

Sermons from the Church Year: Pentecost 2026

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The Feast of Pentecost

John 14:23-31 | The Coming of the Spirit

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Lectionary Scriptures: Genesis 11:1-9; Psalm 143; Acts 2:1-11; John 14:23-31

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

Good morning. Happy Feast of Pentecost!

What will have been the greatest thing?

When time comes to its final hour, when history at least reaches its end, when the trumpet blows and Christ appears in the clouds, what will have been the greatest accomplishment of mankind in all of human history? From the first man to the last child, what will be the greatest thing ever to have taken place?

We can rehearse a litany of possibilities. Will any of the sports dynasties—professional or college, football or soccer—or some sport yet to be invented—make the cut? How much longer will the American democratic project—this constitutional republic endure? Will it breach the top ten? Or what about ancient Rome or Greece? What about any of the sculptures or paintings of the middle ages? What about any of the literature—Homer's *Odyssey* or Dante's *Inferno*? Will any of these feats of intellectual or athletic genius reach even the top ten of the greatest accomplishments of mankind?

Perhaps by that day we will, at last, have a colony or a whole civilization on the moon or mars or beyond. Perhaps supercomputers will enormously improve health and lifespans and come close to eradicating disease. Surely, those responsible for space travel, otherworldly colonies, and supercomputing health—if these things ever come to be—would reach the ten greatest accomplishments, right?

It's important to the Babel story—yes, the one we remember as the Tower of Babel from the Sunday School years—it's important to the Babel story to understand from the start that this was the kind of legacy they were after. What the people of Shinar were trying to accomplish in building the city of Babel was “to make a name for themselves.” What they wanted was glory and legacy and fame. To that end, they built a tower and a city, so that in that day, and in the days to come, they would be recognized, known, great.

The Lord investigates, and finds that these people are *united*; they are of one mind. Whatever they set out to do, they were going to accomplish. But is this a good thing or a bad thing?

What does God do? Does he allow them to continue building this city and tower to their own glory? No—he confuses their languages and scatters the peoples. No longer united through their shared language, they go their own ways, becoming their own nations and peoples.

We might find this a bit odd, still, that God swooped down to intervene. We might find it a bit strange that God gave them many languages, purposefully, to stop this grand architectural project. Why would God take the time to do such a thing? Was it really necessary?

We do get two answers, right away.

In it for ourselves

(1) The first I've already alluded to, and it really comes down to this simple idea: the people were after their own glory.

If ever we have tried to make a name for ourselves, *at the expense of someone else*, then we understand that we've been successful insofar as taking something from someone else. It is a kind of theft. If I make a name for myself at the expense of someone, then what I've done isn't really worthy of recognition, and what I've really done is refused to give recognition for what someone else has accomplished.

This is an easy sin to fall into against God. It is so easy to want to take credit for things that we have done, and to take credit while refusing to give God any credit at all. That will do us no good. Here we move and live and breathe in the universe he made, among the peoples he made, in the body and soul he gave to us. How much credit can we really take?

Likewise, the builders of the tower and city took what God had given them, without giving thanks or recognition for what God had given them, and for the explicit purpose of trying to eclipse God's glory.

God's blessing

(2) The second answer is found in the next chapter, in Genesis 12: it's the story and blessing of Abraham. And in that blessing, we find that it's in Abraham that every nation, every people, every language will be blessed.

We can put it still another way. The glory that the people of Babel were after was not God's. They were not seeking reconciliation with God, to be made right with God, to have his righteousness, to further his glory, and they were not seeking blessing for others—just themselves.

But God's promise to Abraham is the other direction: it's about what God promises, and about what God is going to do for the peoples and nations and languages.

If we keep focusing on this idea of nations and peoples and languages, then we will, unmistakably, see the connection between Babel and Pentecost.

Whereas Babel was about what man tried to accomplish for himself, Pentecost is about God's blessing upon mankind—upon the nations, peoples, and languages. It is God's promise to Abraham coming to fruition.

At Babel, the people were united in making a name for themselves. But what kind of a name were they making for themselves? What kind of glory could they possibly attain?

The unity of the builders of Babel wasn't the problem. The problem was their source of unity—themselves. Their source of unity was just too small a thing, too little a thing. There is only one thing that is big enough, rich enough, good enough, glorious enough to unite mankind *for good*.

Pentecost

At Pentecost, the people become united by the only thing in all of Creation worthy and able of uniting God and mankind—God himself.

The coming of God's Spirit was visible; there were tongues of fire resting on the men. The coming of God's Spirit was audible; there was the sound of the mighty rushing wind. The coming of God's Spirit was marked by God's Word: the men began speaking of the mighty works of God.

Whereas at Babel, God confused the language of men and made many nations and many languages, at Pentecost, God united the many nations with many languages through his Spirit. Notice he did not undo his work at Babel, God sanctified it. He did not make all the men speak the same language, but rather, allowed the men to speak about God's works in *all of the languages* of the men present. And there were many nations, with many languages, present.

8 And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, 11 both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”

What mighty works of God were they possibly talking about? We need only reflect a little while to know. For what incredible, life-altering, world-changing thing had God just done?

Fifty days ago, Jesus had offered himself for the life of the world, and three days after that, God raised him from the dead. Ten days ago, Jesus ascended into heaven to be with the Father. At last, on this day, at Pentecost, Jesus fulfilled his promise to send his Spirit upon them.

