

Sundays of Pentecost 2026 Messages

Part 2

From Pastor Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Russell, Kentucky

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“YOU NEVER NEED TO ASK ‘DOES GOD LOVE ME?’”

Message for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

July 26, 2026

1 KINGS 3: 5-12 ☿ ROMANS 8: 26-39 ☿ MATTHEW 13: 31-33, 44-52

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATION OF EACH HEART BE ACCEPTABLE IN THY SIGHT, O LORD, OUR STRENGTH AND OUR REDEEMER. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Show of hands: how many sinners do we have in church this morning? Don't be bashful; raise your hand if you're a sinner. Before we get into my message, I know, I know, how many sinners are present this morning. All of you, and yes, including me! But something or actually someone happened that changed all that.

Our past, present, and future are all transformed because of Him! Because of Jesus.

Since God is without sin – we must be free from sin also, if we are to spend now and eternity with Him. If we are to experience the Salvation that He has to offer, we must be holy as He is holy. We need to be justified. "Just as if I had never sinned" is what justified basically means. I like the way that word is used, justified, just as if I'd never sinned.

You sin and feel unworthy of God's forgiveness and you feel that you must make it up to Him, in some way. You need to justify yourself before coming to Him. We can punish ourselves in a multitude of ways in an attempt to make ourselves right before a Just God.

Do you know what Scripture says, with regard to God's Righteousness, "In Your court, O God, who can stand up and justify himself?" And the answer, of course, is nobody!

It has been rightly said, "Nothing will satisfy the conscience of man that does not first satisfy the conscience of God".

Our attempts at punishing ourselves will never appease God, or us, for that matter; we simply compound our sinfulness by rejecting God, and we do it over and over. And we reject the Grace He has offered.

We just do not see the horror of sin. We don't understand just how much it grieves our Loving Father. We often think of sin as a particular wrongdoing, over which we constantly struggle – but if that is the extent of our understanding of sin, we are gravely uninformed. You and I think it's too much fun to sin, right? How then, can we be justified?

There is a righteousness that reveals the character of God – And that comes through the Law. The Law is the out-shining of God Himself. But the Law brings God's judgment with it. It convicts of sin.

Under the Law there is no justification.

We know about sin because God has told us about it in His Law. There we are faced with His very character, and we see that there is a huge gulf between our character and His character. By looking into the Law, we see, looking back at us the most vile, hideous creatures, who have no hope of satisfying God's demands.

You know, Paul would never go against God's unchangeable Law. It is eternal! But, he does speak of a righteousness of God that declares a sinner to be righteous. And Paul said he was the chief of sinners.

We say God can do anything! And yet there are some things which God cannot do, and one of them is to let sin go unpunished. God is incapable of not judging everyone who commits sin.

Paul says, by the Law came the knowledge of sin and the decree that it must be punished. On the cross, Christ became us, and took upon Himself our punishment! Oh the wonder of it! God became man, for the sole purpose of delivering us from the penalty of sin. He took upon Himself the sins of the world!! He loves us that much.

I love Romans 8. Verse 27: And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. The very next verse, 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.' Verse 31, 'What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

Romans 8:32 tells us that God abandoned Christ, delivered Him up. It says that, "He (who) did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else?" Another key verse, 'Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us.' Then Paul says something to let us know how sure he is. It's not something he read in the paper or heard on the news or read in a Bible commentary but something he felt; I am convinced, he knows without a doubt, I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I asked you earlier to raise your hand if you were a sinner. I have another question but I'd never ask you to raise your hand and that question is 'Would you abandon your child?' Forget those horrible stories on the news about the family that locked away 16 kids or the ones who allowed the 14 years old girl to literally starve to death! It's in the news all the time but...

Christ as man, when He became our sin, our shame, our impurity, our evil and our rebellion, on that cross, called out to His Father, "My God, My God why have you forsaken Me!". Jesus in effect was saying, I am every man that has, is or will live, and I am bearing the punishment for all their past, present and future sins – God, don't abandon Me to this darkness!

God didn't permanently abandon Him, for on the 3rd day He raised Him from the dead. That He might be just in justifying the one who has faith in Jesus. That's why Paul says "I am convinced."

There is therefore now no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus. Each one of us can be justified in the eyes of God, through faith in His Son, Jesus. Does God love me? The cross proves all of it; he does.

Let's ponder anew what Christ's death has accomplished for us, to really think about what his death meant, why Paul said "I am convinced" as we come to the Lord's table in a few minutes. These emblems, the bread and the wine, are for those of us who have placed our trust in the risen Lord. Those of us who are justified, because of what this feast represents. For at this time we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again. The bread symbolizing His body broken for us and the cup symbolizing His blood shed for us – the blood by which we are

washed clean. God tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin.

The past few weeks we've looked into the parables of Jesus in our Gospel readings. Matthew tells us that Jesus was sitting by the sea. A large crowd gathered around him to hear him speak or see him perform a miracle. "The Sea of Galilee was one of His favorite places to preach to large crowds by using a boat as His podium. The water was a sounding board and the sloping hills and curving coves where people sat was a natural amphitheater."

When I read today's Gospel, I had to wonder about those disciples. Were they treating Jesus the way I might have treated my late wife, Joyce, just nodding my agreement without really understanding just so Jesus would move on to something they really did get?

Jesus asked the disciples, 'Have you understood all this?' after telling them several obscure parables to describe God's reign in the world. He told them the kingdom was like a mustard seed, like yeast, like treasure hidden in a field, like fine pearls, or like net tossed out to sea where the good catch is sorted from the bad afterwards.

Imagine being a disciple. I would imagine their heads were spinning at this point. The kingdom is like what? They, like we, wanted to know how Jesus was going to change the world. They wanted to know how Jesus was going to help them get rid of their oppressors. They wanted to know how Jesus was going to bring about a revolution that would change the world as they experienced it. Bottom line they wanted to know how Jesus would overthrow the worldly government that ruled over them. How could a mustard seed, some yeast, some hidden treasure, pearls, and sorting out the catch of the day accomplish any of this?

Jesus wasn't concerned with revolution against the earthly powers. Replacing one human institution with another human institution, even if the new institution is more benevolent and generous to the least of these than the previous one, would not usher in God's realm.

No Jesus was inviting his disciples, and us, to view the world in a different light, to change our perspective. It's not big revolutions that change the world, but little revolutions with the hearts and minds of every human being in the world. Small things like mustard seeds become imposing bushes.

You cooks and bakers know that just a tiny bit of yeast can yield an enormous amount of bread, enough to feed multitudes. The kingdom is of such great value that when we find it, we'll sell all we have to own it. Worldly goods are nothing, when compared to the spiritual riches God's realm brings to us and to the world. God helps us sort out our daily catch, tossing the bad things aside that would distract us from working to accomplish God's will in our lives and in the world.

Have you understood all this? Jesus asked his disciples and continues to ask us. Have we understood that God's realm, his Kingdom, is not about worldly riches, but about the abundant riches of the Spirit?

Have we understood that God's kingdom is about gladly giving away ourselves and all we have to anyone and everyone who asks it of us? Have we truly understood, as Paul told the Romans, that no earthly power finally separates us from God's realm?

Have you understood all this? The disciples said they understood. But then, they and those who came after them, spent the next few hundred years proving that they didn't really get it. Church fathers spent centuries arguing over Jesus' divinity and humanity, over how or why his death was redemptive, over whether his mother was a virgin, and over a myriad of other doctrinal arguments instead of paying attention to the mustard seed, the yeast, the hidden treasure, or the pearl of great value that needed to be cultivated in their own hearts. While they argued, people starved.

Have you understood all this? We have, only when we spend less time arguing about who Jesus is and what he means and instead get to work obeying his commandment to love each other, and stop pursuing worldly ways to bring about God's kingdom.

Have you understood all this?

Most scholars believe that the Gospel of Matthew was written after the fall of Jerusalem between 70 and 85 A.D. Matthew is writing to an audience of Jewish and Gentile Christians who are troubled by the destruction of Jerusalem and the resulting chaos. They are wondering why evil exists along with good. They see the evil in our world and the pain people inflict on one another, even in the church. Why doesn't God do something? We know God is loving and holy. So why does He hold back His hand of justice? Why does He permit so much wrongdoing and suffering?

Matthew uses these parables of Jesus to explain why the “word” of Jesus, the “seed” of the gospel, the message of His resurrection is not accepted by all. These parables provide answers to Christian hearts, minds and communities in the 70 & 80’s after the fall of Jerusalem.

Each parable begins with “the kingdom of heaven”. In Jesus’ day the Jews knew the prophecies in Daniel and Ezekiel and they were expecting a conquering hero. Each time Jesus used the phrase, “the kingdom of heaven” His words stirred memories of bright banners, glittering armies, the gold and ivory of Solomon’s day, the nation of Israel restored. And God who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. May God bless you as you let him clean your heart and sweep the doubt away with his Word.

