

Pentecost 17, 9.27.2020

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Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25:1-9; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

“Be of One Mind with Christ”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.* Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church!

Today’s readings are all concerned with one basic truth: God never leaves us. God always calls us, and when we return to God we receive life and unity with God and one another. This morning, Ezekiel, Paul and Jesus describe the life-giving and life-changing grace that happens when we are of the same mind - with God and one another.

In today’s gospel, Jesus was questioned about his authority by the chief priests and elders. This scene is not difficult to understand: The chief priests and elders were concerned that Jesus’ works and gospel message were undermining their own authority. In other words, the chief priests and elders were jealous and afraid of losing their authority because in Jesus, people encountered God’s life-changing love. In Jesus, sinful people experienced a change of heart and mind and returned to God.

The chief priests and elders, however, did not want to lose their authority to an upstart rabbi from Nazareth. Now authority is a funny thing. People in authority often don’t want to give it up, but at the same time many in authority do not really want to become servants of all. Jesus was aware of this, and so taught a parable about a man with two sons.

At the end of the parable, Jesus asked, “*Which of the two did the will of his father?*” The chief priests and elders said, “*The first.*” Jesus said to them, “*Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.*”

The meaning of the parable is clear, the chief priests and elders did not respond to God’s call to humble themselves and become servants in the vineyard. They saw the response to John the Baptist’s ministry and yet did not believe in John. The chief priests and elders were “outwardly” religious, yet “inwardly” they had not experienced the repentance that leads to a change of mind, and to becoming servants of God.

In contrast, Jesus explained that the tax collectors and prostitutes – “the sinful people” - knew their own sinfulness and their need of God’s grace. Yes, they may have been wayward, but like the son who later changed his mind in the parable, the tax collectors and prostitutes experienced that

moment of self-realization - that moment of grace - in which they knew they needed God's help. They changed their minds and began new lives of thankful and loving service to God.

Jesus is describing the great paradox of the Christian faith: The last become first and the first become last. The thankful and loving servant is exalted and enters the kingdom of God. The arrogant, unrepentant and unthankful are sent away.

Now parables are a bit like road signs. Road signs point to destinations. Road signs point, in the clearest terms possible, to a reality further up the road. Jesus tells parables to describe the kingdom of God and point to the path upon which we can safely travel to arrive in God's kingdom.

Yet, imagine for a moment what traveling would be like if there were no signs on the roads. No directions, no warnings, no speed limits, nothing to direct us, nothing to start us, nothing to stop us. Would you want to venture out on such a road? God's word, Jesus' parables, the sacraments, the church are all signs that point us toward the reality of God's kingdom, helping us to get there together. All we need is an open mind and heart to travel in the direction that Jesus points us toward.

I think all of us can perhaps identify with the first son in the parable. Like the first son, perhaps we have resisted the signs Jesus has given us, but afterwards with a bit of honesty, courage, and humility we have changed our minds and gone out into the vineyard. All of us have reconsidered, changed our minds, and gone to the aid of someone in need. Perhaps we have also experienced someone coming to help us when we have been in need, anxious, fearful or alone.

The reading from Ezekiel today gives us a historical example. Israel was in exile, through no fault but their own – their own sin against God. The consequences of their sin led to their exile and separation from the community of their homeland and community with God. Israel had sinned, and yet Israel had the audacity to complain, saying it that was God who is unfair. Like the first son, Israel resisted God's loving call to obedient service. Israel blamed God, yet God came to Israel in exile. God said, "*Is it not your ways that are unfair?*"

God was reminding Israel that by following other gods and ignoring the needs of the poor it was they who had been unfair. God gave Israel a sign that pointed to the kingdom saying, "*Get your selves a new heart and a new spirit! Turn then, and live.*"

We, too, are a people in exile. Due to a pandemic, we too are a society in exile from familiar patterns, from family, friends and community. Most of us have never experienced communal exile of this magnitude. Our lives have become fragmented, and we are trying to cope, but it's not easy.

Like Israel, we play the “blame game,” blaming leaders, elected officials, teachers, the government, even blaming God.

We long for a return from exile; we long for unity in our public, family, and religious lives. These past months unity has proved extremely elusive. Racial and social unrest have only made it harder to find unity with God and neighbor during a time of exile. Yet, Ezekiel reminds us that God was still with Israel even in their exile, and that God is with us now.

Ezekiel and Jesus remind us that unity in our lives begins with unity with God. Unity comes from a change of mind that leads us to view ourselves, God and others, as one family sharing a common future with a shared roadmap leading to God’s kingdom.

Today Paul also encourages us in Philippians to remain united as the body of Christ. In one of the most powerful passages of the New Testament, Paul writes, “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.*”

Paul was writing to the Philippians because they were a church divided, exiled from one another. Paul recognized that churches are subject to the same dangers as every human community. People want their own way. People have pet projects. People are ambitious. People are selfish. People say one thing and do another. People are sinful. Paul recognized that unity in the church begins with sharing unity in Christ.

So Paul used the example of Christ who emptied himself of all Godly power and authority, becoming a servant who lived in obedient service for others. Christ emptied himself of everything so that we could see what love and service for others looks like. This word “to empty” is “*kenosis*” in Greek, and means a “pouring out” of everything. In pouring himself out, Jesus became poor that we might become rich in grace. The chief priests and elders complained because Jesus emptied himself to serve the least of these, the sinful, the weak, the vulnerable.

Some years ago, my wife and I served a two-point parish in southern Japan. The smaller of the two churches was a country church named Asa Lutheran Church. It was the only Christian church in the entire county. It was a sign of God’s presence in an overwhelmingly Buddhist world - a single Christian community, in exile, as it were.

As we began to work there, we heard of a woman named Mrs. Sueta who had been a founding member of Asa Lutheran Church. Though no longer alive, her name and example lived on. Mrs.

Sueta had emptied herself for the mission of Christ. Mrs. Sueta always spoke of “giving thanks” for what God was doing. Mrs. Sueta loved others in that community always pointing to God’s kingdom drawing near. Against all odds, but certainly through the thankful and loving service of people like Mrs. Sueta, that small church continues to point to Christ today. Each of us has a role to play in God’s mission in this world. Each of us are called to empty ourselves in love for others.

When we follow Christ, like Mrs. Sueta, we follow the one who on the night in which he was betrayed also “gave thanks” with bread and wine, and at that last meal also gave his disciples a new commandment “to love one another.” With thanksgiving and with love, Jesus emptied himself on the cross, giving his life for the world. Thankfulness and love continue to be the signposts that Jesus gives us pointing us toward new life in the kingdom and away from separation in exile.

We might be in exile socially, politically, culturally, and ethnically from one another, but Jesus comes to us where we are. Jesus comes to us in our exiles saying will you follow me again today? Will you empty yourself of all pride and sin, so that you might be filled with love, so that you might give thanks in everything?

Like the father asking the son to go out into the vineyard, Jesus asks us to change our minds, and to empty ourselves of everything that stands in the way of God’s love.

Empty yourself again of your fears. Empty yourself again of your anxiety. Empty yourself again of your doubt, so that Christ might fill you *again* with loving and thankful hearts and minds.

Jesus emptied himself for each of us. Jesus calls us to empty ourselves in loving service to others. Empty yourself and go in love to others in their exiles. In doing so, we share the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. Amen.