

Sundays of Pentecost 2026 Messages

Part 1

From Pastor Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Russell, Kentucky

Day of Pentecost – May 24 – “Holy Wind”

*The Holy Trinity (First Sunday After) – May 31 – “You’re
Not Simple And Neither Is God”*

*Second Sunday After – June 7 – “Our God The Patron Of
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Third Sunday After – June 14 – “Shake Off The Dust”

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"HOLY WIND"

Message for the "*Day of Pentecost*"

From Pastor Norman Staker

May 24, 2026

ACTS 2: 1-21 ** 1 CORINTHIANS 12: 3B-13 ** JOHN 20: 19-23



GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM
GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR
LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST.

AMEN. HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN
INDEED!!

A woman was at work when she received a phone call that her daughter was very sick with a fever. She left her work and stopped by the pharmacy to get some medication. She got back to her car and found that she had locked her keys in the car.

She didn't know what to do, so she called home and told the baby sitter what had happened. The baby sitter told her that her fever was getting worse. She said, "You might find a coat hanger and use that to open the door."

The woman looked around and found an old rusty coat hanger that had been thrown down on the ground, possibly by someone else who at some time or other had locked their keys in their car. Then she looked at the hanger and said, "I don't know how to use this."

So, she bowed her head and asked God to send her some help. Within five minutes an old rusty car pulled up, with a dirty, greasy, bearded man who was wearing an old biker skull rag on his head. The woman thought, "This is what you sent to help me?" But, she was desperate, so she was also very thankful.

The man got out of his car and asked her if he could help. She said, "Yes, my daughter is very sick. I stopped to get her some medication and I locked my keys in my car. I must get home to her. Please, can you use this hanger to unlock my car?"

He said, "Sure". He walked over to the car, and in less than a minute the car was opened. She hugged the man and through her tears she said, "Thank you so much! You are a very nice man."

The man replied, "Lady, I am not a nice man. I just got out of prison today. I was in prison for car theft and have only been out for about an hour."

The woman hugged the man again and with sobbing tears cried out loud, "Oh, Thank you God! You even sent me a professional!"

Today is Pentecost. What really happened on the Day of Pentecost? Few events in Scripture have generated more confusion, more debate, and more misunderstanding than the Day of Pentecost. What exactly happened? What was the significance of the wind and the fire? What is the difference between the baptism and the filling of the Holy Spirit, and which one are believers commanded to pursue today?

Jesus has risen from the dead, and spent forty days talking and training His apostles and other disciples of what He wanted them to do in planning the New Testament Church there in Jerusalem! He ascended to heaven, and left the Holy Spirit to indwell and fill each believer in the Lord! And now it's been fifty days since Jesus rose from the dead, and this is the Day of Pentecost, which was one of the Jewish holidays that they celebrated to remember how God brought them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land! The official start of the Church, the birthday of the church, will be on this day. Happy Birthday Church! Now they will be given the gift to witness to the people who had gathered in Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost and these 120 will be able to spread the Gospel to all languages of the world and God gave them the ability to do so!

Verse 1: When the day of Pentecost had come, the apostles were all together in one place.

The church has been meeting continually in the upper room waiting on the Promise of the Father, which is the power of the Holy Spirit of God! They are praying and in one accord, basically they agree with each other! The church

where everyone gets along with everyone is in one accord, and God can do something in that church! Our prayer at Bethel Lutheran Church, Russell KY should always be "Lord, help us to stay in one accord," with no cliques or gossipers!

Pentecost was also called the Feast of Weeks. It was one of three major annual feasts, a festival of thanksgiving for the harvested crops. Jesus was crucified at Passover time, and he ascended 40 days after his resurrection. The Holy Spirit came 50 days after the resurrection, ten days after the ascension. Jews of many nations gathered in Jerusalem for this festival. Thus Peter's speech was given to an international audience, and it resulted in a worldwide harvest of new believers, the first converts to Christianity.

Verse 2 says: And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

While they were praying, great winds started to blow in the place, and it would have been like a tornado coming through the house! It produced a great sound that everyone could hear easily! They always say it sounds like a freight train roaring through and I remember the one that hit Wheelersburg in 1968. My family and I were all together in the basement and it sounded like a train roaring through our neighborhood. This was what Jesus had promised that He would send the Holy Spirit upon them. Just curious, what would it have sounded like since there were no freight trains in those days! Jesus is so powerful that it sounded like a mighty wind similar to the winds of a tornado coming through the room where they were assembled together!

Consider the wind for a moment. A gently whisper rustles leaves on the trees; a breeze lifts kites into the sky; a gale roars across an ocean, sending waves crashing against the shore. A puff of wind ignites a flame from a smoldering coal. A steady wind propels a windmill, generating power to light a house or run a water pump. Sailors harness the wind's power to carry their boat across the water. The wind blows unseen, yet we feel its presence and know its power. We see the wind only through what it does. We know the wind because of its effects. While we are able to use the wind's energy, unless you have a fan of some kind, you neither create it nor control it. All we can do is cooperate with it, or resist it.

Remember our Gospel from John, after the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to his disciples and breathes on them, telling them "Receive the Holy Spirit." Or to Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but

you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

This interplay between wind, spirit, and breath stretches clear back to the beginning of the creation story in Genesis. ‘The wind or spirit from God swept over the face of the waters.’ It’s this shared meaning that can draw us more deeply into the mystery of the Holy Spirit, as we reflect on how the Spirit continues to blow through us like the wind, inspiring us and calling us into a clearer vision of God’s love for the world.

Is it any wonder that the scriptures use the imagery of the wind to articulate the power and work of the Spirit of God? In Hebrew and Greek, the language of the scriptures, the same words can mean wind or spirit or breath, depending on how they are used.

Verse 3: Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.

With a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples. Tongues of fire appeared on their heads. The divine power of wind and flame, intertwined, ignites the disciples’ mission.

There had to have been an odd dynamic, being in a place they had called home, being in a place they had longed to get to, so they could finally be at home, and then feeling like a stranger. No one there with whom they grew up; no one who knew their nicknames from grade school. No one who even spoke their language, not the one they learned on the playgrounds and streets anyway.

Verse 4: All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

Then all of a sudden, each head turned, as each heard, each one of them, the language of his or her own heart, being spoken in this place that was supposed to be home to them, but wasn’t, not the way they had hoped it would be. And they turned with suddenly brighter eyes; they turned with a smile. They turned with some undefinable hope, to just because it was a familiar language, but because now this was the opportunity for everything to be perfect. This was now the dream of things as they’re supposed to be. This became the opportunity for home.

Possibly at this point the group left the house and went to the Temple.

This fire and wind were the Holy Spirit, descended upon them which gave them the supernatural ability to speak in languages that they did not know! It would be like one of us speaking Russian, German, and Spanish without ever studying it beforehand! The Holy Spirit gave them "utterance."

We could say that as the wind and fire touched each one on the head, it allowed them to speak supernaturally in previously unlearned languages very clearly! This is a great miracle and one that they will go out of the upper room and into the streets of Jerusalem and be able to spread the gospel to all the people that had come to worship God on the Day of Pentecost! Without this gift they would be limited to the Jews who spoke Aramaic and Greek, but now they are speaking languages from all around the world!

Why tongues of fire? Tongues symbolize speech and the communication of the gospel. Fire symbolizes God's purifying presence, which burns away the undesirable elements of our lives and sets our hearts aflame to ignite the lives of others. On Mount Sinai, God confirmed the validity of the Old Testament law with fire from heaven. At Pentecost, God confirmed the validity of the Holy Spirit's ministry by sending fire. At Mount Sinai, fire had come down on one place; at Pentecost, fire came down on many believers, symbolizing that God's presence is now available to all who believe in him.

God made his presence known to this group of believers in a spectacular way-violent wind, fire, and his Holy Spirit. Would you like God to reveal himself to you in such recognizable ways? He may do so, but be wary of forcing your expectations on God. In 1Kings 19:10-13, Elijah also needed a message from God. There was a great wind, then an earthquake, and finally a fire. But God's message came in a "gentle whisper." God may use dramatic methods to work in your life, or he may speak in gentle whispers. Wait patiently and always listen.

Verse 5: Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem.

There were people who came to Jerusalem from every nation known to man, and God gave these 120 the ability to witness to them in their native tongues! And when it was all said and done 3,000 were saved and added to the Church of Jesus Christ, all because of the power of the Holy Spirit of God giving them the ability to speak in unlearned languages! This was not a bunch of gibberish, but they

spoke properly in the language of the people who were visiting Jerusalem! These were "devout" men.

We could say that there were many dedicated people there from all parts of the world who followed Judaism, or the religion of the Jews!

In verse 6: And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

A great crowd gathered from all these people when they heard them speaking in their own languages, and they came together to hear what was being said! These religious people followed the religion of the Old Testament, but now God was revealing to them the fulfillment of the Old Testament which is Jesus Christ our Lord! There was a big noise that was occurring that drew everyone's attention to these Christians who had the gift of tongues to share the Gospel to people with different languages! They did not understand it because it was a miracle of God, and His ways are higher than our ways! Think about this! All the languages known to man were spoken so that all the people who had gathered could hear the Gospel in their native tongue and be saved! What a way to start, for this was the start of the New Testament church!

The big crowd from all over the world realized that these men and women were from Galilee and yet they were speaking languages from all the dialects of the world! What an amazing feat! Folks, God will do whatever He needs to do to get the Gospel to everyone who is in need of the Gospel.

Verse 8: And how is it that we hear each of us, in our own native language?

They are baffled and confused as to how they were hearing the Gospel in their own language from people who had never studied their languages! God works all kinds of miracles to spread the gospel, using many languages as he calls all kinds of people to become his followers.

Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, the list goes on. There are eighteen different groups of people mentioned here that heard the Gospel of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in their own language and they are puzzled and perplexed on how this is happening! The good news is the Gospel of Christ, and now they all are hearing it in their own language!

Some of the people mistook what was happening and said the people who were speaking the different languages were drunk, but that was not the case! ”But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, ‘Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say, Indeed, these are not drunk as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning!’” They were controlled and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit of God, and certainly not with alcohol! Alcohol has a way of controlling a person and giving them a false spirit of boldness! But that is as far as it goes! But the Power of the Holy Spirit does give you a true sense of boldness and power, and He will help you to witness to those around you! You may be scared to tell someone about Jesus, but you will not be alone! The Holy Spirit will help you witness with boldness and help you to know what to say!

Thank God He will fill us with His power and strength at 6:00 AM, or 9:00 AM, or 3:00 PM, or 7:00 PM. He is not bound with time, for you can be filled with the Holy Spirit of God at any time of any day! Ask God to fill you and confess and forsake any sin that you have committed, and you will be blessed and forgiven of God, and He will use you as an instrument of His power and grace!

