over this point in His life no doubt. The humanness of His life spoke!

He did it because He loved you and me!

He demonstrated the magnitude of the love God had for a helpless, hopeless humanity.

"But God proves His love for us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." He died for us that we might have life, eternal life.

Not only did He think about His love for us but...

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life."

There's no future in success - no way! There's no future in wealth - no way! There's no future in possessions - no way! The late evangelist Billy Graham used to say that he never saw a U-haul following behind a hearse in a funeral!

There's only a future with Jesus! Jesus says, "I am the way...the truth...the life...

God So Loved. Those three words, 'God So Loved,' are more important than all the rest of the words in Webster's Dictionary. If it wasn't for the love that God has for His creation, which includes all of us, we would have no hope. Our future is determined by those three words. "God So Loved." I thank God every day for His love, because without it, I am dead and so are you!

I am not an artist by any stretch but I want to paint a picture for you this morning. Picture yourself arguing with a friend and you really lose it. You pull out a gun and kill your friend. You are caught and arrested. You receive your day in court and found guilty of your sin of murder. You are sentenced to die by lethal injection. With all of your appeals exhausted you are lead to the execution chamber, where they lay you on a table. A heart monitor and an IV are hooked up to your body. You watch as the attendant makes ready the poison that will be placed into your IV. You glance at the clock and see that you only have 1 minute left for a stay of execution. The phone is silent. Is this the end? As the attendant readies the lethal poison, the door swings open. In walks a young man of about 33 years old. He says "Stop, set this man free." He then looks at you with love and compassion and says, "My father loves you so much that I have come to take your place. I will take on not only your sin of murder, but also all of your sins. I will die in your place. You are set free if you choose to be." You say "yes" and you watch as this young man lies on the table in your place. The IV is inserted into his arm. You watch as the lethal poison is injected into the IV. You listen as the young man says "Forgive them Father." Then you watch as the man with his last breath says, "It is finished". Then he dies.

If this would actually happen to you, would your life be changed? Would you live a different life? Would you be indebted to this man and his father forever?

I have good news and bad news for each of you this morning. This has happened to you! It has happened to each and every person here today. It has happened to each and every person outside those doors back there. It has happened to every person who lives. We are all guilty of sin and we all have a choice that we must make.

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

God so loved the world. I want to draw your attention to one word in verse 16 that we probably take for granted; it's a small two letter word that means 'to a great extent.' The word is 'so.' God so loved the world; he loved the world to such a great extent. Folks, He loves you; He loves me and He even loves those who reject Him. He loves us so much that He sent His one and only son to take our place. Because of the sins in our lives, the law has convicted us and found us guilty. We are so guilty that we deserve the death penalty. This death penalty is spending eternity in hell. Christ loves us so much that He willfully allowed himself to be

crucified on that old rugged cross. He took on Himself all the sins of the world. It was my sins and your sins that nailed Jesus to that cross. He didn't deserve to suffer and die. He lived a life here on earth without sin, he didn't do anything wrong; he didn't back-talk his parents or his teachers; he didn't lie or steal; he didn't do anything wrong; he was perfect, something that we cannot be. Because of our sins, we are condemned. Because of Jesus Christ we have a second chance. All we have to do is to believe, and we will have eternal life. Who wouldn't accept this offer? Well, there are many who refuse and will perish.

Romans 3:23 says "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Many people believe that if they live a good life, then they will go to heaven. Others believe that if they confess their sins to a pastor or priest, then they will be saved. Others believe that since they were baptized as an infant they will be saved. Other religions believe that they can get to heaven by worshiping Mohammed or Buddha. With world events today, many believe that all religions worship the same god. None of these are true.

John 14:6: Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

There is only one way to receive eternal life. We must accept Jesus Christ as our Savior. We must make Him the Lord of our lives. This means we must repent from our sins and let Christ lead us wherever He takes us. Don't make Christ a back seat driver. Give Him the keys and let Him take control of your life. Let Him take you where He wants you to be.

Why are there still so many who haven't accepted Christ as their Savior? Maybe it is our fault; have you ever looked at it that way; you and I are guilty of not talking about Jesus to those who really need to hear about him.

What does it mean to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind? This means that we put nothing before God. God is the most important person in our lives. We must put God before our family, before our work and before our pleasures. We must allow Christ to live in our hearts, allow the Holy Spirit to indwell us to our innermost soul and to keep our thoughts pure and holy.

Secondly, we are to love our neighbors. People always ask, "Who are our neighbors?" Our neighbors are all those that we have ever come into contact with

and those that we will come into contact with. Basically, our neighbors are everyone.

