

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

Good morning.

I. TWO WEEKS AGO WE HEARD the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith. We heard how Jesus responded: “if you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea’ and it would obey you.” The message is straightforward: the tiniest amount of faith is enough to follow him faithfully and to do what he asks of us.

The disciples in that moment, like us at times, believed: “If only we had enough faith! If only we had enough faith, then we could _____.” How often have we thought or believed the same? “We just need more faith.” Jesus, in return, tells the disciples — and us — in this passage: “You only need the tiniest amount of faith to do a miraculous thing.”

II. LAST WEEK WE HEARD from our Bishop, Dan Selbo, on *persistence in prayer*. He gave us a bit of a confirmation sermon on *The Lord's Prayer*, reminding us that the first three petitions are about God and his ways — the place to start in prayer is with God and with what he wants:

Make Thy Name Holy. Make Thy kingdom come. Make Thy will done. That's how the Lord's Prayer begins. And because it is our Lord's Prayer, it tells us that this is how Jesus prayed — he prioritized who God is, that his name be holy, that his kingdom come, that his will be done.

And that's why in the last verse of the Gospel lesson, where we heard: “Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?” we immediately understand that there is one who did cry to God day and night. Indeed, who? Who frequently retreated to pray, early or late, alone, on the mountain and in secluded places? Our Lord Jesus.

The Lord's Prayer was a good way to interpret this parable, because the Lord Jesus is the one who prayed persistently; he's the one who, like the widow, cries out for justice. But unlike the unjust judge, who administers justice not out of love, not even out of duty, but out of quieting the widow — God administers justice *favorably* — giving us not the justice (punishment) which we deserve and have merited, but offering us unmerited favor — grace.

And that gift — grace — is the cornerstone of the reformation.

III. THIS MORNING WE HEARD a parable about two men who went to pray.

One, by all appearances, is the right kind of man — a Pharisee, a who (according to himself) avoided extortion, adultery, injustice; a man who fasted, who gave tithes of everything. On paper, and by appearance, this Pharisee was a good man. The second, was a tax collector. And, by his own admission, we can assume *not* a good man, one who perhaps skimmed from the revenues or overcharged people on their taxes. For he, from far off, downcast, “beat[ing] his breast, [said], ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’”

Jesus tells us who God favors in this parable: the tax collector, not the Pharisee. The one who had no good reputation left justified. The one who had a good reputation left unjustified.

How can this be? Doesn't it seem cruel to do the right things, and then get *no credit* for doing them. What is the point of doing good? Why fast? Why give? Why avoid sin? After all, why not sin? — if the very guy who is clearly ripping people off is the one who is looked upon with favor!

Things are not as they seem. These men are not as they seem. Appearances and reputations can be deceiving.

Luke tells us from the beginning who this parable is for: it warns those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.”

It's true that the Pharisee had the reputation of doing good things (fasting, tithing) and avoiding bad things (extortion, adultery, injustice) — yet, as Luke tells us, he “treated others with contempt.” There's no point in doing the right things and avoiding the wrong things if we treat our neighbor — church members, family members, neighbors, strangers — as beneath us. Because when we treat others with contempt, we do not love our neighbor, and when we do not love our neighbor, we do not love or bring honor to God.

This warning is especially good for Christians, for those of us in the church, for those of us who have grown up in the faith. We have been instructed in the right ways to think about God; we, like the Pharisees, know what good things to do, and what evils to avoid. And we may even be pretty successful at doing good things, and avoiding evil things. We might have quite the reputation inside and outside the church. But then, out of our own lips, we say:

I can't believe he did that! I would *never* do that. *I'm* not that kind of person. Or —

Look at that person! I'm not like *that*.

Once we place ourselves above someone else, we have exalted ourselves, and our Lord's words convict us: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” Whatever we may think or feel or even believe we know to be the case about others, we cannot put ourselves above others. We can be confident, that when we do, God *will* humble us. For he must bring down everyone who does not belong there.