Amen!

"YOU'RE NOT SIMPLE AND NEITHER IS GOD"

Message for *"The Holy Trinity"* Sunday

From Pastor Norman Staker

May 31, 2026

GENESIS 1:1-2,4A ** 2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-13 ** MATTHEW 28:16-20



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



God is a God of action. The Holy Trinity is all about action: doing, loving, teaching, and saving.

A family was sitting in church one Sunday morning. The little brother was fidgety and whiny. His big sister looked at him and said, “why don’t you sit still and be quiet?” “Because church is boring”, he said. The big sister looked at him and said, “church is supposed to be boring.”

There are certainly some misconceptions about the church. It is loved by so many; it's also despised by many (due to scandal and abuse and other reasons), and a large portion of society is simply indifferent towards the church.

I want to look at a passage in Scripture from the book of Matthew. In Matthew 16: 13-18, Jesus says some straightforward truths regarding the church. This passage has been a controversial passage. The debate has been over what Jesus meant when he told Peter "on this rock I will build my church." 'Rock' was more likely a name given as a promise of what he was to become not for what he was. He became a man of strength. The rock could mean, Peter himself, the faith of Peter, the confession of Peter, Christ himself or a combination of factors. We have to remember that the New Testament is about Jesus and not Peter. There could be a church without Peter but not without Christ. Peter is neither the head nor the foundation of the church. Jesus founded it and it stands or falls with him, and he is yet its living Lord and head.

Look at these lessons from Matthew: the church is not a building.

Church is not somewhere we go, it's not something we go to; it is what we are. Jesus used the Greek word "ekklesia" This word means "a gathering of people; a called out people." He meant the church is the people of God called out by Him. Jesus did not die for a building but he did die for people. Yet, you go to some churches and it seems the focus is not on people but on great buildings...on building structures. The focus of many churches is how extravagant and how big can we build buildings. Well, God is more interested in building up people. Now, I'm not against buildings but we can't forget that the church is people. Yes, I want our church to grow. I want this place to be packed—but we better make sure we're building people up.

So, the church is not a building. Secondly, the church is a new community.

You ever thought about the people who made up the first church? Jesus' disciples. Those guys weren't superheroes. Remember when Jesus was arrested? What did all of his disciples do? They ran! After Jesus rose from the grave and went back into heaven. He sent his Holy Spirit down and empowered God's people. Those early followers were all together and when the presence of God came on them, they began to speak in foreign languages.

Look at Acts 2: Jesus was preaching a message after being empowered by God's presence. "Cut to the quick, those who were there listening asked Peter and the

other apostles, “Brothers! Brothers! So now what do we do? Peter said, “Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is targeted to you and your children, but also to all who are far away—whomever, in fact our Master God invites!”

Whom did the Lord invite? The blind, the beggar, the prostitute. Why? The healthy don’t need a doctor but the sick do! This new community is made up of sinners bought by Jesus Christ himself! It is so dear to Jesus that he died for the church.

This new community was lost but now found. Separated yet brought near. An enemy of God but now a friend. Dead in their sins and now alive with Christ.

There is the universal community (every believer belongs to one another). There is also the local community of believers. In local churches. Many people often ask, “why can’t we all just be one big church?” Because it takes many different kinds of churches to reach many different kinds of people. Bottom line, we belong to one another and need to act like it. We are to live in community. We aren’t just to go to the same place of worship. We are to belong. We have common interests. We are to share with one another. Some of us don’t want any part of living in community. You are missing out on one of the reasons God created you.

The church belongs to God. In verse 18 of our text today, Jesus said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

Look at the words “My church..” I do not want to overstate this point but the church belongs to Jesus.

By his power, the church will triumph,

The church is victorious! Jesus has already declared that the church will finish its purpose. Not even death will be able to stop it! That was proven later when Jesus died. Many of the first followers of Jesus were martyred for their faith. Many are being persecuted and killed for their faith even now!

You won’t be able to snuff out the church. Jesus died for the church and he is coming back for his “ekklesia,” his called people. It will be victorious; it will succeed.

Let's be honest though...sometimes it seems like we aren't going to finish what was started. Sometimes things in the church can seem messy and unorganized. People are looking for the perfect church; they won't find it because there is no perfect church. And even if there was, as soon as you and I would walk in, it would become imperfect. Church is not a club for perfect people, it's imperfect, sometimes unpredictable, a cross section of life, and the Holy Spirit uses it to draw lost sheep home to the Father."

If this is true, then...the church must fulfill its purpose. Each local church must fulfill its purpose.

A summary of the church's purpose is found in two key scriptures:

The Great Commandment—"Love the Lord your God with all your mind with all your heart and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.

And our text today, called the Great Commission—"Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

Today on Trinity Sunday, we gather to celebrate the Holy Trinity of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In light of that, we'll be using the Athanasian Creed instead of the Nicene or Apostles' Creeds.

The concept of the Trinity is a profound mystery that theologians have grappled with for centuries.

While we may not fully understand it, we must believe by faith what God has revealed to us because His word is truth.

Through progressive revelation, God revealed more about the Triune nature of Himself throughout the writing of the Bible over 1,500 years. From the earliest verses of Genesis to the closing words of Revelation, we see glimpses of the Trinity's presence and activity.

The Old Testament hints at it, and the New Testament reveals it more clearly, culminating in the coming of Jesus, the Messiah.

In the Bible, we see examples that clearly teach the truth of the co-existence of the Trinity. For example, in Matthew 3: 16-17: After His baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on Him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, who brings me great joy.”

This interaction between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is just one glimpse of the Trinity’s existence, just one example of where the Bible clearly teaches the truth of the co-existence of the Trinity.

Belief in the Trinity is essential to our faith, even if we do not fully understand the complexity of the Trinity.

The Trinity - The Triune nature of God is difficult for us to comprehend - It is a mystery.

There are many mysteries in life that we accept without fully understanding.

We take medication without comprehending how it works or understanding its chemical composition;

we use a microwave without knowing its inner workings and drive cars without understanding the intricacies of the engine.

However, the Trinity is not a mystery we can overlook because, without it, we lose the truth and power of the Gospel.

We believe in the truth of the Trinity by faith, even though there are aspects of God we cannot fully grasp.

We may not fully understand the mystery of the Trinity yet we must believe by faith what God has revealed to us because His word is truth.

Over the centuries, theologians have tried to understand and explain the nature of the Trinity.

St Augustine spent almost thirty years of his life writing a fifteen-volume work called “About the Trinity.”

15 volumes! Would you like me to preach on each one because a single sermon is not enough to explore every aspect of the Trinity but I hope that what I've said will benefit you.

The Bible teaches us that by our nature, we are sinful and deserving of God's wrath.

But Jesus, the Son, came to Earth to take the punishment for our sins upon Himself.

Through faith in Jesus, He imputes His righteousness to all who believe, making reconciliation with the Father possible.

We know because of what Jesus did at the Cross, reconciliation with God is possible.

After His resurrection, Jesus ascended into Heaven, and the Holy Spirit came to empower His disciples to live for God's honor and glory.

Each person of the Trinity plays a role in our redemption. Without the Trinity, there would be no salvation and no possibility of a restored relationship with God.

But how can God exist as three distinct persons yet still be one God?

The term "Trinity" is not found in the Bible, but the Triune Nature of God is taught and demonstrated.

Earlier in Matthew 3, we witness the Father speaking, the Son being baptized, and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove.

All three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit together at the Baptism of Jesus.

All three co-exist and are co-eternal.

While we may grasp the concept of the Trinity, we can never fully understand it – three persons in one God, each fully God.

I am so thankful that although the Trinity is central to our Christian faith, I and we do not have to fully understand the mystery of the Trinity to believe in God and be in a relationship with Him.

My God is not only the God who created the universe, but my God became human; my God became Jesus Christ who died on a cross and rose again.

We think of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as only proper names, static nouns if you will, just helpful labels. But Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are full of doing, loving, and teaching. God is a God of action. God created. God sent Jesus to save. Jesus lived, served, died, and rose. God's Holy Spirit has been creating since the beginning of time and now comes to create the Christian community by bringing Christ to the world.

We are called to be part of the Spirit's work. We, you and I, all become the voice, hands, and feet of the good news. Our text from Matthew 28: 19: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. We are called to go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching. With all due respect to our teachers here, will we be good teachers when it comes to teaching and baptizing. Today, Holy Trinity Sunday is a good day to think about what we are doing to bring God's love, forgiveness, understanding, and faith to others, and what we are doing to nurture it in our own lives. Our words and actions teach. Again, I raise the question: will we be good teachers or not?

Amen!!



“OUR GOD THE PATRON OF LOST CAUSES”

Message for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

June 7, 2026

HOSEA 5:15-6:6 * ROMANS 4: 13-25 * MATTHEW 9:9-13, 18-26

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



As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means."

How would you feel if today, since we'll be eating in a little while, if Jesus showed up with a really rough looking bunch of men and women, say some Hell's Angels and a few recently released murderers and rapists from prison? Would you try to find the nearest exit door to get out as soon as you could? Remember, Jesus came to meet people where they were."

A tax collector named Matthew accepts Jesus' invitation to become his disciple. There's no talk of money, of salary, of having control of the Temple treasury, just two words, "Follow me," Matthew got up and followed Jesus. Matthew is a tax collector or he was a tax collector and he can be a rough collector but if you give him what he wants, you won't have any problems with his IRS, his Infernal Robbery Service! So you're at a dinner celebrating his acceptance and Jesus makes an important statement about the difference between a Pharisee and a disciple.

Matthew inserts a story about his own call to be a disciple of Jesus and what happened at a dinner he gave for Jesus and his other disciples. When certain Pharisees got wind of the dinner, they criticized Jesus for hanging out with sinners and tax collectors, that is, disreputable people. Ok, so maybe we aren't disreputable people but all of us are sinners; how would the Pharisees handle us?

All three Synoptic gospels have a story about the call of the tax collector. Mark and Luke call him "Levi;" only Matthew identifies him as "Matthew," traditionally considered the author of this gospel.

Jesus encountered Matthew while he was at work, in his booth, collecting taxes. As with fishermen, Jesus calls his disciples while they are at work, living their routine lives. The taxes in question would be customs duties on goods passing through on the great road from Syria to Egypt or possibly at a toll booth near the lake on goods coming across the lake. Tax collectors were typically among the most hated of people, especially in Palestine.