It seems easy to love God, but to love everyone that I have ever met or seen. How can we love someone who has hurt us? With us this is impossible, but with God in us, this is possible and required of us.

So why are there still so many unsaved people in the world and right here in this community? Is it that we don't love them? Is it that we don't have time to tell them of the saving grace of Jesus Christ? Is it that we are not concerned if they are condemned to hell? Is it that we think that it is someone else's job, like the preacher's? What did Christ have to say about it?

Mark 16:15-16: He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Someone once said,

"If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator."

"If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist."

"If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist."

"If our greatest need had been religion, God would have sent us a Pharisee."

"If our greatest need had been adherence to the Law, God would have sent us a policeman."

"But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent us a Savior--JESUS."

This is exactly what John tells us "the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world."

Jesus did not come into the world to execute judgment, but to save those under the sentence of death, to give them every opportunity to experience deliverance from death.

In his inspired commentary on Jesus, John declared: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”

AMEN!!

“CAN GOD TRUST ME?”


Message for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

September 21, 2025

AMOS 8: 4-7 1 ** TIMOTHY 2: 1-7 ** LUKE 16: 1-13

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

e live in a complicated world. Sometimes our minds are so addled by the myriad dilemmas we face, we hardly know up from down, let alone right from wrong.

If a cashier undercharges you and you don't realize it until you've already left the store, must you go back and correct the mistake? Does it matter if the person who made the mistake works for a huge, big-box retailer? Is it more wrong to pocket the benefit of the clerk's error if it is a small business, locally owned? What if you saved all the money you made from being undercharged and gave it to the church, would that make it okay? What about this; what if at some point in your past you were ripped off, not just once but more than once? What if at some point you were mugged, robbed, or cheated? Then, is it okay to take the extra change? After all, maybe the universe is just trying to give back to you a little of what was taken away.

It is just this kind of question that Jesus poses to his hearers in the lesson we heard today from Luke's Gospel. A manager has gotten caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He is going to get fired and he knows it. So, he puts his deceitful ways to work to establish a nest egg before he gets the ax. Jesus says the master complimented the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. Then Jesus adds, 'Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.' What does that mean?

It was Valentine's Day, and most people know that there is no better day to propose than Valentine's Day. So a young man decided that he was going to take the plunge and ask his sweetheart to marry him. He took the ring out of his pocket,

knelt down on one knee and proposed to her using these words: "Sweetheart, I love you so much; I want you to marry me. I don't have a car like Johnny Green, and I don't have a yacht like him. I don't have a house his size. I don't have the money of Johnny Green, but I love you with all my heart. Will you marry me?" She looked into his eyes and said, "I love you too, sweetheart, but could you tell me a little more about Johnny Green?"

A wealthy older gentleman had better luck than that young man. He just recently married a lovely young lady, but he was beginning to wonder whether she might have married him for his money. So he asked her, "Tell me the truth: if I lost all my money, would you still love me?" She said reassuringly, "Oh honey, don't be silly. Of course I would still love you. And I'd miss you terribly."

As evidenced by these two situations, people have gotten very confused and have allowed money to take the place in their lives that other people are supposed to have. They have begun to love money and use people rather than loving people and using money. The Bible records that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." When not kept in proper perspective, it can cause otherwise honest men to behave in unthinkable ways.

An elderly man was desperately ill. Knowing the time for his departure was near, he called for his closest friends to come see him one last time. Attending him were his doctor, his pastor and his business manager.

The old man said, "I know you can't take it with you, but who knows for sure? What if the experts are mistaken? I want to account for all possibilities. So I'm giving you each an envelope containing \$100,000. When I die, I want you each to slip the envelope in my jacket pocket at the funeral service. Then, if I do need money in the life to come, I'll be ready. I'm giving the envelopes to you because you are my most trusted friends."

Shortly thereafter, the man did die. Each of his three friends was seen slipping something into the deceased's coat pocket as he walked up to the casket to pay his final respects.

Following the service, while these friends were visiting with each other, the doctor, with a sheepish look on his face, said, "Guys, I have a confession to make. You know with the cost of medicine today, I don't make that much money. The hospital is desperate for funds. We can't even replace the CAT scan machine that's

broken down. So, I took \$20,000 for the new CAT scan and put the rest in the coffin.”

The minister cleared his throat and looked down at his shoes. He said, “I, too, have a confession to make. As you know, our church is seriously overburdened by the needs of the homeless. I couldn’t see just burying that money. So, in hopes of helping the homeless, I took \$50,000 out of the envelope and put the rest in his pocket.”