AMEN!!

“THE MEAL, THE MESSAGE, THE MIRACLE”

Message for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

August 2, 2026

ISAIAH 55: 1-5 ☸ ROMANS 9: 1-5 ☸ MATTHEW 14: 13-21

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 He, Jesus, went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.”

It’s a good thing that those verses weren’t written about me. It’s a good thing that thousands of people weren’t depending on Norman for their teaching and nourishment. Especially on the day when I wanted to be alone with my friends. Especially on the day that I knew I was going to be crucified. Had that been my feet in Jesus’ sandals on that beach, the verses would have read something like this:

They were like sheep without a shepherd. So Norman told them to stop grazing on his pasture and head back to their pens. When Norman landed and saw a large crowd, he mumbled something about how hard it was to get a day off. That is not a true sentiment, either! It’s a good thing that I wasn’t responsible for those people. I would have been in no mood to teach them, no mood to help them, but did Jesus? As I think about it, Jesus had no desire to be with them either. After all he did leave them. But only after he taught them many things and healed the sick.

Question? Why did Jesus teach and heal them if he needed some quiet time, as we like to call it now?

Answer: “He had compassion on them.” I

In other words Matthew in this scripture is not saying he felt simple pity or compassion for them. It was a much deeper meaning. Matthew is saying that Jesus felt their hurt in his gut.

He felt the hurt of the diseased; He felt the loneliness of the lepers; He felt the embarrassment of the sinful;

He felt the limp of the crippled.

And once he felt their hurts, he couldn't help but heal them and teach them many things. He was moved in the stomach of their needs. He was so touched by their needs he forgot his own. He was so moved that he put their hurts on his back as though he didn't have enough which he did; he had more than enough. Jesus felt compassion on them because they were the reason he came. They were HIS children. Because self was forgotten and others were served by the compassionate Savior.

I want to tell a story. But first I want to make this point. Jesus knew all too well what pain is and that's the very reason he takes as much as he can off of us. So I guess the words to the old song are true.

“What a friend we have in Jesus; oh what needless pain we bear; all because we do not carry, everything to God in Prayer.”

Jesus knows how you feel. When you struggle, He listens. When you desire, he responds. He's there for you now. He is there for you now.

Like the little boy in the story he sees you with a heart of compassion. He knows that you are special. And it's not our story from Matthew today.

A boy went into a pet shop to buy a puppy. He looked and looked. He told the owner that he would be back with the money to buy the puppy in a couple of weeks. During those weeks he worked so hard. Washing cars, mowing lawns, doing chores around the house. Finally he had the money. The next day he went back to the pet shop. He picked out a puppy that was crippled and he walked up to the store owner. He handed him the money. When the owner saw the puppy he picked, he told him to go pick another puppy because this puppy would never be able to play or run because it was crippled. The boy just smiled and said he was sure this is the puppy he wanted and that it was just the puppy for him. As the boy walked out, the owner started to say something but remained silent. Suddenly he knew why the boy had picked that puppy because he saw extending out of the boy's trousers a brace on his leg.

Why did the boy want the dog?

The same reason Jesus wants us, he knew how it felt and he also knew that we were very special.

Some words of comfort: My God shall supply all your needs; I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me; Jesus doesn't leave you...His words ring loud and clear. Then there's 'And lo I am with you even to the ends of the earth' and finally 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'

Sometimes God seems like a last second God, but it is with those fractions of a second left that we truly see His glory revealed, for "in our weakness His strength is made perfect."

Listen again as I share a few words from our Gospel today: 'When Jesus heard what had happened, (that is the execution of John the Baptist) he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. Notice that apparently because Jesus was human, as well as divine, He sometimes wanted privacy. Herod's sudden interest in Jesus' ministry no doubt concerned Him. He wanted to get away from the people and all the demands which they put on Him. But, when a crowd manages to find Him, He doesn't become angry. Instead, He has compassion on those folks and heals those who are sick. As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food." You've heard me say every time this miracle is read that it's the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. And today we hear those disciples appoint themselves as the board of directors over Jesus. They're trying to tell Jesus what to do. As the afternoon wore on, the disciples realized they could be facing a big problem. There is a huge group of people and there doesn't seem to be any food around. Everyone is no doubt getting hungry and the disciples have a very practical solution. Send the crowds away. It is time to end the service and dismiss the folks so they can go get their own food. But, verse 16 Jesus replied, "They need not go away; You give them something to eat." To us and especially to the disciples, it sounded like an impossible command. No, you give them something to eat.

Now, I have a feeling that Jesus was maybe giving His disciples a hard time. He knew that they did not have the ability to feed the crowd and, as John's Gospel says, 'Jesus already had in mind what He was going to do to feed everyone.'

Matthew is sort of like Readers' Digest; he gives us a condensed report and omits the reaction of the disciples to Jesus' suggestion. Again John's gospel tells us that Philip responded, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" Incidentally, if we try to translate it into our currency, Philip is figuring that they would need at least a dollar a person to give everyone just a snack, maybe a cheeseburger or something. But at currency rates of 2000 years ago, a dollar would have bought a lot more food. Matthew also omits Jesus' next statement, where He asks, "How much food do we have?" According to the other gospels, the disciples then kind of surveyed the crowd. Peter comes back and reports that he found a boy who had five barley loaves and two small fish. Matthew says Jesus was told "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." Jesus then asks that the boy's lunch be brought to Him. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples who tried to be the Board of Directors in giving orders to Jesus were now turned into waiters to serve all those people! Jesus seems to have a very organized plan, and it works.

This is obviously a remarkable story. So remarkable, in fact, that many folks ask, "Did it really happen?"

Having five loaves and two fishes is typical of the sad state of the church in our day. Even today, folks are saying to send the multitudes away, that there are natural ways of caring for their needs. We send folks to the psychiatrist for emotional help and to the government for physical relief. We do have spiritual bread to offer, but how far will five wafers and a small glass of wine or grape juice go. We need the power of the Lord. We fail to realize that the solutions today are not in government or in human involvement but in God. Liberal Bible teachers have suggested that what really occurred was that the boy's willingness to share his lunch inspired others in the crowd to do the same. So, when everyone shared their food and ate only what they needed, there were twelve baskets left over. The big lesson then would be that we should share with those in need. Now, that is a great idea, but it is not what the story is about, because it is not what happened. All four gospels tell us the same thing. Jesus fed about 15,000 people with only five loaves of bread and two small fish. Yes, our modern scientific orientation makes it hard for us to swallow that, but that attitude is the only reason someone would suggest that the people simply shared their lunches that day. Liberal Bible teachers have tried to remove the miraculous from the gospels, giving natural explanations for the different miracles Jesus performed, in order to make these stories more palatable to folks living in the 21st Century. As we continue in year 26 of the 21st

Century, however, more and more people are realizing that if we eliminate the miracles, we rob these stories of their power and even their meaning. The Bible clearly teaches, and I choose to believe, that Jesus actually took one little boy's lunch and fed about 15,000 folks that day.

Don't get the impression that these five loaves were great big buns. They were actually little buns and 2 very small sardine like fish and that fed some 15000 people who were hungry. And the leftover scraps weren't just the garbage pieces that someone didn't finish; these were 12 baskets of food that were not touched and yet the people were satisfied; they had eaten their fill. In a day when most people never knew what it was to have a full meal, twelve baskets left over indicates that everyone had a full tummy.

I believe one of the main reasons the gospel writers report this event is that it clearly shows us two essential aspects of Jesus' character. These are two qualities which we usually don't think belong together, but in Jesus they are a magnificent combination. First is Jesus' compassion. Jesus loves people, He cares about them. We noted that earlier when we saw how even when He was seeking privacy, He could not turn down the opportunity to heal and help people. Here, as He is very busy teaching and ministering to a huge crowd, Jesus is still concerned about the very practical needs of the people around Him.

Secondly, we also see Jesus' power. In our world the compassionate are usually not powerful, and the powerful are usually not compassionate. But Jesus is both. His power is very obvious in our text today. He simply takes five loaves of bread and two fish and turns them into a meal for a huge crowd. Not only does everyone get something to eat, there are leftovers. How did He do it? I have no idea. There is no natural explanation.

Some of you have added a little water to the soup so you could feed a couple of unexpected guests at dinner, but Jesus does something very different. It was a miracle. It was another demonstration of His supernatural power. Jesus had the ability to do remarkable things.

