

✝ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

TWO WEEKS AGO, we heard about Sabbath rest, for it was on the Sabbath, at a dinner party, when Jesus gave a lesson to the host and the guests of the dinner party to which he was invited: “Don’t take the place of honor. Don’t invite your friends and family. Don’t refuse the invitation you’ve been given.”

Don’t take the place of honor. For who is the one who is worthy of all honor? Jesus, the King of Glory. Don’t invite your friends and family. For the Lord has extended his invitation to *any* and to *all* who will come, and we are likewise to open ourselves to all those forgotten, neglected, and lowly in our midst. Don’t refuse the invitation you’ve been given.

Likewise, neither let us not be too proud or too complacent to be in the midst of our Lord and his saints. For we have been invited to the great feast, so let us not find ourselves too busy or too distracted by other cares to attend.

LAST WEEK, we heard more about division, the division that Jesus brings into families — even into our own lives. We heard that hatred of father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and one’s own life is conditional to discipleship: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate [his family and himself] ... he cannot be my disciple.”

This call to hate our family and ourselves comes *chronologically* after Jesus’ call to love our enemies, to do them good, and to forgive if we are to be forgiven. Whatever this hatred means, it has to also mean loving enemies, doing them good, and forgiving them. So, what then does Jesus mean by this hatred?

Just as the week before, it has to do with *who occupies* the place of honor in our lives. In all things, we are to love and prefer and prioritize the Lord Jesus. We are to elevate him to the highest place of honor in our lives. We are also to *not prefer* and to lower all other things below our Lord Jesus. We must put everything else — friends, family, self — below him. Jesus must be chief, highest, and best in our lives.

And so, we reflected: Where does our Lord Jesus rank in our lives? In what places does he need to be elevated to his rightful, highest place of honor? In what places do things — perhaps even good things — need to be brought below him?

Let us be counted among those who trust our Lord Jesus, who elevate him to the highest place of honor, and who rightly order our families and ourselves and all other things below *his place*, the very highest place.

THIS MORNING, we heard the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The meaning is absolutely straightforward — the Lord Jesus *will find* his lost sheep; the Lord Jesus *will diligently find* the lost coin. We need not have anxiety or fear about whether the lost will be found, because the parable describes who Jesus is — the Shepherd who seeks out the lost.

Notice the two things that set the stage for this double-parable of lost sheep and lost coin: (1) sinners and tax collectors are *drawing near* to Jesus; (2) Pharisees and scribes are *grumbling* in response.

As usual, the Pharisees and scribes are looking to find something wrong with Jesus, and here they have found it — Jesus is dining with sinners! Perhaps they have in mind our psalm (Psalm 1) from last week: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, not stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers.” Here they have caught Jesus standing and sitting with sinners! But, of course, this psalm is not warning about simply standing or sitting, but standing and sitting *in the ways* of sinners — in other words, doing the sinful things that these sinners are doing. The irony, of course, is twofold: (1) the psalm warns about the scoffers, and here the Pharisees and scribes are doing exactly that — scoffing at Jesus; (2) they are so concerned with Jesus

dining with sinners that they have completely missed the point that *they* are sinners and Jesus has been eating with them! Indeed, Jesus eats with tax collectors and scribes and Pharisees — all of them sinners, all of them lost.

What do the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin have to say about the lost that Jesus seeks? Are there some whom he will not seek out? Is the parable only to show that the tax collectors and the sinners with them have the hope to be found? What do the parables have to say about the scribes and Pharisees?

For these parables are not *only* for the tax collectors and sinners drawing near to Jesus, but for the scribes and Pharisees, too. What were the scribes and Pharisees doing? *Grumbling*. Contrast their response with how both parables conclude: “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents” and “there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

If all of heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents, what should the response of the Pharisees and the scribes be? If the angels respond in joy, certainly the Pharisees should likewise respond rejoicing. Were any of the Pharisees and scribes convicted by Jesus’ words? Did any of them change their tune from grumbling to joy?

In the midst of telling of this beloved parable, one in which we are reminded that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, Jesus is searching for his lost sheep among the sinners, tax collectors, scribes, and Pharisees. He does not have a favorite brand of sinner — he will happily take any of the lost. The question here is — will any of these sinners, will any one of these tax collectors, scribes, or Pharisees *hear* the voice of Jesus through this parable? Who among this crowd heard this parable and joined the company of the disciples?