In the Roman system and Rome occupied Palestine at this time, the office of tax collection was awarded to the highest bidder. The winner of this right would employ others to do the actual work of collecting taxes. Thus, Matthew might well have been a middle level employee, rather than a rich man in his own right. However, he and any tax collector could become rich through extortion. It was permissible to charge a certain amount over and above the tax required in order to receive compensation. That's how the tax collector got paid. The more the tax collectors collected, the more they were hated, and the more they were hated, the more they collected. Tax collectors had three strikes against them even before they came to bat.

Jesus said to him, "Follow me." There is no mention of a previous conversation and no hint that Jesus and Matthew had met before. The emphasis here is not on the conditions that led Matthew to accept, but on his unconditional acceptance. Matthew left a whole way of life in order to follow Jesus. He may well have been wealthy, but perhaps only on his way to wealth. Nonetheless, he left it all and followed Jesus. Fishermen might and did, return to their former occupation, but not tax collectors. Rome would not hire him again, should he have changed his mind and tried to return. This was an irrevocable commitment, one made without knowing the "benefit package."

Many tax collectors and sinners came: This note sets up the scenario for Jesus' pronouncement regarding whom he came for. One would not expect the guest list

for a party held to honor a religious teacher to be replete with sinners and tax collectors but that is just what happened. These were social outcasts.

In verse eleven, “When the Pharisees saw this,” the Pharisees would not have been at the dinner, but like many “reputable,” and “respectable,” people, they were nosy. They liked to observe everyone else living their lives, perhaps out of jealousy that their own lives were so dull, thanks to their religion. Can a person, namely a Pharisee, be so bored with being ‘perfect’ that they want to sin? Their entering the house is highly unlikely, however, given their fear of becoming “unclean,” themselves by virtue of close association with the unclean. Matthew is probably telling us what happened afterwards, when they heard about it through the gossip mill.

The Pharisees would have considered themselves among the “well,” and the tax collectors and sinners among the “sick.” Jesus left that to them, but he was saying he came to meet people where they were and help them to get to where they should be. He did not come to frown on, to condemn, to isolate or to shame those in need of salvation, nor did he come to side with the gloaters, the smug, the arrogant.

Oh, the life of a Pharisee! They worked so hard to get it right with God, and seemed to get it all wrong. They had rules and regulations. They knew when to come to the temple, how to behave there. They knew how everyone else was to behave. They knew who was good enough to be there and who wasn’t. The life of the temple was the center of their lives. This was, no doubt, a great sacrifice but, “Hey, who else would do it?” There was all this about clean and unclean. They knew about duty; they wrote the laws; they enforced them because after all, God must be concerned with the details of ritual and ceremony, looking to blast all those who faltered. The task was tough but they were up to the challenge.

Then along comes Jesus. He breaks all the rules, muddies the water between righteous and unrighteous, even between clean and unclean. He eats with sinners, enjoys the company of the unclean, heals indiscriminately. And now he has invited himself to the house of Matthew, the tax collector. There was no one lower on the scale than a Jew who would sell out to the Romans collecting taxes from his own kind. But Jesus came to their kind. Jesus said, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” The biggest stumbling block for the Pharisees was that they had convinced themselves that they were the righteous and were miserable enough to prove it. They had the calluses on their knees, they knew the laws and kept them, they had the scorecards to prove it. They had made the appropriate sacrifice.

When Luther joined the monastery he could not accept himself nor could he find peace among his fellow monks. In the monastery Luther struggled to maintain the highest standards of piety, morality and self-discipline. His own memoirs recount that he lived in constant fear of the righteousness of God. For Luther, God's righteousness was modeled after human righteousness. Luther thought that God also was struggling to maintain the standards and to punish all who failed to live up to the rules. Luther joined a club with high standards, but he did not want to be a member of a club that would accept people like him as members.

Luther's great discovery came in his personal struggle reading Scripture. The righteousness of God was not God's wrathful eye and avenging sword waiting to execute all the objects of his wrath. God's righteousness is found in Jesus' words today, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Luther discovered the righteousness of God as grace, mercy, and loving-kindness. For Luther the gift of God's love requires us to humbly join a club that accepts people like us as members.

We meet a woman like that this morning.

We know about her because she comes to Jesus.

There is something wrong. This is not how she wants it to be. She doesn't want us or anyone else to know about her. She wants to keep it a secret.

And no wonder.

Life was a total embarrassment for this afflicted woman. She had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. That is a polite way of saying her period never stopped. Ever!

This would be a hardship for any woman today, but it was far worse for a Jewish woman in the ancient world. During her cycle, a woman was unclean; no, unclean did not mean dirty, even though it sounds dirty. Unclean meant you couldn't worship; you couldn't touch another person; and all your bedding and every chair you sat in had to be ritually purified and until it was purified, it was off limits to anyone.

Imagine now this woman is living in a single room house with her husband and family. The house would be about the size of most of our living rooms. She had to have her own bed, she could not sleep with her husband, she had to have her own

place to sit. It would have been forbidden for her children to sit there. She would have to go through the humiliation of scolding her children if they came near her seat. She would hear their sorrowful protests, ‘Why momma?’

Imagine every time she left the house, having to be prepared for the flow of blood. With the primitive hygienic methods of the day, she probably seldom ventured out into the daylight.

The gospels of Mark and Luke also tell the story of this unfortunate, sad woman. In them, we read that the woman had visited every doctor and specialist in the region. Not only could none of those doctors help her, she had bankrupted her family in the effort to be healed.

Here are some cures for menstrual problems from the ancient world and most of them are rather crude; the safest, if that’s the right word, was a dressing with a mixture of chopped onions, mash and pine sawdust; she must eat fresh donkey liver.

She comes to Jesus in secret. She has to. She has hopes from what she’s heard that if she comes into contact with him, she will be healed by his power.

Do you see her problem? She cannot touch a man in public. Jesus is walking by with his disciples so he’s surrounded by men. Jesus is surrounded also by the crowd who would have mostly all been men too. “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.”

She fights her way through this crowd that surrounds Jesus and succeeds and touches his garment. Jesus turned and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well.” He felt some power escaping him. And the woman was made well from that moment.

She has broken every convention, she has violated God’s law in the Bible, arguably she has interfered with the spiritual life of any disciple she may have touched as well as any man in the crowd touched by her.

She deserved a searing reprimand and scolding from Jesus.

What she got was health and wholeness. Her bleeding stopped.

She deserved a stern tongue lashing (some men would have beat her like a dog) what she heard was: “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.”

Doctors could not cure her. All the money she had could not cure her. The priests could not cure her.

Only one person in the whole world could give this woman the thing she yearned for. Jesus Christ.

He did not give her pills to take. He did not put her on the cold stainless steel examination table.

He did not do a biopsy. He did not order an MRI. By her touching him, she was healed.

Jarius comes to Jesus and pleads with Jesus to save his daughter. Mark and Luke record that his daughter was near death. Matthew writes that Jarius’ daughter was already dead. It was a hopeless situation that drove Jarius to Jesus. This situation forced Jarius to swallow his pride, as a leader of the synagogue, and approach a man whose ministry and teaching he opposed. Jesus orders the noisy group of people to leave the little girl alone because ‘she is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him. Jesus went in and took her by the hand and the girl got up. The power of Jesus if we but trust Him.

The young daughter of Jarius was raised from the dead. Hopeless situations were turned into occasions for celebration because Jesus entered the situation and touched lives.

We face hopeless situations; times when we can only look to Jesus—to his love and grace.

There are times when God does not answer our prayers immediately.

It may be helpful to us, when we are in hopeless situations, to have a VCR mentality. One sports addict tapes all the games, but instead of watching them from the beginning, he watches the final score. If his team wins, he rewinds the tape, grabs a bag of popcorn and sits down to enjoy the action. He doesn’t worry if his team gets behind or makes mistakes because he knows that they were victorious in the end. In a similar manner, we can look to the final victory of Jesus

on the cross. We don't need to worry because we know the end of the story. We can rest in the love and grace of Jesus.

Let us take some time to bring the hopeless situations and areas of our lives where we need to be healed to Jesus and ask for his healing touch in our lives.

Amen

“SHAKE OFF THE DUST”

Message for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

June 14, 2026

EXODUS 19: 2-8A ❄ ROMANS 5: 1-8 ❄ MATTHEW 9: 35-10:8 (9-23)

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

 Have you ever sat down at a table trying to talk to someone and found that you're losing the battle with their cellular device. You're trying to look into their eyes, but their eyes keep dipping down to glance at the little screen. You're trying to talk about reality, but everything in their body is really attending to this virtual reality that's wooing them with differently toned beeping noises at odd intervals.

Is it me, you're asking yourself? Am I too boring, too threatening, too intense, too in-your-face, too demanding, just too much for you? Maybe the problem is that that little electronic device offers you a future of texted assignments or emailed future plans, or You-Tubed funny moments or twittered allegations, a whole fantasy world of unaccountable possibility and non-material alternatives. But I, sitting here in front of you, offer you simple, prosaic, present-tense reality, and no escape hatch.

And that overwhelming tsunami of reality is what [encountering] God feels like. Before we get too self-righteous and resentful about the colleagues, friends or family members who seem increasingly addicted to a life of distraction and allergic to being present face to face with us, just wait a moment. That's what we're all like before God. We're all fiddling and fantasizing and distracting and avoiding eye contact and pretending to be tired and looking bored and being addicted to elsewhere.

God is the one who is longing to look into our eyes. We are the ones who fidget and slouch and find a hundred ways of asking if we can get down from the table. That's what it means to be indifferent. Indifference is saying, "Can I think about something else, please?"

This is the reaction God gets from us, all of us, almost every second of every day. And if you're going to join in the mission of God, this is the reaction you're going to need to get used to. When Jesus sends out his apostles, he says, "As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town."

There are two verses in our texts for today that I would like to call to your attention. The first is in our lesson from Romans which says: "But God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." and the other verse is found in our gospel lesson saying: "When he (Jesus) saw the crowds, "He had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

These two verses, I feel, sum up for us the meaning of the gospel message, the Good News of Jesus Christ. God showed his love for us while we were still sinners, or enemies of God, and Jesus had compassion for the people. But what does that mean?? God loves us and Jesus had compassion? These two words often times have a vague and mysterious meaning. What does it mean to love?? What does it mean to have compassion??