Looking sternly at the doctor and the minister, the businessman exclaimed, “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I am astonished and deeply disappointed that you would treat a solemn trust so casually. He was our friend. I want you to know that I placed my personal check for the full \$100,000 in his casket!” If you need to think about that, do so now!

If I was to ask you, can you trust God, I’m sure I would get an emphatic “Yes, I can trust God; I can trust God with my whole life; He is trustworthy.” You believe that you can trust him. But this morning, we are going to turn the tables around, and the question that God has for everyone of us today is, ‘Can God trust me? Can God trust you?’

Luke chapter 16 is an interesting parable that Jesus gives to us; it’s one of the most difficult parables to understand in all the Bible. Luke 16 follows Luke 15; I didn’t have to tell you that; but Luke 15 is of course the best known and the most loved chapter, the parable of the Prodigal Son, and in Luke 15 as Jesus tells this parable, he is teaching about wrong attitudes about people.

In Chapter 16 Jesus teaches about wrong attitudes about wealth. And he talks to us about our possessions, what we have, and how are we going to deal with what He has given to us.

It’s very interesting: Jesus talked about money 16 out of 38 parables; 1 out of 10 verses in the Gospels. The Bible devotes 500 verses to prayer; less than 500 verses to faith; but over 2,000 verses to money and possessions.

There are 3 things that I want to note from this story:

First, I note the Accountability of the Foolish Steward. The fact that when the owner came back this unwise manager of the master’s possessions was brought into position of accountability. There are two reasons that this manager was

accountable to the owner and there are two reasons we are accountable to God. First of all, God is the Owner, I am the Manager; He is the owner, I am the manager.

The first reason that I am accountable to God is because everything that I have today is a gift of God of which I own none. I am accountable to the owner. Every good and perfect gift comes from the Lord, right? He's the owner, He blesses me with everything, Your very breath is a gift from God, Your ability to walk and work is a gift from God. Every Gift you have, He gave them to you, Every possession you have, He gave them to you. He's the owner.

Folks, this is the number 1 issue; until we can settle this issue we're always going to have a problem in this area of management and stewardship. The more that I understand that God is the owner, and I'm the manager, then the conflict begins to disappear because I realize everything that I have, everything, my health, my life, my possessions, my family, everything I have, it's not mine, God owns it, I manage it.

The second reason I'm accountable to God is because the Owner, again God, the owner has expectations of the Manager. (repeat)

In other words, when the Master comes back, he wants to know what has been done with the possessions that he has given us, and there are several areas of expectations, and I want to just give you a few biblical areas this morning; we confess them, ourselves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love, and he is gracious and he loves us!

But what about our abilities? Jesus has an expectation of what we do with what he has entrusted with us. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

God has expectations that we will take our gifts and abilities and use them to build up his Kingdom. They are all to be used for Him, and we will be held accountable on how we are using those gifts.

I found this little saying this week that fits in with what I'm trying to get across. "God put me on this earth to accomplish a certain number of things; right now, I'm so far behind that I will never die." How many of you have felt like that before?

It's interesting to note, that when this owner comes home and fires the manager, he gives the guy some time to settle accounts, and in the settling of accounts you will notice what he did. He sat down with those who owed his master, and he began to cut down on what is owed. Now either this foolish manager had over charged them and was now giving them the legitimate amount owed, or maybe he was taking off the interest owed and going to the principle. Regardless, he began to cut the prices down and our Lord Jesus says, although this was an unwise foolish steward, he was unwise and foolish because he didn't use the talents and gifts that God had given him.

You see we're OK until it comes down to where we live. We have some Christians today in a lot of different churches who are trying to snow God, trying to pull one over on God. Have you ever tried to do that? Be honest, how many here have ever tried to slip one past God before? It doesn't work. Because trust can be measured. It doesn't matter what we say, what kind of excuses we come up with, God says simply says, 'If you're not faithful here, you're going to have trouble down the road; be faithful in the little things, and God will trust you with more.

When I realize that what I have is not my own and that the attitude that I show toward what God has placed in my care will affect my relationship with Him, then I will treat those things with great care and respect. After all, my relationship with God is more important than any possession that he might entrust to my care. So the problem all boils down to my relationship with God. Either it is not what it should be or I have no relationship at all with God. I see him only as the rich man upstairs rather than as my loving Father who graciously provides for my needs.