The Murder of Charlie Kirk

Just a few days ago, the conservative political activist, Charlie Kirk, was murdered at a rally while he was answering a question. In the days that have followed, the evil of his murder has beget even more evil — too many people, across social media and traditional media, have said something to the effect of, “Good. Good riddance. Charlie deserved it.” Some have said far worse.

Hear this. Evil brings about its own undoing. We understand this chiefly from the cross. The very thing that evil — satan and his minions — most wanted was the death of the Son of God. And yet, Christ’s death did not bring about the permanent reign of evil, but in fact brought about the beginning of evil’s unravelling — its permanent end will be on that Day our Lord Jesus returns in glory to judge the living and the dead. There, all evil will be fully and finally dealt with.

The seeds of evil which germinated in the murder of Charlie Kirk are still flowering and germinating for now — and indeed more evil and more violence may come to be through this. There are those who are continuing and perpetuating the same evil — posts throughout social and traditional media glorifying his death. And there may be, perhaps there already are, calls for violence against those who glorified his murder.

But this evil is also shocking lapsed Christians and atheists into seeking the very and only thing which is putting an end to this and every evil. This ugly evil is shocking at least some into picking up their Bibles for the first time in years or seeking out a church which will have something to say against this evil, seeking out a church which has the definitive answer to this evil. The fact that there is no answer to evil outside of Jesus is causing some to begin to turn to him, some to admit that atheism is simply not possible in a world with such evil.

And so, Charlie Kirk’s murder will bring some lost sheep into churches this morning. Let us pray that the Lord — and no one else — finds these men and women and children and brings them into the kingdom.

The chief thing about Charlie is not that he was a conservative political activist, or in his worldly success, but in the one whom he put his faith, publicly, vocally, clearly — Jesus. For Charlie is a Christian. And though his death will likely galvanize movements towards free speech or towards conservative politics, what we are chiefly hopeful

in — and what we will pray for — is that his death brings some lost sheep to be found by our Lord Jesus. For all things, as we have been hearing, belong *below* our Lord Jesus, and our Lord Jesus belongs *above* all things.

As Christians who hear these parables this morning, we must remember that our Lord looks for lost sheep indiscriminately. That is, he looks for his lost sheep among those who are heartbroken over Charlie's murder, and among those, to our horror, rejoice over his murder. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, is in the business of calling all of his sinners to repentance, of offering his mercy to those undeserving — for such was our state when we came to faith in Jesus.

Jesus did not come to win arguments with the Pharisees, or merely to dine with tax collectors and sinners, but to die for them — to die for each of them and to die for us. For it's in his death that he defeats death, satan, evil — and it's in his resurrection, that he opens the way to eternal life to all who place their hope in him.

Lord, let many place their hope in you.

What about our hope? Is the Lord Jesus our chief treasure? Does he have the highest place of honor in our lives? Are we delighted when sinners are found by him? Do we remember the great mercy he has given to us?

A Curious Chart

There was a curious chart presented at Lutheran Week. It contrasted average worship attendance and the average number of congregations in the NALC from 2016 to 2023. What was so curious about it? From 2016 to 2023, the North American Lutheran Church grew from 371 congregations to 483 congregations. And yet, over that same period, its average worship attendance did not grow, did not even remain steady, but declined from a high of 40,094 in 2016 to 36,641. In 2021, attendance dropped by 6,000.

And so, what is the Good Shepherd doing in our denomination and in this congregation?

We must be quick to remember that numbers alone are, no matter their appearance, never the only indicator of success or failure. We remember Elijah, one of the most successful prophets in the Old Testament by God's standard, who was convinced he was absolutely alone — and yet, God had 7,000 faithful followers alongside him. Always, there are these two worlds, two realities present — the way things seem by appearance, and what God is actually doing.

The clearest success among those of us who have been found by the Good Shepherd is simply this — faithfulness to Jesus for life. That is our goal, our mission, our purpose, our hope, our prayer. Faithfulness to Jesus for life.

For **Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.**

Let us then, in the confidence of Christ and his cross, in the sure and certain promise of the resurrection, and in the comfort and hope of Christ who will find the lost, be faithful to him, to the end.

✠ **All Glory be to God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, Amen.**

NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN CHURCH GROWTH AND DECLINE (2016-2024)