In Roget's Thesaurus, which is a book of synonyms and antonyms, the author lists many words which describe or expand on the meaning of love and compassion. These words are, sympathy, charity, mercy, generosity, pity, and we could go on and on. And each of these words can be described with many others. The list is endless. But that still doesn't get us to the meaning, to the heart of the matter, what does it mean that God loves us, what does it mean that Jesus had compassion? Maybe scripture might help, how about John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that who so ever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

"Yes, that verse speaks about God's love for us, but does it describe it? Can we see love in that verse? Yes and no. Yes we can see love because God's love is visible only through Christ. No, we cannot see love, because we do not see the actions of Christ. The only true way to see God's love, to describe God's love is to see Christ. Christ is God's love incarnate, or God's love made real in this world. So, as we look through the New Testament, as we look for descriptions of what it means that God loves us, we need to look at the actions of Christ.

When Christ had compassion on the crowds, He was in a sense, in all reality, showing the people, showing us what it means that God loves us. As He healed, as He forgave sins, as He brought people together, as He made especially women feel part of God's created order, He showed us and them God's love.

Jesus is the one who shows us very dramatically what God's love is like. It is a forgiving, accepting, caring, merciful, compassionate love. It is a love which allowed God's only son to be killed on a cross so that you and I might have eternal life. It is a love which was willing to sacrifice God's son so that reconciliation might happen on this earth. "While we still were sinners, Christ died for us." While we still were sinners, Christ reconciled God the Father with the creation.

So, if one is to describe God's love, it can be described in the action, words and deeds of Christ. It can be called a reconciling love, a love which brings people together. It is a love which forgives; it is a love which is willing to sacrifice; it is a love which is willing to give instead of take.

That love of God is seen through Christ and the cross, but at the same time, the love of Christ is seen today not only through the actions, words and deeds of Christ in the Bible, but through the actions of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of people today. Paul says very clearly, that you and I are like "little Christ's" out in the world. People see Christ today through us, through you and me. Paul says in Romans 12:9: "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honor."

Paul says further in another of his letters, to the Ephesians chapter 5: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Paul says further, "for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, walk as children of light,"

As you can tell, you and I are to be little Christ's in this world. We are to be Christ like, loving one another as Christ has loved us. We are to be free with our love, expressive with our love; we are to be generous with our love toward our neighbor.

I would like to tell you a story which sums up for me this love of God through Christ and then my love for my neighbor. It is in the experiences of these stories, that Christ becomes alive for the individual. I hope and pray that as you listen, Christ will come alive for you and then you in His love will become alive for your

neighbor. Our faith is not static, but alive and expressive. As you listen to the story, decide which character you are. Who are you in this story??

"A group of men were traveling across the desert. They were total strangers when they started, some were well to do business men, others were common working men, and one was a criminal, a thief. This band of men traveled together across the hot desert sand. They encountered more wind storms than they anticipated, so their food, their water began to run low. They wore woolen hoods to keep the hot, biting sand from stinging their faces as they traveled. As they traveled, a man noticed that one was missing, the one called Jasmin. They looked around in the driving wind storm, but all they could see was his empty camel. No rider. The men thought it wasn't worth going back to look for Jasmin since he was the thief among them. He wasn't worth saving. But, Lawrence, a wealthy business man, a man who had a lot to lose risked leaving the group to go back to look for Jasmin. Lawrence traced over their route, and finally found Jasmin, half mad with heat and thirst. He shared what little water and food he had, placed him on his own camel, and led the camel forward once more. They traveled on and on until they reached the group. When they arrived, all were surprised they had made it. They were bewildered that Lawrence, the rich man, would risk his life for a thief, a crook. They marveled at his love, his respect for a human life.

Do you see yourself in this story?? I do, I am Jasmin. In my relationship with God I am the criminal, I am the outcast, I am the sinner. I am the enemy of God. But Paul says, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son." You and I are Jasmin, having broken God's laws, having become lost in the storms of life and failed to live according to God's commandments. But all is not lost, Christ is Lawrence. Christ saves the lost. Christ finds the lost. Paul says, "much more, now that we are reconciled shall we be saved by Jesus' life."

Folks, we are not perfect. We need the love of God, the transforming love of God in our lives. If you and I were not or are not at one point or another a pack of wolves, if we did not have a sense of our own sinfulness, then, then, you do not need Jesus Christ; you do not need to be here; you do not need to come and eat and drink this morning; you do not need the cross; you can get up and leave right now because there is nothing here for you.

But in you sense you can be and at times are that pack of wolves in your lives, if you treat people badly, if you reject God, if you feel life is not as perfect as you would like it, then, you are in the right spot, because here transformation takes place; here lives are changed; here you and I encounter God and Christ through the

Holy Spirit. Here you and I have a personal relationship with Christ through the Word, through the Sacraments, through fellowship with each other. Here hurts are healed, here lives are made whole, here fellowship and love are present.

Lutherans have far too often been accused of being stuffed shirts, non expressive in our faith. But I think Lutheranism is broad enough to allow for expression, to allow for joy, to allow emotion of faith to be expressed. I have said many times in other churches, but probably not here yet, that if someone would shout an amen, or praise the Lord, or alleluia during one of my sermons, there is a gentleman from St Paul who says Hallelujah after I say 'He is Risen' and I'm okay with that. I would know that maybe someone was listening, that someone was interested, that everyone was not asleep. There is a power present here that means something; it means business is not usual. Life can be changed. People can be renewed.

All of us at one time or another can relate to the hurt, the pain, the abandonment that some people feel. If we are honest with ourselves, we have all been there.

Folks, I hope and pray that does not ever happen here, because all of us have someone, I hope we have Christ, and we have Christ incarnate here in the church. If we do not, then there is something wrong with the church and its members.

Here is where the power of Christ is present. Here is where the compassion of the people of God should be present. Here is where love should abound for each other. Here is where we should and do feel free to express that love for Christ and love for neighbor. Here is where deeds of mercy and love should begin and then spread out across the land. But if we cannot love each other here in this particular family of God, then I do not know where else that love can be felt.

With the exception of St John who is at least 90-95 % family by blood, I like to think of the church as a family and in that family, each of us gives of ourselves, receives from others and is willing to sacrifice for another. In that way we express Christ's love for us and we become little Christ's for one another.

It's hard to imagine anyone responding to Jesus with indifference. But of course they did. Feel the venom in the words of Revelation toward the church in Laodicea: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." What does Jesus tell us to do?

Jesus says, "Shake the dust off your feet."

Don't judge them -- that's God's job, not yours, and only God knows why they're so distracted or so passive or so frustrating or so silent. Shake the dust off your feet.

Don't go on a self-righteous rant that assumes you're a perfect embodiment of the gospel and anyone who doesn't repent and be baptized this instant must be stupid. Shake the dust off your feet.

Jesus faced indifference. He said we would face indifference. Don't be surprised; don't be devastated; don't be bitter. Shake the dust off your feet.

Isn't this why pastors and missionaries burn out? Because we offer wave upon wave of effort and hope and energy, and find ourselves met with indifference and passive aggression and a shrug of the shoulders that says, "Whatever." Because we can't get over the indifference.

What is dust? Dust is dead skin. Dust is dry earth. Remember what God says to Adam in Genesis chapter 3? "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." It's what we say to each other on Ash Wednesday. Dust and ashes. Dust is death.

You made anything out of dust and ashes lately? 'Course you haven't. Can't be done.

God made anything out of dust and ashes lately? 'Course God has. Does it all the time.

Shake the dust off your feet.

By shaking the dust, you're letting God do what only God can do. Shaking dust isn't sadly washing your hands of failure or angrily tossing aside a broken project. Shaking dust is a prayer that God will do a miracle by making beauty arise from ashes and making life come from the dust of the earth. You have prepared the way of the Lord; that's all you can do. Now, pray that all people will see the salvation of our God.

Shake the dust and see the glory of what God alone can do.

AMEN!

“HAPPY FATHERS’ DAY”

Message for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staler

June 21, 2026

JEREMIAH 20: 7-13 ** ROMANS 6: 1B-11 ** MATTHEW 10: 24-39

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



For those of you who came this morning thinking you were going to hear a sermon about dear ol’ dad, well, not quite.

I do want to wish all of those of you who are fathers a Happy Father’s Day and to those of you who are sons and daughters, my hope for you is that you have a father as loving as mine.

My dad would have been 110 years old this coming September 17th. I still think of him often and my fondest memories of him are of times that he would take us to a Reds’ game at the old Crosley Field or rabbit hunting but more importantly, sitting in church.

I’ve heard people say that when they were a kid, they had a drug problem; they were drug to church whenever the doors were open. That was not the case with the five of us kids. When we attended church, as I was growing up, which was every Sunday, we attended as a family. Like most good, normal Lutherans, we had our own special pew, one that comfortably fit the seven of us, mom, dad, my 2 brothers, my 2 sisters and me. Course we were a lot smaller then. Very seldom did my 2 brothers and I actually sit next to each other. Usually, for the sake of the pastor and those around us, my brothers would be at one end, I at the other.....not that we were bad, it was just one of those “lead us not into temptation” things that my parents took very seriously.

My dad didn’t want to have to discipline us during church, because he was there for a reason. He was there to give thanks to God and to listen to the sermon, to

listen to the Word of God.

Now, can I admit something here that I don't think a lot of pastors admit?

A lot of times, I couldn't understand why my dad wanted to listen so closely, so intently.

It was the same old story. Week after week, month after month, year after year. God loves us! He truly loves us. Now, all I can say is, "Thank God!"

Thank God that the story never changes. Thank God that His love for us continues, even when we lose sight of Him. Thank God that His faith remains strong, even when we our faith weakens.

Do you ever feel like Father's Day gets the short end of the stick? Fewer people celebrate it, less money is spent on it, and back in the day, before cell phones, more calls were made collect on Father's Day than on any other holiday. But regardless of how the world treats it, fatherhood is one of the most sacred and significant callings God has ever given a man.

Father's Day isn't nearly as big as Mother's Day. The florist isn't overworked, card sales aren't nearly as profitable, restaurants will be half-filled, and church attendance pales in comparison.

On Mother's Day pastors all across America praise Mom for her sacrifices, and everybody weeps. But on Father's Day we talk about absentee fathers and deadbeat dads, statistics are recited, and we lay on the guilt for not being there for the kids. If you look up the word "father" in the dictionary, it occurs just before the word "fatigue," and just after the word, "fathead!"

I know many of your fathers are in heaven, as mine is, and I know today as you worship that you bless their memory and you thank God for them. You will always be blessed with what they left you and the heritage that they left in your life.

Happy Father's Day! We LOVE our dads here and thank God for them! It's weird sometimes but it seems to me that Mother's Day is so big, but Father's Day is so small. This seems to be true in the church as well. And while, in no way, do I want to diminish Mother's Day and its importance, I also want Father's Day to be an important day in the life of our church.