As the story goes on, we see there is no limit to Jesus' willingness to do this. The ultimate need of human beings is some way to be saved from the results of sin and eternal death. As human beings, we need someone who will rescue us from our wretched condition of being separated from God and without hope. Jesus is willing to do that. He is willing to give up His own life as a sacrifice of atonement. The angel told Joseph that the baby will be called Jesus "because he will save his

people from their sins." He did that by dying on the cross in our place. He suffered agony, pain, and the horrors of death itself for me and for you. He did that because it was the Father's will, and also because of the great compassion, the great love, He has for people. We catch a glimpse of that compassion in our story today.

What I think we need to do today is just sit back, or stand back, in awe of Jesus Christ. I was a small child when I first heard the story of Jesus feeding the 5000. I remember wondering whether or not I would have been willing to give my lunch to Jesus, like that little boy was. Even then, I valued my meals quite a bit. I am sure I heard the story frequently during those early Sunday School years, but to be honest, since that time I have not really thought about it that often. Yet, it is such a great story because it shows Jesus' compassion and power so clearly. Folks, this morning I feel like my words have been very feeble, but I hope God's Spirit has used them in your mind and heart to give you a fresh sense of the compassion and power that are found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

“DON’T STAY IN THE BOAT”

Message for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

August 9, 2026

1/st KINGS 19: 9-18 ☸ ROMANS 10: 5-15 ☸ MATTHEW 14: 22-33

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

When I was here two weeks ago, I asked all of the members here that day to raise their hands if they were sinners. I think all of you did, even the young ones. Today I have another challenge for you and it is this: how many of you could walk on water and before the wheels start turning and someone says they could if it was frozen, no, this is plain ordinary lake water. Ok, I see a few hands. Final challenge for today: how many of you would get out of the boat and walk on water if Jesus Himself said “Come.” Would you be like Peter and respond “Lord if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Would your faith be strong enough that you would step out of the boat onto the rough, wind-blown waves and walk on them because Jesus said ‘Come?’

I don’t know about you but I used to always think Simon Peter was nuts for getting out of the boat and thinking he could walk on water. Think about it; the weather conditions, the physical impossibility of it, then I realized that is the point of the exercise. God calls us out of our comfort zones to do the impossible. That is so much about what following Christ is about.

What is your boat? It is whatever represents safety and security to you apart from God. What ever you put your trust in. Are there physical impossibilities? For example, my physical impossibility to do this job, yet God still calls me out.

What about the fear of failure? So another question, who is the failure: the guy who sunk or the guys, plural, who refused to get out of the boat? Remember our text says Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

Some of you may be thinking ‘but it’s comfortable in the boat.’ There may be a storm but it beats risking life.

We live in a comfortable society – it's no mistake that one of the best selling chairs in Ohio is a Lazy Boy.

Nothing smothers the gospel more than our Lazy Boy attitude to life.

Early in the morning Jesus came walking toward them on the sea. He's already walking on the water so Jesus is not in the boat. If you want to follow Jesus, then occasionally you will have to walk on water. Has anyone changed their mind about walking on water yet? When you step out, you will receive the supernatural support,

They're sitting in the boat and they see what appears to be a ghost and it's not Casper. No they haven't been drinking but this is a ghost and they are terrified. And they cried out in fear. What I do know is that if Jesus tells you to get out of the boat, then he will be with you. This is not some ghost that Simon Peter saw – it is Jesus. Jesus tells them, "Take heart it is I; do not be afraid." We, on the other hand, would have a tendency to sink, to get out of there. And don't be surprised if you sink occasionally.

Human nature is to sink; human nature is to take your eyes off Jesus. But human nature is to suddenly realize what you are doing. And know that God can pick you up.

But how will you know if you don't ever get out of the boat?

I believe that inside of us all is a still small voice calling us to more, telling us that there is more to life than sitting in a boat, that we were made for more than just a mundane, boring existence, that there is something inside of you that says you can do it; you can walk on water!

The word 'walk' in the Bible often symbolizes the way we live, the way we act, and the way we conduct ourselves in a certain way. I'm a big Gaither fan and I love hearing their music. One song that really hit me and it makes a reference to what I just said: "You know your walk talks, and your talk talks, but your walk talks louder than your talk talks; your behavior toward your neighbor is really how you feel about the Savior." And it has reference to the fact that life is a journey, life is a pilgrimage and that the Christian is a person who is traveling to another country. And so to walk by faith is to live in the confident expectation of things that are to come. The people of this world are influenced by the things that are

seen. They live for wealth, power, and possessions; for the things, which this world can give. But the Christian looks beyond this world with a conviction that believes there is a better place.

And so to walk by faith requires that we become familiar with the promises that God has given to us. The Bible is filled with promises for believers. Nothing is more encouraging or nurturing to our faith than reading the promises of God. Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the word of God.

But now believe me when I tell you that many Christians have misunderstood what faith is. To them faith is some kind of power or force. They think if they have enough faith, God will do whatever they ask Him. So when a crisis comes up, they try to move God into action with their faith.

Our text says that the disciples are in a storm and in the 4th watch of the night Jesus came to them walking on the water. Jesus said to them to be a good cheer, it is I; be not afraid. And Peter said to Jesus, Lord, if it is you, command to come to you on the water. Now Peter asking to walk on the water was a most unusual request. Some have even criticized Peter for trying to show-off in front of the other disciples. And some have criticized him for trying to show that he had more faith in Christ than the other disciples did. But in reality one of the main reasons why Peter wanted to walk on the water was because he wanted to be closer to Jesus. Peter wanted to be closer to Jesus on the water, than he was in the boat. Peter wanted to be close to Jesus and Jesus wanted to be close to Peter. Is there anybody here who really wants to get closer to Jesus? If you really want to get closer to Jesus, you have to walk by faith. Because faith pleases God and without faith it is impossible to please God. Walking by faith means to make some changes in your life. You cannot stay where you are and get closer to Jesus. Peter wanted to change from being in the boat to being close to Jesus. James said, "When you draw close to God, God will draw close to you." And if you are like Peter and you believe that Jesus is who He says He is, then you ought to want to have a close fellowship with Him.

The thing that really made Peter want to walk by faith and get closer to Jesus was the storm he was going thru. Sometimes storms come to test us so we can see if we will walk by faith and not by sight. Your storm ought to draw you closer to Jesus. Some people can be in a storm and they still don't get close to God.

All the disciples in this boat did not follow Peter's walk of faith. The rest of them were satisfied with sitting in the boat. Some people are satisfied with sitting in a

comfort zone. Boat Folk are satisfied with staying in the boat. But you can't let boat folk stop you from getting out of the boat. Everybody in the boat is not going to walk with you on the water. Everybody doesn't want to walk by faith; some people are happy walking by sight. Can't you hear doubting Thomas in the background telling Peter, Man, you better stay in this boat. Peter, don't be a fool in here. Stay in here. You never have walked on water before. What makes you think you can walk on water now?

The Bible says in v. 29 that after Peter asked to walk on the water, Jesus told him to come. And when Peter came down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. Now when we think of Peter walking on the water, we normally only think of him sinking. But Peter did have some success before he started sinking. And the reason why Peter was successful is because he believed the Word of God. Peter began his walk on the water by faith in the Word of the Lord. Jesus told Peter to Come. And Peter stepped out of the boat on just ONE WORD because he believed THE WORD. Yes, the water was deep, the wind was strong, and the waves were high, but Peter still stepped out on the Word of the Lord. We can always stand on the Word of God. Because whatever God said will hold us up. Whatever God said will build us up. That's why we need to stop sitting on the premises and start standing on the promises of God. You can always put your faith in the Word of God.

But I believe the devil had his hand in this somewhere. I believe that the devil tempted Peter to take his eyes off Jesus. The devil will always tempt us to take our eyes off Jesus. The devil wants us to walk by sight instead of walking by faith.

Faith is a personal surrender to God. When we accept Christ as our Savior, we are putting faith that Christ died on the cross for our sins and that God raised Him from the dead. It is through faith that we know that we now have the promise of eternal life in Heaven with God. Faith believes without any doubts.

Faith is a conduct inspired by such surrender to God. When we accept Jesus as the Lord of our lives, then we take on a new way of life. We are no longer our old selves, but we are born again. Our old life of sin has died and we live a new life in Christ. This means that people should be able to see Christ in us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

We are to live by faith in Jesus. This means that we let Him lead us. We trust Him to provide our every need. We are not to worry about tomorrow. Christ will take

care of us, if we don't interfere. I learned the hard way that I can't solve my own problems, but Christ can, if I let Him do it His way.