A life that God enables us to live upward and outward is a rich and rewarding life. In this life, we can make many friends—not temporary friends who are bought with money, but friends for eternity who are won over by our love and the Good News of what God has done for us all in Jesus who paid for our salvation with his very life... and lives and rules eternally. Let us all be faithful in the small things. Let us all pass the tests in our lives and handle the trusts God gives us in ways that bring greatest glory to Him.

AMEN!!

“EAT DRINK AND BE SORRY”


Message for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

September 28, 2025

AMOS 6: 1A, 4-7 ** 1 TIMOTHY 6: 6-19 ** LUKE 16: 19-31

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

here was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

The text before us this morning is about many things: about the pain of regret, about injustice, about the flames of hell. Ultimately, it is about life and death. It is about the broad, uncrossable chasm that stretches before us. It is about the final crossing that many of us fear, dance around, deny, and avoid most of our lives.

Is today's reading a parable that's not really a parable or is it a true story? Today we look at the life of the rich man and Lazarus, and right off, we need to clear up that this is not the same Lazarus, who was the brother of Mary and Martha and the one Jesus called out of the tomb after being already dead 4 days; this is a different Lazarus altogether but Jesus gets us to think about this question: who's the true winner and loser in life and not just a specific life as is the case in our Gospel but in every situation?

In our lesson today, unique to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus pulls back the curtain to help us catch a glimpse of life on the other side of death. His target is the self-

righteous Pharisees. The Pharisees were “lovers of money” and sought to justify their own behavior, but God knew their hearts.

Have you ever gone to a cemetery, any cemetery, and looked at the names, dates, and epitaphs, if they have them and I’m not aware of too many that do, but the epitaphs or sometimes cute sayings on the tombstones. We then talk about the “dash” and study the promises of God and the resurrection of Jesus. My first message regarding the ‘dash’ was at the funeral of Sam Longshore, who is still sorely missed by all of us and I followed that up fittingly as I see it, when Virginia who is also missed very much, when she passed away. That dash is what your life is all about, not the date of birth or the date of death but what you did with the dash in the middle while you lived!

Maybe you’ve heard the story about the message one man left on his tombstone. It said, “Consider, young man, as you walk by, as you are now, so once was I. As I am now, you soon shall be, so prepare, young man to follow me.” That sounded very profound, but one fellow took a knife and scratched a response that read, “To follow you is not my intent; until I know which way you went!”

So we’ll ask the question: what about Lazarus? Was he a winner or loser? According to his earthly appearance, I think most people would have pegged him to be a loser. How did Jesus portray him? At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. Lazarus was a “beggar.” He had to ask people for money or just some spare food. The Greek says that Lazarus literally “had been thrown” at the gate of the rich man. Perhaps he couldn’t walk - so they “threw” him there; he was literally thrown down. What is worse was that Lazarus had sores all over him, which may have been ulcers or some skin disease. Not only was Lazarus possibly crippled, but he was also probably not a very pretty looking man. Out of no fault of his own, he couldn’t work and he was difficult to even be loved. So he was left to beg for money at the gate of the rich man. The only friends he had were a bunch of stray street dogs who liked to lick the puss out of his sores. When he died, Lazarus probably had no proper burial. He probably had no mourners. In the eyes of the world, Lazarus was just a waste of space, a loser. His body was more than likely just thrown on the garbage pile, more commonly called Gehenna.

On the other hand, there was the rich man. In the eyes of the world, here was a winner. He had achieved the Israelite dream. He was able to dress like a king with purple clothing. He was able to wear nice, soft linen.

Also, he lived it up, partying all the time. You could envision this man enjoying the finest of wines, having extravagant parties, probably having a heated pool and house with plumbing, always getting the best seats in the front row at sporting events and truly enjoying all of the modern amenities of life back then. This guy was just plain fun to be with. People would have loved to be friends with the rich man; he would spare no expense. He was even nice enough to allow Lazarus to sit at his gate and possibly throw him some scraps now and then. In the eyes of the world, this guy was a winner. He was a successful and friendly businessman who supported the economy very nicely. When he died, you could imagine the Rich Man having all of his friends of the community testifying to what a great man he was. Maybe they would have told stories about “good ol’ Joe” - all of his parties and all of his festivities. Who was the winner and who was the loser? In the eyes of the world, the rich man was the winner.