If you ask mom what she wants for Mothers Day, she wants the family to come to church with her. If you ask dad what he wants, he wants to spend some time on the lake, the golf course, or at the ballgame. I want that to change!

I want to give dads an excuse to want to come to church on Father's Day. I want you to know that God loves you just the way you are, but He loves you too much to leave you that way!

I know this isn't specific to Father's Day, but I'm learning that being a dad is a huge job! You have these little things called children and you are completely responsible for their well-being; physical, emotional, mental, psychological, social and most of all, spiritual!

Something so simple yet so true, is the statement that almost any man can father a child, but it takes a real man to be a dad.

I know some men who have no children of their own but they are more of a father than others who have many children. Being a dad is not about genetics as much as it is about relationships.

The presence of a father in the home is vastly important to the development and future of the child.

Drawing from Proverbs 17:6, "The glory of children is their fathers", one author builds a pastoral, heartfelt message around four things every father is called to give his children: unconditional love and support, encouragement and affirmation, time and presence, and provision. He reminds dads that their children are watching them far more closely than they realize. As one little girl put it when asked to draw a picture of Jesus: "I really don't know what Jesus looks like, so I just draw my daddy." That single moment captures the entire weight of the sermon.

This is the kind of Father's Day message that doesn't pile guilt on dads; it lifts them up, calls them higher, and sends them home with a renewed sense of the glory and privilege of fatherhood.

I want us to consider some things about the best Father of all.

As we study chapter 10 of the gospel of Matthew, we are reminded that God's love wins. God's love wins, always. Think about that, always! We have a Father in heaven who gave us His Son, Jesus Christ, as a gift of love, a gift of life.

Our Father's gift conquers sin; it conquers death; it conquers brokenness and separation. Our Father's gift overcomes the world and brings life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Jesus, God's gift, was crucified for our sins. He obeyed his Father and died a terrible, cruel, excruciatingly painful death on the cross. All the sins of all humanity were laid on him, not just a select few or chosen people but all the sins of all humanity, all of you, all of Bridges church members, all of St John, all of St Paul, all of the Episcopal church, all humanity, were laid on him as he suffered on that cross, and he was punished for each and every one of our sins as if he had been guilty of them all. He was crushed for our iniquities, he was wounded for our transgressions, he was punished for our sins; the chastisement that brought us peace fell on him. He was despised and afflicted, for our sakes. He, the innocent, suffered so that we, the guilty, might be set free. What a gift! What an ironic work of heaven for humanity!

Jesus' death is the heavenly gift and work of salvation for us. Jesus' resurrection is the proof that Jesus is the Savior, Son of God, and Lord of life.

Jesus died as our Savior and he rose to prove it and to be our Lord.

What a grand finale for the gospel, the good news of Jesus! Jesus, who was crucified, is risen! He fulfilled all that was written about him in the Old Testament scriptures, and now he rules from heaven as King of kings and Lord of lords.

You may ask, "What does this have to do with Father's Day and fathers today?" I'm glad you asked! It has all kinds of things to do with that.

First, think about God the Father's relationship with Jesus his Son.

Our Father in heaven has had big plans for Jesus his Son from before the beginning of time. Those plans have been revealed to us throughout the scriptures and Jesus has followed the Father's plans to the letter, even when it cost him his life. I propose to you that we have a Father/Son relationship here that is a great example of all Father and child relationships (or all parent/child relationships for that matter).

What if God the Father had modeled his Fathering after our modern concept of individuality and freedom of expression and self discovery and personal fulfillment? What might Jesus' life have looked like if that were the case? If Jesus

had only had his own personal will to follow, he would not have gone to the cross. He himself said, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; not MY will, but THY will be done." Whose will is Jesus following here? His own or his Father's? Whose plan is Jesus keeping?

Jesus didn't come here to fulfill himself, did he? Jesus came here as the only begotten Son of God who the Father said at his baptism, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased!" And at the mountain of transfiguration, "This is my beloved son, listen to Him!" You see, God the Father has entrusted all things to the Son, Jesus Christ. Why? Because Jesus is faithful as a Son! Jesus follows the will of the Father! Jesus loves his Father and is completely in submission to his Father and walks in perfect step with his Father's will. Jesus performs the plan. Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me." And whose will is that? It has to be the will of God the Father.

Secondly, the Father in heaven is perfect. He knows Jesus his Son perfectly and fully. He loves Jesus his only begotten Son and gives him all authority in heaven and on earth.

Think about this with me. What kind of parent/child relationship is imagined in the Bible? What kind of honor are children called to have for their parents? What kind of nurture and admonition are parents called to give to their children?

What the Bible shows us is that God not only had a plan for Jesus, God the heavenly Father has a plan for every one of us! God, the heavenly Father, wants every one of us to become His children and follow His plan for our lives. As Dads and yes, moms too, we need to know God and read his plan for our lives and walk in it first, so that we can help our children come to know the plan for their lives and walk in it too.

Our heavenly Father gave us the perfect gift! He gave us Jesus. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life! He reveals the Father's plan for us! If we father our children as God demonstrates for us, we will teach our children his plan for their lives and help them follow in it. We will show them how to walk in the plan by walking in it ourselves and calling on them to follow.

God's way is the very best. It is not always the easiest or the most thrilling, but it is the very highest and the very best.

Father's Day is a very special day. Our Fathers are special in so many ways. Too many ways to describe here today. We know too that not all fathers are the best at being a father.

This is Father's Day. I want to go on record saying that Dad's are critical to the raising of sons and daughters. I don't need to have that verified by Government studies. God knows that neither fathers nor mothers are handed an owner's manual or a quick start guide when they first become parents. They usually model what they learned from their parents. God provides priorities as what we are to say and what we are to do.

There is only one perfect father: Our Father in heaven. Unfortunately a bad experience with an earthly father can cause anger or resentment and it is difficult to transfer trust to the one who calls himself "Our Father." Now, I know that our earthly fathers are not perfect but you can help your son or daughter have self esteem, security, personal value.

Remember, we were made in the image of God. God is actually our Father! You therefore are to follow in your Father's footsteps and become co-creators to the world, to the air, the soil, the water, to the animals, to each other. You are to be a blessing for others, like God has done with us.

Children need your time. They need your example. They need to see you imitate Jesus. Happy Fathers' Day!

Amen.

“BATTLE YOUR HEART TO KEEP JESUS FIRST”

Message for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
From Pastor Norman Staker
June 28, 2026

JEREMIAH 28: 5-9 ** ROMANS 6: 12-23 ** MATTHEW 10: 40-42

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

“And whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous, and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple, truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Think for a moment how important it is to develop strong leadership to partner together in ministry. Take a moment and try to shake hands without someone else. It's very empty without someone else. Try to clap with only one hand. Try doing "the Wave" - you'll look pretty foolish. We need each other in ministry. "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens his friend."

Think about multiplication and how powerful it is. Take one penny today. If every day for a month you get one penny, you'll have less than a dollar. If the second day you double that penny, and keep on doubling, in a month you'll be a multi-millionaire.

I have taken the liberty of combining the last two verses from last week's Gospel text with the verses from this week's text for my sermon this week! Those of you who object to my doing that will have to take it up with the Bishop herself. In the meantime, let me just say thank you for welcoming me into your church home again today. I always feel very warmly welcomed. Thank you again!

In our Gospel text today, Jesus is speaking about the "life of burdens" that a Christian lives. He is talking about suffering and hardship.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his sister saying:

"It is good to learn early enough that suffering and God are not a contradiction but rather a unity, for the idea that God himself is suffering is one that has always been one of the most convincing teachings of Christianity. I think God is nearer to suffering than to happiness, and to find God in this way gives peace and rest and a strong and courageous heart." Think about it; do we cry out to God more when we're happy or when we're sad? I'm leaning toward the latter, when we're sad, when we're suffering.

We live a life which is filled with the reality of living in a sinful and less than perfect world. Jesus is speaking about what has come to be called, "a theology of the cross!" This theology says that through the brokenness of this world, through "crosses," life will be redeemed and renewed. Jesus is reminding the disciples and us that life is not easy. Living on this earth is very difficult. You and I will have "crosses" to bear. Life will not be easy. Living as a Christian, as a believer, in this world with the power of Satan to harness, to tempt, to drive one away from Christ means a life that is difficult.

Sometimes, I think, Satan works extra hard to drive those away who are the most faithful to Christ. It seems that Satan is alive and well especially in the church. Jesus knew that. He knew that Satan doesn't want us in church, singing, and praying, and reciting creeds. He knew life would be difficult for His followers especially after He ascended into heaven. Jesus speaks about this difficult life over and over again in the gospels.

In this text of course and in Matthew 16, He says, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Again in Mark 8:34 Jesus says, "And he called the multitude to him with his disciples and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross

and follow me." And in Luke 9 and Luke 14 he says the same thing. This theme of a "rough road" is repeated again and again in the gospels.

Not only does this theme of cross bearing appear again and again, but the idea of division, of a sword appears all over the gospels, as in this text for today and elsewhere in Matthew and again in Mark 13 and we find similar text in Luke as well as John and also in the Old Testament.

Do you see, do you get the point!!! Jesus is saying life will not be easy as you follow me. Don't look for a life of roses, don't look for the easy way, but the narrow road. Carry your cross, be ready to speak against even your father, your children, your parents and also be ready for them, your father, your children, your parents to speak up against you because of your faith, your belief in Me.

Not only did Jesus tell His disciples about the kind of life they would live for Him, but on Good Friday, He demonstrated that life by dying on a cross, by experiencing death, by facing pain, by being humiliated as He died a death of a criminal. This was not an easy life; this was a life of burdens for Jesus.

A pastor wrote:

I think that pain and suffering is the price we pay for being alive. Being alive means living with original sin and the mighty power of Jesus' death on the cross. When we understand that, our question will change to, What do we do with our suffering and pain? Our pain and suffering must become meaningful. It must not become pointless and empty suffering? How can we turn all the painful experiences of our lives into personal growth within our selves and within our relationship with God? We may never understand the why or be able to control the forces that cause our suffering. But one thing is for sure. We can have a lot to say about what the suffering does to us. We can determine what sort of people we become because of it. Pain makes some people bitter and envious. It makes others sensitive and compassionate. It is the end result, not the cause, of pain that makes some experiences of pain meaningful and others empty and destructive. It is left up to us and our relationship with our God.

Many today are making it a benchmark of a so called true believer that on the outside at least life has to look perfect. No suffering, no pain, no heartache, no struggles, no guilt, no illness, no disability, but a life that is filled with glory. Many are saying to you and me, that if you don't have a so called perfect life then, then

something is wrong with your faith, something is wrong with your personal relationship with Jesus Christ, you are not as good of a believer as I am.