So for us to have faith, we must believe in the Word, we must surrender our lives to Christ and we must conduct our lives, so that others can see Christ in us. It is sometimes easy to distinguish a Christian with little faith. They are the ones that seem to worry about anything and everything. As Christians we are to put our trust in God and His promises. God is a holy and righteous God. He cannot and will not break His promises to us. When it seems that our lives are a mess and everything is going wrong, God hasn't deserted us, we have deserted Him. We have stopped putting our faith in His promises. If you want to live a worry free life, learn to trust God and His Word. Have Faith that God is still in control of everything. What kind of faith must we have? We must have a faith of innocence.

We see that even in healing, faith plays an important part. When we pray for healing, do we have the faith to believe that it will be done? Without faith there are no miracles. When we pray for healing for someone, not only does the sick person must have faith, we must have faith that it will be done also.

What was Peter feeling when Jesus said, "Come"? I think I might have an idea. Jesus is calling me to step out of the security of the boat. 24 years ago, God called me to ministry and thanks to all of the folks at Bethel and all of you, here I stand. Thank you!

Was Peter scared when he climbed over the edge of the boat? We can only guess, because the scripture doesn't say. Peter climbed out of the boat and was walking on water until he took his eyes off Christ and began to sink. Peter had the faith to get out of the boat. This meant that he had to leave the safety and comfort of the boat and do something he had never done before. He had faith to do this much. Then Peter stood on the water and took his first step into a new uncertainty. He had enough faith to get this far. Peter was actually walking on water. As long as Peter kept his eyes straight ahead on Jesus, he was fine. But, as always, when we are doing God's will, Satan will interfere and try to distract us just for that split second. This was the case with Peter too. When Peter saw the wind, he became afraid and lost faith just for an instant, but long enough for him to begin to sink into the water. Jesus was still in control, because Peter didn't collapse into the water. The scripture says that he began sinking into the water. This implies that Peter was sinking slowly enough that he had time to call upon the name of the Lord and Jesus reached out and pulled him up. In that short instant that the wind came up, Peter's attention was diverted from Christ to the reality that he was

walking on water, which in his mind was impossible to do. How often does Satan pull the same trick on us today when we are doing God's will?

What should we make of the other disciples? Were they to be judged as lazy and afraid, not as zealous for the LORD because they didn't seek to come to Him? Not at all because every Christian is different.

With the Word and command of Christ, Peter stepped out of the boat - and he walked on water! Wow! What a faith! Amazing! Peter achieved the impossible - he walked on water!

The story of Jesus walking on water is a familiar story to most of us. I first heard the story in Sunday School and I remember thinking to myself how neat it would be to be able to walk on water. I really wasn't very interested in feeding a lot of people, or healing the sick, but walking on water was impressive.

As I have gotten older, I have found myself wondering about this odd, little story. Why did Jesus do what he did? Why did the gospel writers include this story in their accounts of Jesus' life and ministry? Did Jesus walk on water because he saw that the disciples were in trouble and there was no boat near by? Was he trying to demonstrate to the disciples that he truly was the Messiah—God's Son—because only God could walk on water?

The disciples certainly understood that what Jesus did was only something that God could do. At the end of this short story they worship him. There is more to this story, though, than a demonstration of Jesus' divinity. It is a story that tells us how God moves in our lives and how God wants to move in our lives as Christians. This is both a comforting and challenging story.

Folks, we are not alone. Jesus is with us. He says, "Take heart! It is I! Be not afraid!" And just like Peter, we can walk on water. I don't know what God is calling you to do. I do know that God is calling you to get out of the boat, and to walk on water. Folks, don't stay in the boat!

Amen

“WHEN GOD PUTS YOU ON HOLD”

Message for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

August 16, 2026

ISAIAH 56: 1, 6-8 ☸ ROMANS 11: 1-2A, 29-32

MATTHEW 15: (10-20), 21-28

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

Most of us have probably experienced the following: You want to get down the road, but the road is curvy, and you're behind a slow driver. You want to pass but you have to slow down and wait. How about making an important phone call, and all you get is a machine. Leave a message at the beep: then the machine says, "If you live within the U.S. press 1; If you want English press 2; If you have a complaint press 3; If you have bad breath...you can hang up." Finally, you press all those numbers and you get another recording which says...."you're the 15th caller and your wait time will be approximately 12 minutes."

But, after you get to your final destination by phone, you get another recording which says, "I'm not able to take your call right now; if you will leave your name, number, and a brief message, I will return your call." Wait, Wait, Wait, you've got to wait. Do you like to wait? Then there's always that message that says the mailbox is full and you can't leave a message. What do you do then; yes, you probably hang up!

Does this bother you? You take the whole family, and let's say you drive to some place like McDonald's or Burger King, you go through the drive-thru....you order that Value Meal for you; you've got several people in the car; you make all the orders, pay for all the orders, then, you get to the window for pick-up. Everything is there....all except your order..You are then told to pull-up and park and they will bring it out to you. Has that ever happened to you; I know it has happened to me. Wait, Wait, Wait! Do you like to wait?

How about when you are in line at WalMart; you've waited for what seemed to be forever, and someone ahead of you has an item with no price sticker on it so now,

there's a price check, which takes 15 minutes, They've got new employees who are being trained, so you wait for them to pay and they take out a hammer and bust open a piggy bank full of pennies. Ok, I know I'm exaggerating a little, ok a lot, but maybe not; anyway you get the message.

We are constantly waiting whether we are at a traffic light, or stuck in traffic, or waiting at the dentist, or doctor's office....Wait! Wait! Wait!

With the use of Fax machines and email, we have become spoiled on immediate service. Ten minutes without electricity sends us up the wall. This past week I ran into someone who had lost power at their home since 5pm the previous day and this was now 9:30 in the morning.

Whenever an operator puts us on hold, we feel as if we've been deprived. Our time is valuable to us, but not to them.

What about when God is slow in responding to a prayer we've prayed? Has that ever happened to you?

What do you do when you have to wait on God?

Yes, the Bible says 'wait on the Lord' in Psalm 27: 14. That's easy to say. It's easy to preach, especially, if you are not the one waiting.

Tell that to the person who has just lost a loved one. Tell that to a person who has been told by a lifelong spouse, that they are leaving, and do not plan to come back. It's easy to wait, if you are not the one having to wait.

Tell that to the child who has to live in the midst of abuse. Tell that to the person getting bad news from the doctor.

What do you do when you have to wait? I mean, waiting on God? What do you do when God puts you on hold?

Does God actually put us on hold? Are we that unimportant to our Creator that we mean God will put us on hold? In our text from Matthew 15 this morning, we read about a lady who did not immediately get her prayer answered. Jesus was silent and did not immediately respond to her prayer request.

Listen again to some of our text today from Matthew: Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon. But he did not answer her at all." This is our Lord; this is Jesus but he ignores her. His disciples even wanted him to send her away. Jesus said, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

Jesus along with his disciples travel northwest about 50 miles to a town known as Tyre and then to another town called Sidon. It was in this area that they stop at a home probably a relative or friend of one of the disciples. In Mark's gospel, chapter 7 it says they were in a house. They were not in Jewish country. They were in Gentile country. The Jews and Gentiles did not have much to do with each other. Jesus took time to show His love and concern for the Gentiles. For many, many years the only distinction made in the Bible was you were either a Jew or a Gentile. But after Jesus formed the church...He made it clear that salvation is for all people.

Regardless, if they were black, white, Jew, Gentile, man, woman; salvation is to all people.

This home probably was Jewish...with Jewish traditions and customs. They were probably having a meal together.

While in this home, a lady from the area, which Matthew calls a Canaanite, a woman of Canaan, comes begging Jesus to deliver her daughter from a demon. You and I may not really react hearing that she was a woman of Canaan but to Matthew's audience, the Jews, it meant one thing...enemies. The Canaanites were long-standing enemies with the Jews. Here Jesus was with his disciples spending some time in enemy territory. But this woman comes into the very house, and begs for Jesus' help. She addresses Jesus with a title, that only the Jews would understand. She says, "Lord, Son of David" That was a title for the Messiah. Gentile people did not have that kind of belief. This woman grew up in a country where they had beliefs in many gods. They had a god of the sun, a god of the rain, a god of wind...a god

for this, and a god for that. This woman grew up believing that. All of those multiple gods could not help her. She had a daughter severely tormented by a demon. She needed real help. Somewhere along the

way, the name Jesus was brought up. She had to have heard about Jesus from somewhere. She heard the title “Son of David” the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior, and she took advantage of this moment.

She said, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed.”

But Jesus, answered her not a word. Jesus put this lady, for the moment, ON HOLD! Can you just imagine the length of the silence? I believe the woman repeatedly makes this request, and repeatedly begs for the help of Jesus. The next verse says one of the disciples urges Jesus to “send the woman away, for she cries after us.” There is silence from Jesus. Not a word is spoken!

What do you do when God puts you on hold? Everyone else has received an answer, but now you’ve been placed on hold! What do you do?