We have no right to place ourselves above others. And there is one central, chief, unalterable reason for this — our Lord Jesus — God-and-man — did not place himself above others. Our Lord Jesus humbled himself, coming down from heaven, placing himself below mankind, as a servant, suffering pain and death for us. And because our Lord Jesus humbled himself, God exalted him — there, on the cross, Christ's glory shines *ever brighter and clearer and crisper* as the dawn of his return draws nearer. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

How will Jesus judge us?

We know that the world is *unfair*. Some are rich; some are poor; some have nothing. Some mothers miscarry; some children die young; all of us die. Things are not as they should be.

We will not get justice on our terms. We might imagine that fairness or justice means that everyone gets the same thing — like the same amount of time to live, or the same circumstances or money or talents or looks. But we do not.

We might imagine that we are the exception, that we have done more good than evil, and so we have earned a right to be with God in heaven. Our parable warns us that this belief is false.

What hope would we have if life were fair? What hope would we have if we *actually* got what we deserved? What hope would we have if karma was real, and each of us got what was coming to us?

Thanks be to God that life is unfair, that we will not receive what we deserve, that karma is false:

7 “*Though our iniquities testify against us,
act, O Lord, for your name's sake;*”

Our hope has nothing to do with the justice of this world, but with the character of the Lord — “act, O Lord, for your name's sake.” We put our hope in the Lord not to do what is deserved or earned, but because of who the Lord is — gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

None of us will get what we deserve. We will either get what we do not deserve — life in heaven with Jesus, by grace. Or will we get the life we want — life in hell, *apart* from Jesus, because we have refused to put our hope in him, because we have kept our hope in *ourselves*.

The cross is the place where God's justice is brought to bear, where our Lord humbled himself, taking himself the punishment for our sins:

[24] He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. [25] For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Peter 2:24–25, ESV)

Because God is just, Christ suffered for our injustice. Because God is gracious, Christ pours out his grace upon all who turn to him.

Have you placed your hope and trust in Christ? Or, have you withheld your trust, keeping it in yourself?

Reformation Sunday is the big reminder to return our trust to the Lord, and to *stop* placing our hope in ourselves. It will do us no good. It may do us evil.

Throughout the history of the Church—and it will continue until Christ returns—there have been those who have sought to buy favor, buy God's grace and gifts, buy God's Spirit. We saw this in the book of Acts with Ananias & Sapphira, who tried to buy the church's favor; we will see it with Simon the Magician, who tried to buy God's Spirit; we saw it leading up to and through the Reformation where repentance was being bought and sold; and we see it today when blessings and healings are promised for money from televangelists and popular presenters and preachers.

None of those of us who are in the faith will receive God's justice, because we enjoy God's grace — his favor, his Spirit, his blessings. This is more than we could ask for and it is something that we cannot deserve — for God's justice enacted would be the end of us.

But those who try to sell God's grace and favor *will receive* — lest they repent — God's justice. For our Lord Jesus will be far from pleased with all those who try to profit from the love and favor he has for his people.

God's grace is not for sale — not God's favor, not God's Spirit, not God's blessings. God's grace is freely available — like the tax collector in today's parable, we humble ourselves, crying out for God's mercy — and he gives it to us freely, speedily, gladly.

God has poured out his mercy upon all here who have placed their hope in his Son.

The goal of grace is this — to end well. Listen to Paul's words, near death:

6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing

16 At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! 17 But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever.

May this be able to be our words, too. May we — our gifts, our suffering, our minds and hearts and souls — be poured out as a drink offering, that the name of Jesus may be glorified. May we persist in faith, finishing the race, keeping the faith. May we attain to the crown of righteousness, which is the gift of all those who put their hope in Jesus. May we long for and love Christ's return in glory. May we keep the faith, even when others abandon us; may we forgive those — even fellow believers! — who have wronged us. May we always place our hope and faith in our Lord Jesus — even when things are bleak and dark and dreary and lonely.

May the Lord bless us with grace that keeps us in the faith until our death or until Christ returns as Judge.

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