I don't buy that stuff. I look to Jesus, He was perfect, righteous, obedient but yet He suffered.

Another pastor says: In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time, after a while I have had to look away. And in imagination I have turned instead to the lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of His. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering."

As Christians, we have the only Lord who has suffered, so then he understands our suffering. He understands our burdens. He reaches out to help us carry those burdens in life. We do not have a Savior who closes his eyes to the pain of the world, but he reaches out from the cross with out stretched arms to embrace each of us in our lives, with the burdens we carry.

And Jesus tells us that even in our own suffering, our own burden carrying, we need to reach out to others with hospitality.

That is what the last verse of our gospel lesson says: "And whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple, truly I tell you, none of these shall lose his reward."

Jesus is speaking about hospitality here. How do we interact with others? The word reward does not mean we earn heaven, but it is our promised result and outcome.

Jesus is telling us as we carry our burdens, we need to be hospitable to others. We need to treat people as we would like to be treated. We need to show concern for the burdens they are carrying.

Jesus called his early disciples to go into all the world. That was not just wishful thinking, but was a goal they could have accomplished in the first century if they would have multiplied and reproduced as Christ taught them to do. The Great Commission called for the disciples to teach others who would learn, who would in turn train others: a ministry of multiplication.

In verse forty-two, whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones: To give a cup of cold water was and still is, an essential act of courtesy and hospitality in the arid Near east. It is really taken for granted and deserves no reward. Yet, even this small act of acceptance will receive one. God notices and counts as valuable the smallest act of kindness and acceptance just as he notices the sparrow and counts the hairs on a person's head.

Every week you and I give a sermon. The way we live our lives Sunday to Sunday, is the sermon of our lives, and we demonstrate our kindness and Christian attitude during the week, by the way we act and react to the circumstances and conditions we confront. We make disciples by living our lives, telling our sermon by reminding people what Christ taught. What are you teaching?

We do not choose our emotional attachments, but we can choose to detach from them.

We do not choose what pains we will suffer, but we can choose how we suffer them.

The way we react to someone is beyond our choice, but the way we "receive" someone is a choice.

Finding goodness in others gives us a focus for loving them, despite their negatives.

Any good, no matter how small, we do for others will come back to us magnified.

For a Cup of Cold Water, Eternal Life! Eternal life just for a cup of cold water!

Verse 42 says, "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

The act of giving a cup of cold water is showing hospitality, just as we probably would ask someone who sat down at our kitchen table if they would like a glass of pop, ice tea or a cup of coffee.

When someone who doesn't follow Christ welcomes "...one of these little ones..." a disciple of Jesus, who are taking the message of Christ to those who were unfamiliar with our Lord Jesus and dying of spiritual thirst, eventually in their conversation they would offer their host a sip from "...a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Physical water is a necessity of life and ancient Palestine was relatively poor in water.

But what is the reward of being hospitable and the giving a cup of cold water to one of Jesus' disciples? The disciple would give them a drink of the Water of Life by introducing him or her to Jesus of Nazareth. And may they have an eternal, thirst quenching drink.

For a cup of cold water, they receive eternal life!

When I was a teenager, just a couple of years ago, I would often help my uncles bale hay. To be out in the hot sun or up in the hot barn, perspiring, itching from the hay, I could hardly wait to get to the water pump, where we would enjoy a cool, refreshing, thirst-quenching cup of water and wash off the itchy hay.

How about the twelve disciples, walking the dry, sun baked roads of Palestine? Going from village to village announcing the message Jesus' gave them, "...The kingdom of heaven is near."

Well, the disciples must have appreciated the cups of cold water very much, and while they sipped the cool drink, they probably talked about their business with the local folks. Of course, those who wanted to hear more about Jesus and their message probably invited the disciples to stay with them.

Jesus promises here that those who offer hospitality to those he sends out, they would never lose their reward. How is that? Well, when you receive one of the disciples, "...you receive [Jesus], and he who receives [Jesus] receives the one who sent [Jesus]," our Heavenly Father!

So if someone were to welcome you into their home, what kind of blessing would they receive from your stay? Would they hear your testimony, regarding “...how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you?” Would they hear you speak of the person and work of your Master, Jesus of Nazareth? Would they hear how Jesus died for their sins? Would they see you as a living example of Christ?

In closing, I want to give you an assignment:

Let us commit ourselves to share the good news with our hospitable neighbors in a neighborly manner. Lord Jesus, go with us as we visit with our hospitable neighbors, who are lost and don't know you. Bless our conversations and open a door for our witness to your mercy and forgiveness; so that, we may proclaim the good news about you. Enable us to proclaim it clearly, as we should.

Amen.

“THE GIFT OF CHRIST’S FREEDOM”

Message for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

July 5, 2026

ZECHARIAH 9: 9-12 ** ROMANS 7: 15-25A ** MATTHEW 11: 16-19, 25-30

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

Yesterday we celebrated "Independence Day." On July 4th, 1776, 56 of the bravest men who ever lived, signed the document known as "The Declaration of Independence," declaring independence from King George III and the government of England.

That document, as we know, came to be the steppingstone for the United States Constitution, which was signed just a few years later in Philadelphia in the year 1787. The Constitution is one of the most important, if not the most important document ever adopted by a nation of people. In the writing of that document, those men passed on to the people of this great nation, a set of rules and guidelines, that if followed, would lead America to become the single most important, most powerful, and most free people on earth.

However, let's back up a moment; let's be reminded that those 56 men who were willing to sign the Declaration of Independence did so at tremendous cost to themselves. Many lost their lives; most lost their property; and all of them lost certain freedoms in order to give us ours.

As we celebrate our freedom this weekend, I want us to think for a moment about what they say and no, I won't be reading those entire documents.

“When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

As I said at the beginning, those words are the beginning words to our Declaration of Independence, adopted in Congress, July 4, 1776 as the unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

Yesterday, this great country and all those who are a part of the millions who inhabit this great country celebrated the 250th birthday of these United States of America; we celebrated 250 years of freedom. Talk about a magic word. Freedom.

No, this is not a government class or civil liberties class; this is church and the document that was ratified on December 15, 1791 in the very first amendment to our Constitution says ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.’ You and I are free to worship our God however we see fit, legally of course. Aren’t you glad you live in America?

In 1984 Lee Greenwood, a country western singer, wrote the words to what some have said could be labeled our second national anthem after the Star Spangled Banner but it’s not the second national anthem; it’s titled ‘God Bless the USA:’ or ‘Proud to Be An American.’

If tomorrow all the things were gone
I worked for all my life
And I had to start again
With just my children and my wife

I thank my lucky stars
To be living here today
'Cause the flag still stands for freedom
And they can't take that away

And I'm proud to be an American
Where at least I know I'm free
And I won't forget the men who died
Who gave that right to me
And I'd gladly stand up next to you
And defend Her still today
'Cause there ain't no doubt

I love this land
God Bless the U.S.A.

A couple who had been married for twenty years went to a wedding reception of a close friend's daughter. During the ring exchange ceremony, the husband started to cry.

The wife, surprised by her husband's emotional outburst, said, " I didn't realize that you have so much feeling about your friend's happiness."

"Twenty years ago, your father threatened that if I didn't marry you, he would put me behind bars for twenty years," the husband said, "If I had just gone to jail, I would've been a free man by now."

We Americans love our freedom. We delight in our freedom to do what we want, when we want. We believe it's our right to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But of course, we know that political freedom is always conditional.

I am not free to interfere with your life, liberty, and the pursuit of your happiness. And you aren't free to interfere with mine. I'm not free to scream "fire" in a crowded theater, unless it is on fire! I'm not free to drive as fast as I want. I'm not free to steal something from a store. I'm not free to do whatever I want, if it comes at the expense of your freedom.

The book of Galatians is about freedom, not political freedom, but spiritual freedom. It's about freedom from God's Law condemning you and freedom from sin's bondage. But it's also freedom to receive God's gifts in worship and freedom to stand in His presence as a sinner, yet fully righteous because of Christ Jesus!

The threat to spiritual freedom in the Galatian churches was a mixing of the Law and the Gospel. Some false teachers were saying, "Christ isn't enough. You still have to submit to Moses, get circumcised, and follow the Old Testament dietary laws to be a true follower of God."

But the Apostle Paul wouldn't let that teaching stand. He said, "No. It's either all because of Christ, or His death was in vain, for nothing." That's the foundation of our freedom in Christ, and anything added to Christ destroys that foundation. Anything added to the cross of Christ chisels away at the freedom we have in Christ.

As the Apostle says, “Before this faith, we were kept under guard by the Law, imprisoned until the coming faith was revealed. The law, then, was our guardian until Christ, so we could be justified by faith.” Before faith in Christ, we were unbelievers. God kept us in something like house arrest for our own protection.

How so? God gave us His Law--not only to keep us from hurting others--but also to keep us from hurting ourselves. If we are disobedient toward authority, the Law is there, threatening us with justice and even imprisonment. If we’re tempted to kill, the Law is supposed to contain us and stop us before we do something harmful. If we’re tempted to steal, the Law is supposed to restrain those outward behaviors.

So the Law surrounds us with bricks and barbed wire. It hems us in on every side. It restricts us with rules and regulations. It restrains us like an electric fence. Indeed, “the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law” as told in First Corinthians 15. Be careful around that fence of the Law. It’s high voltage. It kills.

But the Law also teaches, rebukes, and corrects us--if we are willing to learn and not think we know more than God. And God is omniscient, all knowing, He knows everything; none of us here can claim to know everything since we don’t know more than God does. The Law is our teacher and guardian; it teaches and prepares us. The Law is softening the rockhard soil of our hearts, driving us to Christ and His grace.

Think of the best teacher you had in school, the one from whom you learned the most. Most likely that teacher wasn’t a softie. He or she demanded and expected much. And you did the best you could, learning more and more as you struggled. I remember Mrs Harrison in Latin; I took 2 years of Latin. True story; she and her husband ran a funeral home. Now I know what they say is true, “Latin is a dead language; it’s plain enough to see; it killed off all the Romans and now it’s killing me!” My English teacher in 9th grade, Mr Gampp, took a rather famous line and twisted it to fit me; Instead of ‘No man is an island’ he would say, ‘Nor-man is an island!’

Those weren’t necessarily the best teachers; I liked them both. You may have hated your favorite teachers at the time. But those teachers didn’t care if you liked them or not. And I’d venture to say that all of our teachers, retired of course, felt that same way; they had a job to do and that was to teach, not to please certain kids or their parents. They never let you rest on your earlier glories. It was always another challenge, another hurdle, and another lesson.