First, Keep on trusting in Jesus. You’ve got to keep on trusting in the God Who has always been faithful in the past. I’ve never known of a case that was too difficult for Jesus. With God nothing is impossible!

This woman only gets the silent treatment. Does that mean Jesus is uncaring, and unconcerned? Absolutely, not! The woman of Canaan did not walk away. She kept on trusting in Jesus. She believed Jesus will eventually speak. That’s what we have got to do. We must keep on trusting in Jesus because He’s been faithful in the past, and because He will eventually speak to our need. When God puts You on hold, just remember He has a word for you.

Hang on...stay on the line...You may not get that word immediately, but eventually, He will speak to your very need. Keep on praying. God will speak to you. Keep on reading the Bible, Jesus has a message just for you.

Don’t think you’re the only one. Many Bible characters wondered when God would speak. Job lost his family, He lost his health, he lost the confidence of his wife, He lost all of his wealth. God allowed Satan to touch his life and all those bad things came upon Job. God never told Job the reason why. Job wondered why. Why doesn’t God speak to me?

There was Abraham. He was 100 years old before his first son was born. For many years Abraham wondered not why, but when? When will my son come? When will

my wife Sarah give birth? For many years Abraham kept on believing God, even when God placed Abraham on hold. Even the

prophets wondered “how long?” When will the Messiah come? After the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, there is a period of time that’s been called the “silent years.” For 400 years nothing new was brought up.

No new revelation. From the last book of the Old Testament to the first book of the New Testament, Matthew, a 400 year span of silence. It is as if God put the entire world on hold.

So, you keep on trusting Jesus, because He will eventually speak. God will eventually speak but there was one time, one time when God did not speak. When Jesus hung on the cross, Jesus cried out “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me.” Jesus did not get a response at that present moment. But Jesus was committed to the Heavenly Father. Jesus said after that, “Father into thy hands I commit my spirit...”

So far, we’ve heard two voices: the voice of the mother, “Lord have mercy on me.” And then that of the disciple, “Send her away..”

But Jesus will not send her away. Jesus has said, “all that come to me, I will in no wise cast out.” Jesus now speaks: “I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel.” Jesus was not saying the blessings of God are only for Israel. Jesus was not saying that salvation was only for the Jews. He was saying that God had sent Him to offer salvation to the Jewish people first.

When God puts you on hold, keep on trusting Jesus.

When God puts you on hold, take inventory of where you stand with God. Where do you stand with God? Where did Israel stand with God? Jesus said they were lost. Someone might argue, “Yeah, but wait,

I’m a Jew.” So, what difference does that make. Someone might say,

“Wait a minute, I’m a church member,” So, what difference does that make with God. Without Jesus, we are all lost in our sins.

This woman’s approach to Jesus was like this....

Don't miss this...it's very easy to miss this. Look at verse 22 she says, "Lord, Son of David." She came with a Jewish approach. His disciples besought him, Send her away..." The disciples were saying..."Lord, she's not one of us....she's trying to be, but she's not Jewish.....Jesus said, "I've come only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The next thing the woman says...."Lord, help me" She got down on her knees and worshiped him. She dropped the title, "Son of David" She dropped her Jewish approach.....She got on her knees in a helpless and humble way and said, 'Lord, help me.'

When God puts you on hold, take inventory of where you stand before God. What are you holding up to the Lord for his approval? Jesus did not meet her need based on her nice, kind words, and her gracious way of greeting the Lord with that title, "Son of David." Remember, folks, we don't come to Jesus through a Baptist door or through a Methodist door or even a Lutheran door; we come to Jesus through the sinner's door. That's the only way anyone can get to Jesus."

Jesus was not being disrespectful when he said, "it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus was not calling her a dog but Gentiles were often called dogs. The woman said, "I know I'm called a dog, but even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." I know we got a nickname, but that should not stop me from getting a blessing from the Lord. This woman, she did not care what others may call her. She was willing to even have the Lord use that name, that embarrassing name, that degrading name of a dog. Even if that is the position the Lord wants her to be, that's okay with her, because she has a desperate need. She has a daughter who is desperately hurting. She is praying for her daughter to be delivered from those tormenting demons in her life. This woman was confessing her total dependence upon God. With this lady, There were no strings attached. Lord, you can call me what you want. You can place me anywhere at the table you please. You can put me on the table, or under the table with the dogs. I'm hanging on for a blessing. I'll take the crumbs if necessary. I'm depending on you.

Based on the Word of God, if you will commit your all to Jesus, He will speak to your personal need. He will speak peace to your Heart. He will give you strength for your trying days. He will give you wisdom in what to do in a given situation. He will give you His presence in the time of loneliness. Jesus said, "Woman, great is your faith; let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed from that moment.

When you have to wait for the answer, keep your eyes on Jesus. Keep your faith in God.

AMEN!!

“WHAT’S RIGHT WITH THE CHURCH?”

Message for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

August 23, 2026

ISAIAH 51: 1-6 ☸ ROMANS 12: 1-8 ☸ MATTHEW 16: 13-20

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 visited another church while you were on vacation or maybe just to take a break from your regular church? As soon as service was over, you caught yourself pointing out what was wrong with that church. Their bulletin was different than ours. Their order of service was different than ours. Their nursery wasn't clearly marked. Their pastor stood in one place the entire time he was preaching. You're picking out petty things that cannot possibly affect the way a person will worship if his heart is right with God.

Now then, if you have ever done that, instead of pointing out what is wrong with the church, why not point out what is right with the church? What are some things to consider?

For one thing, the Church has the right foundation. Everything must have a proper foundation. Whether it is a marriage, a building, or a church, it should have a proper foundation..

1 Cor. 3:11: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.”

The church has the right foundation because Jesus is that foundation!

Secondly, the Church has the right leadership. The leadership sets the pace for the body. What is the leadership of the church?

Some people say the deacons. If we follow the verse in Acts 6,3: Therefore friends, select for yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task.” This is the NSRV version, not

the King James version. And it's clear from this verse that the deacons are chosen by a higher authority so they are not the leader; besides, where would we get seven men just to fill deacons' positions.

Some people say the pastor is the leader of the church. Consider what Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus. "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." But even here we see that the office of pastor was given by One of higher authority.

To clearly understand the leadership of the church we need to look at Paul's teachings about marriage. "For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church: the body of which He is the Savior." God's Word clearly tells us that Jesus is the head of the church because He is the Savior. The deacons cannot be the head because they are not the Savior. The pastor cannot be the head because he has no nail scars in his hands.

The church has the right leadership because Jesus is that leadership!

Then, thirdly, the Church has the right doctrine.

Doctrine is simply that which we teach. Some teach truth. Some teach falsehood. Those who teach falsehood pervert the Word of God. Those who teach truth affirm the Word of God. John said, "Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son." The church has the right doctrine because Jesus is that doctrine!

Of course, the Church has to have the right purpose, number four.

Every organization has a purpose. The purpose of IBM is to make computers and to make money. The purpose of a school is to teach students. The purpose of Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous is to help people overcome addiction and dependency on these items. Even the church has a purpose. Jesus told us what that is when He said, "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, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age. This is the

Great Commission that we've all heard many times from Matthew 28 vv 19/20.

The church has the right purpose because sharing Jesus is that purpose!

The Church has the right reward.

Nobody does nothing for nothing. We work 40 hours a week because we expect a paycheck at the end of the week. We plant a garden because we expect to harvest fresh vegetables. We all expect a reward of some kind, and the church is no different. We sing "Will there be any stars in my crown" because we expect not only a crown, but stars, too!

1. Jesus promises us a reward. In the book of Revelation He says, "And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be." But He doesn't say what that reward is. Is it fame? Wealth? Power?

2. To find what our reward will be, we need to go back to the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. While Abraham was traveling away from his family and home, God spoke to him in a vision saying, "Fear not, Abraham: I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward." Did you get that? God Himself is our reward! Again the book of Revelation tells us in Chapter 22 we "shall see His face." We will see Jesus!

The church has the right reward because Jesus is that reward!

Anybody can tell you what's wrong with the church but I want to tell you what's right with the church. What's right with the church? Jesus!

As we read Matthew 16's text this morning, it helps to realize that (for the last couple of years) Jesus has been training His disciples for a fight that they don't even understand as yet. His disciples knew they were being trained for something. Jesus had been working with them for over two years by having them follow Him wherever He went. For months, these disciples had listened to Jesus as He taught. They had watched as He healed people, and fed the crowds. They had trembled as He walked upon the water and stilled the storm on the sea.

Physically, they had begun to get into shape. But, they needed something else. They needed an edge. They needed to be trained in how to think.

What we read about in our text was a critical part of that part of their training. For this session Jesus takes them out of the familiar world of Galilee and Judea and

into an unsettling world just across the border, into pagan territory.