What made the rich man a loser in God’s sight? It wasn’t that he was rich. Abraham too was rich. The rich man’s total life was consumed around how much he could get out of it - “eat, drink, and be merry.” That’s not how God designed us. The primary purpose and focus in life is to “worship the Lord and serve Him only.” Jesus compares serving the Lord to “carrying a cross.” Life is about fighting temptation; walking through the valley of the shadow of death. That doesn’t mean there is fun and enjoyment. Ecclesiastes 3 says, there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. But when your work becomes your only purpose in life - then you are a loser in God’s sight.

Therefore, it isn’t a sin to be rich. For this could happen to rich and poor alike. There are many poor people who are more consumed with their own happiness and relaxation than rich people are. If a poor person spends all his or her money on beer and cigarettes, what makes him any better than a rich person who spends all his or her money on cars and clothes and boats? So we need to be careful in our judgments.

When Jesus was put on the cross, what must the Jews have been thinking? “What a loser! What a fitting end to this phoney! Here he claimed to be the Messiah; now he’s getting what he deserves, death as a criminal. He’s paying for his blasphemy!” The devil must have thought, “ha! I am the victor! Jesus is a loser! He’s not going to save the world!” How his jaw must have dropped when Jesus appeared in hell that Sunday announcing to him, “guess again! Who’s the loser now! Satan, You are! I have just paid for the sins of the world and God just accepted that sacrifice! Now you and all your followers are doomed! Your power

is gone!” How the Jews’ jaws must have dropped when darkness came over the land at the death of Jesus! How they must have been amazed when the earth shook! Jesus was in fact saying, “I’m not the loser you thought I was!” After Jesus rose from the dead, he proved to actually be the winner, not the loser.

When Lazarus died, what happened to this “lonesome loser?” The angels carried him to Abraham’s side. He instantly went from dogs breathing in his face and licking his sores to being surrounded by a heavenly escort straight to heaven! What a surprise! And where did they lead him? Straight to Abraham’s bosom to be comforted. What a rich word: “comforted!”

And what kind of escort did the rich man have? While the rich man’s friends and family were all gathered around his dead body, he was surrounded by flames of fire. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ‘So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ What was worse, was that there was no crossing over. The rich man still wanted Lazarus to help him out, still wanted to take advantage of the poor beggar Lazarus but Lazarus couldn’t come and help; no one could. The rich man was eternally lost, stuck to burn in the fires of hell forever. Who’s the loser now?

Isn’t it amazing how hell changed this man’s outlook on life? All of a sudden he realized that life wasn’t supposed to be about partying it up and just living for himself. As someone once said, “there are no atheists in hell.” But even in hell, he still didn’t get it, did he? You see no sign of remorse from him. All he wants is pity. And then, when that is impossible, what is his suggestion? ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ His brothers most likely had inherited his small fortune. They too were doomed. And so he thought that sending Lazarus back from the dead would work to shake them out of their materialism. He still thought he knew better than God. Even hell couldn’t shake him from his unbelief.

Just stop and think for a minute how much more time we would spend into spreading the gospel if God gave us a glimpse of hell! If we actually had to experience one minute, just 60 seconds of hell; how we would realize what a terrible place it is to be! Could you even do it for half that? But this is actually wrong kind of thinking. Is the same thinking of this Jewish man, who thought that

a miracle, a visual resurrection of Lazarus would be able to change his brothers and shake them out of their unbelief?

So what did Abraham say? “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ Moses and his law condemned his brothers as sinners who needed a Savior. The Prophets predicted the coming of Christ Jesus- who would come and suffer and die for their sins as their Messiah. This was all they needed for conversion. If these brothers of his would not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they wouldn’t listen to Lazarus either. These brothers of his would have been Jews, since Abraham calls the rich man a “son” of his. If these Jews who had the Word were going to remain losers in the eyes of the Lord after hearing Moses and the Prophets, then a resurrection wouldn’t change that.

Within this book called the Bible, we have the tool to take people from the depths of hell and despair to the hope of heaven, to change them from losers into winners, all through the blood of Christ.

So what are you? Are you a winner or a loser? You may not be the most famous person in the world. You may not make a lot of money. You may not have the most talents. In the end, it doesn’t matter. Don’t judge your life by what you have done, how popular you are, or how much money you have. Everyone may think you’re a loser. But that’s not what makes you a winner or loser. You have the Word of God.

Folks, God has done everything necessary to open the doors of heaven for you. His creation is his handiwork. He places believers near you to encourage you. He places believers near those who are spiritually lost and searching. God has placed an enormous stop sign on the road to hell and the sign is in the shape of a cross. God does not and has not offered a Plan B. The road to heaven is prepared by the blood of Christ. Heaven is a free gift if you choose to accept Jesus as your personal Lord.

AMEN!!