The Law is like that--a stern and strict schoolmaster. And the Law has but one lesson to teach us--so learn it well! That lesson is this: You cannot please God with your works; nothing you do can earn God's favor. The Apostle Paul wrote, "If righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing." If you or I could get God's favor and eternal life by what we do and how we live, then Christ died for nothing. Breathe that in! Let it simmer for a while!

"But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian," for where faith in Christ is alive, the Law has been silenced. That's why "Christ is the end of the Law, that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes." Christ fulfilled the Law. The Law ends in Christ. It's that way for all who believe that His death is their death, that His obedience is their obedience, that His life is their life.

Well if that's true, and it is! then why do we still teach the Ten Commandments to baptized believers? Why don't we then just trash the Law? It's because we are at the same time a saint and a sinner, a believer and an unbeliever. To Martin Luther, "Simul iustus et peccator," saint and sinner. And so the Law still speaks--and still needs to speak--to the sinner and unbeliever in each of us!

But where faith in Christ is alive, no condemnation now exists under the Law. That's the freedom that Christ earned for you when He died on the cross and rose from the grave. It's freedom from condemnation under the Law. Where there is faith in Christ, the Law cannot hurt you; it cannot accuse you before God, and it cannot condemn you to hell. For Jesus Christ has the last Word for all who trust in Him.

God kills to make alive. He kills us through the Law to make us alive through faith in Jesus. As the Apostle Paul also wrote: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

If the Law were to condemn those who have faith in Christ, it would have to condemn Christ. But Christ has already been condemned, having become a curse for us on the tree of death. Jesus has already been condemned for you and me, in our place. And so the Law cannot now condemn you. In Christ, you are free.

But how do you know if this freedom is yours? Are you baptized? Do you trust that Jesus is the solution to your sin problem? You see, baptism is your declaration of freedom, your emancipation proclamation. The Apostle Paul writes, "You are

all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Scripture tells us that in baptism, “there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” All are baptized alike. All are absolved the same way. All commune from the same bread, which is Christ’s body. All commune from the same cup, which is His blood.

Now baptism doesn’t wipe out your ethnic identity: a Jew is still Jewish, and a Greek is still Greek. It doesn’t change someone’s place in society: a prince is still a prince, and a pauper is still a pauper. It doesn’t alter someone’s gender: a man is still a man, and a woman is still a woman. But baptism does make us into something new and different--children of God!

That’s why Jesus’ forgiveness of sins is now yours. That’s why His eternal life is yours. That’s why His salvation is yours. That’s why Jesus died on the cross. That’s why He baptized you. That’s why He forgives you and feeds you with His body and blood. That’s why you and I are called children of God because that is what we are!

This inheritance is yours through God-given faith. Your works--although needed--have nothing to do with your salvation. That’s why you are free. It’s yours in Christ Jesus--and you can’t add anything to what Jesus did to save you. That’s because “if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

Yesterday we celebrated our nation’s independence. So it’s ironic that on this Independence Day weekend our appointed epistle reading should address our lack of independence!

In the reading from Romans, St. Paul addresses the difference between what he wants to do and what he ends up doing instead. “I don’t get it,” he says, “I wind up doing the very things I don’t want to do. Why can’t I stop myself? It’s like somebody else is in charge and not me!” You cannot help it. You want to do the good thing, but you end up doing the very thing you hate.

This passage today from Romans is nothing short of a fishing lure for Lutheran preachers. How can we not bite on this passage? It’s so totally Lutheran!

In our Gospel this morning, Jesus offers a similar sentiment, a similar welcome to the hurting and suffering of this world. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy

laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Jesus is talking to everyone seeking a new life. A free life. He says these words to you and me. And we are so relieved to hear these words.

This is the time of year when our national thoughts are of freedom.

Freedom is even in the language of the church. Jesus himself said, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

'Freedom' is a word on everybody's lips today. There are many different forms of it, and many different people advocating it and canvassing it.

Freedom! The words are etched upon our hearts and land, "America, the home of the free and the brave." Freedom has been secured, but freedom must be maintained. If we fail to appropriate the freedom we have, we become slaves.

The Bible tells us we are free in Christ and yet so many times we find ourselves shackled and chained to our feelings, desires, thoughts, and habits.

Freedom means: "FREEDOM" IN CHRIST. Freedom is not free to do whatever I please ... but to live and act in Christ. How I live in Him is the true measure of how free I am.

Freedom means I have been set free to become all that God wants me to be, to achieve all that God wants me to achieve, to enjoy all that God wants me to enjoy.

The basic test of freedom is perhaps less in what we are free to do than in what we are free not to do.

As children of God, we sometimes do not quite comprehend the fact that we have been set free by our Savior.

Freedom to Love instead of hate; Freedom to be joyous in the midst of sorrow; Freedom to have peace in the midst of conflict; Freedom to wait with God, when others moved by circumstance; Freedom to be kind when others hurt; Freedom to do good, when others do evil; Freedom to have Christ as your anchor, when others have nothing to trust in; Freedom to let Christ lead you in steps of righteousness,

and holiness; Freedom from self, wrongful passions & desires. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free"

You see, Man has this unique little thing God put in each and every human being when He created us. Man has a will, making him in every sense a free moral agent and a responsible being. And that's why we're not absolutely free. Because we're responsible. We are accountable for every deed, every word, or every thought that we take time to dwell on.

Right now, right here, in this time, in this place, you have two choices. To obey God or to disobey God, to live or to die, to live a life in sin or to live a life in Christ. One is bondage and one is freedom. One leads to death, destruction and eternal bondage; the other one leads to peace, and eternal and absolute freedom.

What's the secret to freedom? If you're here and you don't know Jesus as your savior, the secret to freedom is on a hill far away stood an old rugged cross. Jesus went there for you. But before He got there He was brought before a judge and jury on some trumped up charges and like a sheep led to the slaughter He said not a word. He was beaten. With the cat-o-nine tails that sliced His back open, It was for you. His beard was plucked out. He was spat upon. A crown of thorns was dragged down His precious head for you.

All of this was before He got to Calvary. When He got there three rusty nail were driven unmercifully in His hands and His feet. That old cross was raised up into the air and plunged down into a hole for it to stand in. When it hit bottom every joint in His body came out of place. Excruciating pain and suffering for you. There He was left hanging to die then a roman spear came piercing into His side where His blood and water flowed out onto the ground. Jesus died and was buried for you.

But that's not where it ends. When He died He went down into the deepest, darkest, lowest pits of Hell, took on the devil, slam dunked him, grabbed the keys to death, hell, and the grave and eternal bondage and said, "Give 'em here." He took them away from the devil. Then up from the grave He arose. With a mighty triumph o'er His foes. He did all that for your freedom. Christ died to set men free from sin, sickness and all of the curses of this life. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." That's the freedom you and I have.

Amen!!

“Listen, Listen, God is Calling”

Message for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

From Sylvia Gardner

July 12, 2026

The refrain from a Swahili Hymn says:

“Listen, listen, God is calling, through the Word inviting, offering forgiveness, comfort, and joy.”

In this hymn we are exhorted to listen, and reminded that God is calling to each of us. His Word is an invitation. If we listen, we will hear God’s offer of forgiveness, comfort and joy.

But what does it mean to listen to God, and how do we listen?

The number one way God speaks to us is through his Word.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments God employs an arsenal of communication tools: words spoken from heaven, words written on tablets, preaching and prophetic words, answered prayer, visual demonstrations, thoughts, dreams, visions, symbols, words from others, angels, music and song, the breaking of bread, and common sense.

The word “listen” shows up over 400 times in the Bible, and in many of those, God is pleading with His people to listen, or reprimanding them for not listening.

When you read the Bible you listen to God speak. You get to know him and let him teach you, help you, correct you, and show you how to live through his Word. You can use it for every part of your life, for the rest of your life.

Psalm 119 says, “Your word is a lamp to guide me and a light for my path.”

The Bible is like a flashlight for life. It’s not a high intensity beam that’s going to show you the next three years of your life. Instead, it’s going to give you enough light for your next step, and then you trust God for the rest.

God’s final Word is his son Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1 tells us that, in the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.

Jesus is the Word. Jesus is the full expression of God. Do you want to know what God is like? Look at Jesus. Listen to Jesus. Jesus is the Word incarnate. Scriptures point us to Jesus so that we can come to Him and have life. We not only listen to the whole of the Bible, but we specifically listen to Jesus.

Jesus said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” Let us open our eyes and ears more intentionally. After all, we never know when and where God is trying to say something to us.

To hear God’s call, you have to pay attention to him. You can’t hear God speaking to you if your life is full of noise. Zacchaeus, a wee little man, climbed up into a sycamore tree to get above the noise and find a more quiet place to listen to Jesus. We too need to rise above the noise and find a quiet place to listen to God. As you find that quiet place, the focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace. And if you search for him with all your heart and soul, you will find him. That’s a promise from God.

A lot of people talk to God but never listen to God. For them, prayer is a monologue. But no healthy relationship is a monologue—you need a dialogue. Talking to God in prayer is important but so is listening to him and letting him talk to you. Humbly accept the word God has planted in your heart, for it has the power to save your soul.

God speaking can be very comforting or very uncomfortable. It can rattle your cage and change your life. Sometimes we don’t hear God speaking simply because we are afraid of what He might say.

In Isaiah 42:20 , the Lord God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, accuses His people of being blind and deaf. “You have seen many things, but you pay no attention; your ears are open, but you do not listen.” This bible passage describes a people who, despite having many opportunities to see and hear divine truth, fail to pay attention or listen.

This message is relevant today for many of us. Often we are judgmental, and blind and deaf to anything that challenges our fixed ideas or our comfortable lifestyle. Rather than judging and dismissing ideas or people whose views we disagree with, soften your hearts and ask questions to understand their story. Maybe you will hear God's voice as you come to understand this person or the idea they are sharing.

God is speaking to us, but are we listening to Him? When our conscience begins to nudge us for whatever reason, it is wise to prayerfully consider whether we are offending God with our actions.

The message of the Bible says, “Listen for God’s voice in everything you do and everywhere you go.”

God can use anything or anyone to speak to us. He used Balaam’s donkey—to speak to Balaam. If God can speak through that chatty donkey, then He can speak through me! Or you! Or that person next to you!

God may speak to you through a friend, a song, a movie, a sunset, a gentle whisper. So we should always listen—you never know when you might hear God!

End your day by asking, “Where did God work in my life today? What did God say to me?” You’ll probably be surprised!