He takes them to the capital of the Roman province in Judea, the seat of the governors or procurators that ruled their land, and the headquarters of the Roman troops.

Caesarea Philippi was the heart of the kind of pagan worship God had always condemned.

As Jesus stood there, He was surrounded by numerous idols and pagan gods that populated the region (14 temples to Baal, one to Caesar and a nearby cave was rumored to have been the birth place of the Greek God of Nature: Pan)

This was an unsettling atmosphere for “good” religious Jews, for this was indeed the gateway to Hell.

Embodied in all those idols and temples was the power of paganism, the wickedness of ungodliness, the dominion of Satan himself. It was a scary place for good Jewish men to be. And it’s here that Jesus takes His disciples to prepare them mentally for the fight that will lay ahead of them.

He begins this part of their training with a simple question: Who do people say the Son of Man is?

Like children in a class room, the disciples begin to shout out their answers: “Some say you are John the Baptist;” “Teacher, there are others who say you are Elijah;” Another one raises his hand and says “I heard someone down at the market say you were Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

As I visualized this in my mind, I could see Jesus nod in approval as he saw his disciples warm to the discussion. I can almost see Him smile as He then asks the real question He had in mind: Ok, now, who do you say that I am?

His question is met with silence; they weren’t used to thinking about Jesus that way. They had walked with Jesus for some time now. He was their constant companion, their teacher, their friend. They worshiped Him, but they had never thought about this question.

Until Peter, perhaps frustrated by their silence or ignorance, jumps right in: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus pats Peter on the back – "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven."

And you almost find yourself thinking; Alright Peter, at least you know what's going on; at least you understand who Jesus is. You are plugged in; you're mentally focused; you're ready for the fight that lies ahead.

BUT THEN, as Jesus proceeds to tell His disciples that "He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

Peter shows that he doesn't really get it. He doesn't really understand.

He jumps right in again and objects: Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" But this is next week's Gospel. Just a few moments before Jesus had complimented Peter... but now He rebukes him. Again next week's gospel.

Now many of you are "physically" ready for the battle.

Some of you have gone to church for years. You attended Sunday School as a youth and even as an adult. Some of you may have "perfect attendance" pins from your youth. Some of you can recite all the Bible books in their order or find any passage you want in a matter of moments. You've been to Bible studies.

Physically, you may be in shape... But the question you need to ask yourselves now is this: are you mentally ready? Do you know what you need to know to give you the edge?

Jesus took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi for a reason.

He wanted them to understand the seriousness of what they were getting into. He wanted them to realize that this wasn't a game... This was going to be a deadly struggle for the hearts and minds of mankind. And so, He wanted to bring them face to face with Hell itself.

I have noticed that some of the most powerful witnesses for Christ have been those who have been to the gates of hell, and they haven't liked what they have seen. They've been the drunks, the drug users, the sexually promiscuous. The type of

people Jesus associated with: the prostitutes and tax collectors. The dregs of society, the sinners who everyone despised.

These people know what hell looks like, and they don't want to live there anymore and they don't want anyone else going there either.

Jesus wants us to understand: we are in a struggle with an ungodly world. A world that doesn't think like we do. A world that doesn't act like we do. A world that is held captive by Satan, by the power of guilt and shame and selfishness.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus asks a very pointed question: "Who do you say that I am?" that sounds like he has an identity complex.

Peter answers the question, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

If Peter is right, and Jesus is the Son of God as our liturgy proclaims, then God must be loving, merciful, and compassionate. God even loves us enough to allow us to be vulnerable with our struggles and shortcomings—instead of playing the "actor" and pretending like everything is perfect.

Who is Jesus? If he's God's Son, then our opportunity is to act on the world in love.

Who is Jesus? He's the one who shows us the true nature of God, love. He's the one who empowers us to act on the world in love.

Something happens when Peter makes his confession. Jesus changed his name to Petros... stone.

When we commit to follow the example of Jesus, transformation occurs in us.

Who is Jesus? He's the one who liberates us to love and empowers us to transform.

When we understand God's nature as love, and we take the liberating message of love to the world, things transform, and walls come down.

To ask who is Jesus is to ask who we are.

Amen.

[Defying the Doubt: Faith When the Forecast is Clear – Hymn: Just as I Am]

“God talked to Noah, and Noah listened.”

Message for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Sylvia Gardner

August 30, 2026

We have all heard it, the story of Noah and the ark. A boat overflowing with animals and a rainbow beaming in the background are the beloved images our children's authors paint.

But there is more to this story than butterflies and rainbows. There were emotions, despair, and perseverance. Genesis 6 gets straight to the point with, “The Lord saw that humanity had become evil on the earth ...” and God was pressing a reset button for mankind.

Faithful, God fearing Noah was chosen to build an ark, to not only escape the flood, but become part of a story that would teach active faith, patience and full reliance on God.

It was faith that made Noah hear God's warnings about things in the future that he could not see. Faith isn't about what we see now; it's about believing in what God has promised.

Noah did everything just as God commanded him.

Noah built an ark for a flood he had never seen, in a desert, and in clear weather, ignoring ridicule to obey God.

Noah spent roughly 100 years building an ark in a place with no signs of rain. His actions seemed irrational to the world, yet he chose to trust God over his own senses.

As Noah built, hauling trees, sawing boards, shaping the ark, closing the door when the rains came and while he waited, adrift on a new sea, he must have fought against his doubt and despair and fought to hold onto hope. The hope that his heart knew was the anchor and the perseverance he needed to survive.

Noah had been obedient to God's commands putting his hope in God when no one else would, but after 40 days and 40 nights of rain he sat waiting 150 more days - 5 months - for his next encounter with that outside world.

He may have thought, "did I do this right, is God still with us?" or maybe "I want to trust, but I'm scared, God are you there?"

We do not like to wait. Laying our timeline and desires down at God's feet - that's tough! Yet, waiting on God produces a renewed sense of trust in who He is every time ... always consistent and always faithful.

Remember Noah's situation during the "in between" moments of this story. Put yourself in Noah's sandals. The mixture of emotions Noah must have felt; sorrow and gratitude interchanging as he floated along.

Noah realizing how grateful he was that God has spared him, yet knowing so many others had drowned. Joy and fear tossing back and forth like the waves beneath him. Joy in knowing he and his family had survived, but fear of the unknown as he peered up from the dark, dreary boat wondering when God would speak again.

In our own lives, there are going to be voices of doubt. Voices of doubt can come from a lot of places—from critics, from competition, from Satan, from friends and family. But the loudest and the biggest voices of doubt can come from inside us.

Doubt itself is not sinful or wrong. It often can be the catalyst to new spiritual growth. Faith that survives doubt is the strongest of all. For in our honest doubting, we encounter the presence and power of God. No doubt about it!

Faith is the antidote to fear and doubt in our lives. Faith is believing and acting upon what is not yet visible.

Noah couldn't see the flood, but he believed what God told him. You can't always see God's destiny for you either. But when you trust your future to God—when you are sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see—the voices of doubt will fade.

Fast forward to God breaking the silence for Noah. Genesis 8 says, "But God remembered Noah," and commanded them to "come out of the ark." God remembering in this moment is not that He forgot; God never forgets. God remembers all His promises to us even when we are caught in a sea of doubt.

God can handle your doubts, your fears, your worries, and all your unanswered questions. He's a big God. He runs the universe without any help. Your doubts won't upset him.

God never turns an honest doubter away. Never. Come to him with your doubts, your skepticism, your unbelief, your hard questions, your uncertainties. He welcomes your hardest questions. Doubt is not a sin. Tell him your doubts, cry out and ask for his help.

This life, that sometimes feels like a wild boat ride with a zoo, has a parallel and contrast to Noah's story. As followers of Jesus Christ, we may be called by God to take action with our faith.

It may require patience as we fight a storm of emotions. But the difference from Noah's story is God already gave us the final destination and the next step: the promise of Heaven through Jesus Christ.

Stand firm in the storm as you wait. Allow God's promises of faithfulness to shine bright in your heart.

Don't let your doubts keep you from Jesus. Come to him just as you are—and bring your doubts with you. He will not turn you away.

The third verse of the hymn that we just sang: "Just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt."

Fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

And the fifth verse contains the gospel promise:

Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;

Because thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Amen

“IS CHURCH A DIRTY WORD?”

Message for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

September 6, 2026

EZEKIEL 33: 7-11 ☸ ROMANS 13: 8-14 ☸ MATTHEW 18: 15-20

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

Jesus said to the disciples, “If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector.”

Did you know that 45% of Christians don’t belong to any church but profess, at the same time, to be Christians and believe in Jesus Christ? If so many professing Christians do not belong to a church, then the question needs to be asked, why join a church? Why go to church? Can’t I be just as good a Christian at home, saying my own devotions, doing my own good deeds, praying my own prayers, and watching church on TV in the comfort of my own living room? Why go to church? On that note, I’ve titled my message “Is Church a Dirty Word?”

Speaking of the church: HERE ARE THE TOP 9 THINGS YOU’LL PROBABLY NEVER HEAR IN CHURCH 9. Hey! It’s my turn to sit in the front pew! 8. Pastor, I was so captivated, I never noticed your sermon went over 25 minutes. 7. Personally, I find witnessing much more enjoyable than golf. 6. I’ve decided to give our church the \$500.00/month I used to send to TV evangelists. 5. I volunteer to be the permanent teacher for the teenage Sunday School class. 4. I love it when we sing hymns I’ve never heard before! 3. Since we’re all here, let’s start the service early. 2. Pastor, we’d like to send you to this Bible seminar in the Bahamas. And the number one thing you’ll probably never hear in church: 1. Could you please preach more about money!

This Friday our great country will mark the 25th anniversary of 9-1-1. As President George W Bush said, “We will never forget.” Yes, we want to but we can’t. Over 3000 people lost their lives in those attacks

After the tragic and devastating attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center and the field in Pennsylvania on that fateful September 11th, one word suddenly burst into the global arena of conversation. It was the word ‘evil.’ It was a word that many people began using to describe what happened on that bright early morning. And why not? No other word better captures the horror that took place. The downing of the commercial airplanes, the felling of the World Trade Center, the damaging of the Pentagon building, and the slaughter of thousands of innocent people was nothing less than bold-faced evil, dramatically played out on a highly visible international stage.

What a strange irony it was for us Christians to suddenly hear so many men and women making liberal use of a word that just one day earlier they might have rejected as an expression from a bygone era. It was as if, for the first time, they had undeniable evidence that there is at work within human experience, a massive, inexplicable, unmanageable, and sinister dynamic that is capable of producing untold pain and destruction.

Here’s the thing; god has been telling us this all along. The whole Bible conveys that something has gone wrong in the world and that only Christ can make it right. If we read between the lines of Jesus’ comments in Matthew 18, we’re led to conclude that God is particularly distressed about evil as it relates to his church.

One church that shall remain nameless had a gifted pastor, a large budget, and an expansive mission program. What’s more, it was the pride and joy of a struggling mainline denomination. Then the roof caved in. For reasons never made public, the pastor and the associate pastor couldn’t get along. People took sides. Harsh words were exchanged and in the end there was a church-wide exodus. How devastating it was to see such a prosperous congregation reduced to a shell of its former self with survival, not ministry, as its principal concern.

It’s no wonder that Jesus prayed as He did, in the upper room, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Many question today, why they should go to church? Many ask of what value is the church for my faith life?

We go to church because God commanded it in the 3rd commandment. Jesus says He fulfilled the law and if we are in Christ, then we are in the church. Beyond that, He gave to the church this authority of forgiving sins. It says clearly in our texts that the authority of Christ to forgive sins works through the church. Contrary to popular belief, the church does have authority. In the U.S. today, we have so individualized our faith, we have so personalized Christ, that we forget that Christ himself established the church through the disciples.

For many today, the church is seen like the people in the following story: "Some people were sitting in a boat. One of them begins to bore a hole beneath the section of the ship where he was sitting. His friends ask, "What are you doing there?" He says to them, "Of what concern is it to you? Am I not boring a hole in my section of the ship?" They replied, "But the water is coming in and sinking the ship under us!!!"

We have gotten so wrapped up in the "ME" generation, in the "ME" lifestyle, that we forget our actions affect those around us. As we decide to forget the church, as we forget to be loyal to the church, as we so individualize our faith, we lose the fellowship, the corporate dimension of the church. The church becomes nothing important to us, because we sense we are somehow above the church.

We forget we have been called together by God through Christ and the Holy Spirit to be in and of the church. We forget that the church has authority in our lives. This group of people called together in the name of Christ is not something people thought of, but God created the church. He created the church and gave to the church some authority in His name.

Why go to church?? We go to church to receive, to be part of God's community in which we receive from God that which we cannot find anywhere else. In the church, we find forgiveness of sins. In the church we find the sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In the church, we find God's complete revelation for us as His people. The church comes together as many people to receive from God. Jesus says: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be also."

We gather in His name so we might receive his full revelation. So, yes you can stay home, but you will be missing something. If you never come to church, you

would miss a vital element in your faith life, that is, the authority Christ gave to the church to forgive sins in His name.

Let us make this point crystal clear. The authority to forgive sins belongs to the church in Christ's name, but the power belongs to Christ, Himself.

This authority has caused much confusion in the church. It has led to a denial of this authority, so that those who want to control God, to manipulate Him, can do so.

As one controls God, a person feels one has no responsibility for actions, beliefs or convictions of faith except to God. This kind of confusion leads one to be very judgmental of another's faith. In this confusion, God has little life in and of himself, but only life as the believer gives. In this sense, God cannot meddle or reprimand or quicken conscience, because He has no authority only what is given Him. In this confusion, the believer is at the center stage of faith, not God. As this evolves, then one becomes very judgmental, judging everyone else by one's own idea of faith and life.

A poet said this: Don't find fault with the man who limps or stumbles along life's road unless you have worn the shoes he wears or struggled beneath his load. There may be tacks in his shoes that hurt, though hidden away from our view.

If placed on your back, the burden he bears might cause you to stumble too.

God gave this authority to the church, not as a way for us to become judges, but as a way for the church to be reconcilers of people. The church is to be the ground where people are brought together in Christ's name, brought together with one another and with Christ. The church is not a place where division abounds, but where reconciliation happens. Here in the church, people are brought into a freeing relationship with God as they are freed from sin and the door of the kingdom of God is opened. This freeing, this opening, this forgiveness happens here in the church. Here one encounters the power of Christ's forgiveness so that we might become one with Him and with our neighbor in faith.

"In this power of reconciliation, the church becomes the place where true feelings are present. Here in the church people can be and should feel free to be "real" with their emotions. Here we can be "real" because we are freed by forgiveness to allow ourselves to be open to another in Christ. When people are "real" with each other, then an honest relationship takes place and growth in faith can happen. If here in

the church we are phony, pretending with one another, then there will not be a freedom to trust another and the church will be filled with people who stagnate in their faith.

When "forgiveness" denies that there is anger, acts as though it never happened, smiles as though it never hurt, fakes as though it's all forgotten----don't offer it. Don't trust it. Don't depend on it. It's not forgiveness. It's a fantasy."1

But the church isn't owned by anyone, or controlled by any group. The church received its authority and commission from God. The authority to forgive sins and the commission to Baptize. You and I do not own the church, its pews, any classes, even the pastor. It all belongs to God. We know we don't own these but sometimes we act like we do. We act like we do when we keep things for ourselves and refuse to co-operate. We act like we do when we make our decisions based on our wills and not upon what Jesus has taught or what is best for the congregation. We act like we do when we keep both church and Gospel for ourselves instead of reaching out to the community.

Sometimes we get mixed up.

How hypocritical is it for me to use Jesus' words if I don't read all of what he says?

Because if you continue on in the Gospel text, it says: "go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."

You see, the whole point of this confrontation is not to belittle. It's not to judge. It's not to call on the carpet. It's not to turn away. It's to turn the person back to God. It's to bring the person back into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Do people need to know, do people need to hear that they are sinners? Yes.

But they also need to hear the loving words of forgiveness. They need to know that no matter how bad society thinks they are, no matter how bad they think they are, God loves them.

And He's already proven it by sending His Son to die for them.

The biggest mystery in my life is understanding how this God that reigns in the heavens above. This God that created life. This God that formed the mountains and the rivers and the oceans and the stars and the planets. This God that has His hand in everything that happens in this entire universe, in this planet, in this country, and in this state, also has me.

He holds me in the palm of His great and wonderful hand and promises me that I am forgiven.

He promises me that I am His child.

I don't understand it. I can't intellectually figure it out.

All I can do is relish it. All I can do is fall on my knees and be grateful for it. All I can do is love and give thanks and praise to Him who loved me first.

Martin Luther put it like this in his explanation to the Fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, where we are taught to say, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

For everything that Baptism and the Lord's Supper – externally appointed as signs – can accomplish, that also this sign (forgiving others) can do for the strengthening and cheering of our conscience. It is a sign that we are privileged to use and practice every hour.

When we forgive others as Christ has forgiven us, we show the love of God and strengthen our faith.

Live in His forgiveness.

Amen.