Remember the story of Elijah hiding in a cave. A great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

The fireworks that Elijah expected happened: hurricane, earthquake, firestorm—but God wasn’t in any of it. Then came a gentle whisper—or “the sound of sheer silence.” And God speaks by “the gentle whisper”—or “the still small voice.” Elijah heard the silence.

There is a wonderful story in 1 Samuel. Samuel is a young boy, living in the sanctuary and serving the priest, Eli. One night as he’s falling asleep, young Samuel hears a voice calling his name: “Samuel. Samuel.” He assumes it is Eli and runs and asks, “Did you call me?” Eli says no and sends him back to bed. This happens a second time and a third, but by the third time, Eli has figured it out. “Go lie down Samuel, and if you hear the voice again, say: Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Samuel heard the voice, and said, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

And God spoke.

Amen

“HOLD UP ON THAT ROUNDUP!”

Message for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

July 19, 2026

SAIAH 44: 6-8 ☸ ROMANS 8: 12-25 ☸ MATTHEW 13: 24-30, 36-43

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

When I was a kid, I would often help my grandpa by working in his garden. I loved to plant the seeds but weeding the garden was one of my least favorite activities. It was often hot out there and my back would hurt from bending over. Worst of all, I thought it was monotonous work, so often I did not pay real close attention to what I was doing. My grandpa loved tending a garden and he passed that love along to me. When I was about 7 years old, I was “helping” my grandpa in the garden in a way that only a small child can. Gramps had planted the garden a couple of weeks previously. Now he was removing the weeds that were emerging around the new seedlings.

My grandpa assigned me a row to weed. I distinctly remember: it was carrots. I began working my way down the row. I pulled out each weed as I saw one. One particular weed presented as a repeat offender. “Gee, there’s a lot of this one weed in this row,” I told Grandpa.

I continued my progress down the row. Yes, indeed, this one weed kept cropping up! “Wow! There sure is a lot of this one weed growing!”

Grandpa stood up. “What does it look like? Show me.” He came over and I showed him the perpetrator. In an alarmed voice he announced, “Those are the carrots!”

I think my Grandpa thought I did that on purpose so he would decide to do the job himself, but really I was just careless. That simple mistake of confusing a weed with the plant you want to grow, is the basis of a parable that Jesus tells in our text today. This little story about a very ordinary part of life contains some important

spiritual truths that we as Christians need to hear and heed. Let's pray that God would help us understand His Word for us today.

Jesus put before the crowds another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field, but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well."

What the enemy planted was almost certainly a weed which looks very much like wheat when the plants are young. However, when the heads of grain appear on the wheat, there is no doubt about which plant is which. "And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field?' 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'"

'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'

That is the story. What does it mean? Fortunately for us, Jesus' disciples asked that question, and we have Jesus' explanation of His parable. "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man." "The Son of Man" is a title for the Messiah which Jesus claims for himself. So in other words, the one who planted the seed is Jesus. "The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one." The sons of the kingdom are believers in Jesus Christ - Christians. The sons of the evil one are all those who reject Jesus as Lord and Savior, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels." This is the cast of characters.

In verse 40, Jesus says "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age." The focus of Jesus' story is the end of the age, the end of history. This will be the time when Jesus Christ returns to the earth. As we have talked about before, the Bible tells us that we don't know when this will occur. It is not for us to know the times and seasons of the end of history. It may be tomorrow or a thousand years from now. "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear."

That, friends, is the story Jesus tells of the weeds. Obviously, one implication of this text is a warning to those who do not trust in and follow Jesus Christ. Such an individual may succeed in fooling other people. Everyone may think that he or she

is a wonderful person and even a wonderful Christian. But God can never be fooled. When the end comes, it will become clear who those people are whose faith is truly in Jesus, and it will become clear who those are who have been just playing a religious game. That is a very solemn warning to anyone here who is not a genuine believer in Jesus Christ. But, there is another important lesson here too. It is not always easy to distinguish between those who are believers in Christ and those who are not.

One of the things Jesus does in this parable is to remind us that we as human beings should not be going around deciding who are the true Christians and who are the counterfeits. That is not our job. If we try to do that, we are going to do some real damage. We have to let God sort things out in the end. This is an important truth and we will come back to it a bit later, but I want to first respond to a couple of mistakes people make in understanding this parable.

First, the Lord is not prohibiting us from making moral judgments. Some folks say that because it is difficult to tell the difference between someone who is really a Christian and someone who is not, we must never judge another person. No matter what their words or actions, we should see every person on the planet as a Christian brother or sister, even if they call themselves Muslims or Hindus or atheists. In our day, being judgmental is now considered the chief vice. The most popular Bible verse is no longer John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,.." but Matthew 7:1- "Judge not, lest you be judged." However, we need to be very careful not to misinterpret that verse. I think what Jesus primarily has in mind is that we don't fall into the trap of judging the motives of another person. That doesn't mean, however, that we can't evaluate someone's words and actions. For example, let's say there is someone in a church who says, "I'm a Christian, but I don't believe Jesus was the Son of God." Is it judgmental or wrong to say this individual is not really a Christian? No! By his own words he has admitted he is not truly a believer in Jesus Christ. Likewise, I don't believe Jesus prohibits us from considering someone's actions. Let's say our church has a Sunday School teacher who gets arrested and convicted for drunk driving. Now, I can use this example because I have total confidence that this is not going to happen to any of our Sunday School teachers, not in a million years! But, if it did, if it did, I think it would be very proper for me to go to him or her and say, "I don't think you should be teaching Sunday School right now. Your actions reveal that you have a problem that needs to be dealt with before you are ready to serve or to continue serving in this way."

I hope you are getting my point. Jesus' parable, which teaches that it is not always easy to distinguish who are genuine Christians and who are not, doesn't mean we have to be morally paralyzed. We still should be able to declare that some ideas are true, while others are false; that certain actions are right and others wrong. We can do that, of course, not on the basis of our opinions or preferences, but rather on the basis of what God has taught in His Word. Often these days we hear people say things like, "Who are you to say that a certain lifestyle is wrong? You don't have a right to judge another person's behavior." Our response to that should be, "You are right. I don't have the right to decide whether what someone is doing is right or wrong, but God does. We are not being judgmental, we are simply repeating what the Bible teaches. Jesus tells us we are to love our neighbor and if we don't think that includes someone who lives a lifestyle counter to ours, we'd better read our Bible more carefully because Jesus says we are to love even our enemies.

Now, friends, we ought not be judgmental, but as Christians, both as pastors and as lay people, we need to tell the truth to those around us. When the Bible says that a certain practice is sinful, that practice is wrong. When the Bible says that a certain belief is false, any teaching that reflects that belief is also wrong. By telling the parable of the weeds, the Lord was not encouraging us to become moral relativists who start to think that all ideas are equal and all lifestyles are equal. The wheat is still wheat and the weeds are still weeds. We still need to call sin, sin, and false teaching, false. To think that the parable of the weeds teaches we should not do that, is to grossly misunderstand what Jesus is saying.

Secondly, the Lord is not teaching that the church should include those who are not Christians. Augustine, the great Christian teacher in the early 5th Century, said that the parable of the weeds means that the church will always be made up of both those who are true believers and those who are not. Thus, we should be content with that and never try to change it. In his day, there was a group known as the Donatists who were very concerned about the purity of the church. They wanted to make sure that anyone who had wavered at all in the face of persecution be removed from the church. Their logic was that anyone who denied Christ certainly could not be a genuine Christian, no matter what they said now, they were not a true believer and therefore should not be part of the church.

Why? Well, first of all, Jesus says the field in which the wheat and weeds are growing together is not the church, but the world. Though this passage is very relevant to discussions concerning church purity and discipline, it is incorrect to say that Jesus assumes the church will be made up of both wheat and weeds. Secondly, there are numerous texts in the New Testament which make it clear that

Christians ought to distinguish between those who truly follow Christ and those who do not. The Bible commands us to distinguish between wheat and weeds at certain times. Thirdly, I would argue that this parable does not teach that all nonbelievers appear to be Christians. Rather, it simply teaches that some who are not believers in Christ will give that appearance.

But what does it mean for us? Well, the big lesson is that we must be very careful in judging others. Even though we as Christians ought to make moral judgments, even though we as churches ought to seek to include only those who are true Christians as members, we need to be careful, very careful how we judge others.

Folks, remember that in Christianity, motives matter. They matter a lot. Why someone does or does not do something is very important.

Folks, I think today is a good time to remind ourselves that God has called us here together as a congregation, not to judge each other, but to serve one another. As I have said, that doesn't mean we put on moral blinders and refuse to recognize sin and error. But instead of constantly trying to analyze each other's motives, instead of trying to discern who is more spiritual than who, we need to devote ourselves to helping each other. Instead of judging, we need to focus on serving. Maybe even in this room today there are some folks whose motives you are prone to question. You kind of wonder if they are really sincere in their expressions of faith in the Lord and love to others. My assignment for you today is to try to stop asking those questions. Unless you are in some situation where you are required to make some type of moral judgment, I encourage you to just be content to let God judge that person's heart. Instead, think of a couple of ways you can help that person to become the individual God wants him or her to be. Oh, being a judge may seem a lot more fun than being a servant, but remember what Jesus said, "If you want to be great in God's kingdom, learn to be the servant of all."

Jesus' parables are artful word pictures. We cannot take parables too literally, that's not typically Jesus' point. In this parable, Jesus is drawing us a word picture of God's mercy. God doesn't just go out and chop down the weeds with a machete; God waits in hopes of a change. God has mercy and patience, letting each of us find our own way, in time. Botanically speaking, if I plant a sunflower seed, I'll get a sunflower. If I plant a tomato seed, I'll get a tomato plant. Whatever the seed is when it goes into the ground determines what it will be when it reaches maturity. We cannot make a lettuce seed produce blue fescue grass. It is not possible.

But what is not possible in the world of seeds occurs frequently in the world of human beings. Though a columbine seed cannot change, a Columbine student might. Though a daisy seed will always produce a daisy, a woman named Daisy might change. Botanically speaking a seed is a seed. Seeds do not change. But people do. Though a trained gardener may be able to judge between wheat and weeds early on, it's hard to say how a person is going to turn out from what they look like in the early stages of growth.

Throughout the Bible, God's people sometimes look a lot like weeds, until they grow to maturity and somehow blossom into beautiful flowers. Aren't you glad that God waits instead of cutting down the weeds early? When you stand at the judgment seat of God, God will say, "Haven't we dealt with your case? Yes, here it is. Your soul was cleared at Calvary. Case dismissed.

We each are wheat and weeds. Both of them grow in this earthly field. But one day our souls will be purified at last.

Amen.