“GOD’S FORGIVENESS VS OUR FORGIVENESS”

Message for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

September 13, 2026

GENESIS 50: 15-21 ☸ ROMANS 14: 1-12 ☸ MATTHEW 18: 21-35

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

While I was preparing this message, I came across a couple of interesting items. Did you know that 45% of Christians don’t belong to any church but profess, at the same time, to be Christians and believe in Jesus Christ? Now then, since we’re not supposed to judge, and if so many professing Christians do not belong to a church, then the question needs to be asked, why join a church? Why go to church? Can’t I be just as good a Christian at home, saying my own devotions, doing my own good deeds, praying my own prayers, and watching church on TV in the comfort of my own living room and if I need to forgive someone, let me just forgive them! That works, doesn’t it? Why go to church?

This past Friday, our great country marked the 25th anniversary of 9-1-1. It was definitely nothing to celebrate; it was nothing short of horrific. As President George W Bush said, “We will never forget.” Yes, we want to but we can’t. 2977 people lost their lives in those attacks not to mention those who have passed away due to illnesses incurred by the dust and all from the bombings.

Can we forgive them for that horrific incident? Better yet, how can we ever forgive them?

Closer to home, if you hurt me, how can I ever forgive you? A couple of reasons: Because God has forgiven me; and because God gives me the strength to do so.

How can I ever forgive you? You have hurt me for the last time! How many times have we heard or said these types of statements? In the Lord’s Prayer we ask our

heavenly Father to forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us, so how can we not want to forgive someone? Each Sunday when we pray the Lord's prayer, have we become so numb that we do not think about what we are saying? Any time we feel that we are inclined to withhold our forgiveness, this petition of the Lord's Prayer should immediately stand out in our minds: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It's interesting to note that other versions say 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,' which is in line with our Gospel today.

In our first reading that was read, Joseph's brothers are concerned about Joseph bearing a grudge against them, which he had every right to do. They came up with a lie to try to convince Joseph. "Your father gave this instruction before he died. Say to Joseph, I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you. Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father. We are here as your slaves. Joseph has no intention of making any of them his slaves, though in his position he could have, but he said 'Do not be afraid. Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' Talk about a forgiving brother.

Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" For Peter to ask this question, he must have thought that he was being very generous. The rabbinical teaching was that three times were sufficient to forgive. Imagine what Peter must have felt when Jesus told him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy seven times." Some Bible translations have seventy times seven, which comes out to four hundred ninety. The total amount here is not important. Jesus was not telling Peter that you have to forgive your brother 490 times and on 491 it's okay not to. Besides who can keep track of the times you have forgiven another? Jesus was telling Peter to forgive your brother every time he sins against you. It does not matter how often he sins against you. Think how many times God has forgiven you and me for the sins we commit on a daily basis. Think how many times we have disappointed our Heavenly Father when we fail to do what he has commanded us to do. Jesus uses a parable to explain this to us. Jesus reminds us that God has forgiven us. Out of love for what our Savior has done for us, we are also to forgive others. Sadly, we are too eager to forget what Jesus has taught us. Peter missed this lesson as well. In our portion of God's word, Jesus had to give Peter a lesson on what God requires when it comes to forgiveness. Just as God forgives us, we are to forgive others. So when we find ourselves asking, "How Can I Ever Forgive You," we can say, "Because God has forgiven me, because God gives me the strength to do so.

Jesus then told about a king and an unmerciful servant. The king is merciful to his servants just as God is merciful to us because of the sinless life, the innocent death, and the resurrection of Jesus. The king called together his servants in order to settle accounts with them.

One of these servants has a debt of 10,000 talents. What did he do with all that money anyway; over a billion dollars by some estimates? It was a debt so large that he knew he could never repay it. The debt of 10,000 talents in this time was a huge sum of money for a servant to owe. Las Vegas wasn't in existence nor was Atlantic City nor was TV gambling. A days wage for a servant was one denarius. One talent = 5000 to 6000 denarii. He owed 10000 talents! For the servant to pay off his debt would take 139,000 years working 7 days a week and giving every penny he earned to the king.

Because of his debt, the servant was about to lose all that he loved and owned. The king had every right to demand his money. The servant borrowed the money and it was his responsibility to pay it back. Even today if we do not pay what we owe, our creditors have a legal right to repossess their property. I worked in credit and collections longer than I care to talk about. I could tell you some stories.

WE MUST FORGIVE WITHOUT LIMITS:

- We must forgive no matter how BIG the offense.
- We must forgive no matter how FREQUENT the offense.
- Our sins have been ABUNDANTLY PARDONED. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7).
- Our sins have been REMOVED FROM US AS FAR AS THE EAST IS FROM THE WEST. "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12).
- Our sins have been CLEANSED AS WHITE AS SNOW AND WOOL. ". . . though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18). G. K. Chesterton said, "God

paints in many colors, but he never paints so gorgeously as when he paints in white."

- Our sins have been **THROWN INTO THE DEPTHS OF THE SEA**. ". . . thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19).
- Our sins have been **FORGOTTEN**. "Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more" (Hebrews 10:17).

There is a story that one night Martin Luther went to sleep troubled about his sin. In a dream he saw an angel standing by a blackboard, and at the top of the board was Luther's name. The angel, chalk in hand, was listing all of Luther's sins, and the list filled the blackboard. Luther shuddered in despair, feeling that his sins were so many that he could never be forgiven. But suddenly in his dream he saw a pierced hand writing above the list these words: "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." As Luther gazed in amazement, the blood flowed from the wounded hand and washed the record clean.

"Forgive us as we forgive others." Jesus' parable explains why we should forgive others – because we ourselves have first been forgiven. And Jesus also explains what are the consequences of not forgiving others – our own sins will not be forgiven.

And, so this parable explains that tiny word "as" in the Lord's Prayer: forgive us as we forgive others, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. That word "as" does not mean "because." We are NOT praying, "Lord, forgive us **BECAUSE** we forgive others." The Lord's forgiveness of our sins does not originate as a response to us: He does NOT look down from heaven and say, "My, my, look at how they're forgiving one another. I'll reward them by forgiving them their debt to me." That is **EXACTLY** what is NOT going on in the courts of heaven.

INSTEAD, the parable shows us what goes on in the courts of heaven. God the Father freely and graciously forgives those who owe him a debt wildly beyond their ability to pay. As a consequence of this, he expects that the grace he extends to debtors will be further extended by those forgiven debtors to those who are indebted to the ones whose debts are forgiven.

Christ made one sacrifice for all sins for all time. He did this for you and He did it for a wretch like me. I hope you are paying attention. The only one I accused of

wretchedness was me. You are however free to infer that a greater group was implied. God's law shows our wretchedness. The law serves as a mirror so that we can see our sins.

Our two readings today are focused on forgiveness. Between them we hear a question and two stories. Peter poses a question to Jesus: how many times must I forgive my brother? When someone repeatedly offends you, just how many times do you have to forgive them?

Peter throws out what he thinks is a very generous number: seven times. But Jesus multiplies it beyond all expectations. “No, Peter, 77 times.”

The first story we heard, from Genesis, records the final chapter in the complicated relationship between Joseph and his brothers. This family is the textbook example of a dysfunctional family! Dad plays favorites – between his wives and among his children. Naturally, this causes resentment and rifts. Joseph is the golden son, and his ten brothers hate his guts.

And then Joseph begins rubbing it in. He tells his brothers about dreams he’s had where his brothers submit to him. Finally, they grab an opportunity to get rid of their brother for good. They sell him into slavery and tell Dad that Joseph was eaten by a wild animal.

Joseph’s situation goes from bad to worse. He’s sold as a slave in Egypt. Then he winds up in prison. His prison term finally ends when he’s appointed as the Pharaoh’s assistant.

Joseph is reunited with his brothers because of a drought. They concoct a story that dear old dad made a deathbed request: “Tell Joseph to forgive his brothers.” In some ways, the old family dynamics haven’t changed a bit. The brothers still lie their way out of trouble. His response is to cry. What’s behind those tears? A lifetime of sorrow? Is he remembering all of the pain and separation he endured? Is he crying because he realizes that his brothers will never change, that they will always stick together and he’ll be the outsider?

The brothers begin to weep with him. Their future destiny is in Joseph’s hands.

He remembers the pain he endured. The tears are an acknowledgment of his many years of agony. All he felt – all the resentments, regrets and anger, all his disappointments, his loneliness, his brooding – all of it is released in his tears.

They release him from the hold his terrible, torturous past held on him. He lets it go, the tears wash away his sorrow. And what they leave is a space for forgiveness.

In dying on the cross, Jesus took upon himself the consequences of all the world's errors. We have been forgiven and freed: forgiven from our sin, and freed into a new day in Christ, as new as the day he rose from his tomb. May the divine mercies of forgiveness flow through us, that we may forgive one another.

AMEN!!