It's worth emphasizing one more time that these men were not speaking in some unknown or some spiritual language or "in tongues," but rather that these Judeans were speaking in the languages of those nations who were gathered, so that everyone gathered there was able to hear the mighty works of God done in Christ Jesus our Lord.

They heard about how Christ our Lord died on the cross for them—and for you and for me. They heard about how Christ our Lord was raised for God's glory, for them, and for you and for me. And now they were seeing, in real time, the promise of God's Spirit—promised by our Lord Jesus on the night of his betrayal [in John 14]—fulfilled.

Feast of the Harvest

The apostles, and all these devout men from these many nations, were gathered together to celebrate Pentecost. We have to remember that this is the Greek name for the Feast of Weeks—one of the three major feasts. And it's this feast that celebrates, that the harvest has come. And in particular, the wheat harvest.

Immediately we begin to remember the parables our Lord Jesus taught, and how the Sower went out to sow, and how the seeds fell in many places, and the seed that fell on good soil sprung up producing sixty- and hundred-fold.

This is the era of the world that we are in—the time of the harvest. We tend to sub-divide our age in other ways: the printing press, the industrial age, the age of the internet and now of AI—but the reality is that since Pentecost, we are in the time of the harvest of the church. The harvest will not last forever. There will come a day when the last fruit has come, and the last grain sprouts, and then, it seems, the end of all things will come.

And at this end of this age, at the end of all time and of all history, when our Lord Jesus returns in the clouds to raise the dead and call his own to him, there we will see that the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, ever and always, is the greatest accomplishment.

And all that follows, in the top ten greatest acts of all time, will be the Christ-like kinds of things. Perhaps next follows Peter's great sacrifice, upside-down, on the cross, for his Lord. Perhaps next follows Paul's incredible suffering for the sake of his Lord. Perhaps next follows John's immense suffering and faithfulness for the sake of his Lord.

And cracking the top 100, of course, will not be Babel, or sports dynasties, or even the achievements of space travel or AI or such things, but the small, steady, enduring faithfulness of ordinary Christians.

At the end of all time, the greatest deeds that any of us could possibly accomplish will be shown to be those things done in faith to the glory of God.

We are destined for great things, for greatness, for eternity—but not by seeking our own glory, our own fame. Greatness will not be measured by athleticism or intellect or agility. It will be measured by one thing alone—faithfulness to our Lord Jesus.

Thanks be to God, then, that by his glory and for his glory, he has poured out his Spirit upon even us.

Christ the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever. **Amen and amen.**

The Feast of the Holy Trinity

John 3:1-17 | The Triune God

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Lectionary Scriptures: Isaiah 6:1-7; Psalm 29; Romans 11:33-36; John 3:1-17

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

Good morning. Happy Feast of the Holy Trinity!

Recapping Pentecost

Two weeks ago, we heard that we are to ask and receive. This asking is tied directly to the mission and work of the Church. And so we reflected: How might we change how we pray with regard to the mission and work of the Church?

Then last Sunday, on Feast of Pentecost, we asked:

When time comes to its final hour, when history at least reaches its end, when the trumpet blows and Christ appears in the clouds, what will have been the greatest accomplishment of mankind in all of human history? From the first man to the last child, what will be the greatest thing ever to have taken place?

This question helps to get the core of greatness. We realized that no, none of those accomplishments which we typically consider are great will make the cut—not medical advancements, not space travel, not sports dynasties. At the end of time, on the last day, we will see that the greatest accomplishment in all of human history was the death of Jesus on the cross.

Whereas at Babel, men tried to create their own everlasting fame and glory by building a city and tower to the heavens, at the cross, Jesus revealed to the whole creation that he is the one who is worthy of all fame and glory and praise, now and forever. For he poured out all of himself for all of his people.

We know that Peter followed in his footsteps, giving up his life—hung upside on a cross—for the sake of his faith. We know that Paul gave up his life for the sake of his faith. We know that John, whose gospel we heard this morning, suffered immensely for the sake of his faith.

The list of the top one hundred greatest accomplishments in all of human history will therefore be those who are *like* Christ. We don't have to have intellectual or athletic genius, or have some particular ability or agility. What we need to achieve greatness in this life is be Christlike. This includes the faith of the apostles, to be sure, but also those of ordinary Christians.

One of the most incredible things about being even an ordinary Christian is that we are among those who have been entrusted with the very words of God. We are those who have been entrusted with Scripture, with what God has said. And the New Testament tells us about who God is and what he has said in an extraordinarily special way—because we hear who he is directly from his Son. If we want to know who God is, we had better listen to his Son.

Who do you know best?

That brings up the driving, central question of this morning—the question that will help us get to the heart of today's sermon, to the very heart of God—and it's this: Who do you know best?

Who do you know best? What do you know about them? What could you tell me about them?

Our Gospel begins by introducing us to Nicodemus, who is both a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. He is therefore a teacher and an authority. And yet, he comes to Jesus by night. This is how he begins:

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

It’s true that Jesus is a teacher, that he’s from God, and that God is with him. And because this is true, why is it that Nicodemus comes at night—and seemingly alone? Yet is this all Jesus is? Is he just a teacher? Is it just that he is from God and has God with him?

What I want us to notice here is that Nicodemus says, “we know.” He’s speaking of other Pharisees and perhaps other rulers of the Jews. Where are these others, and why has he come alone at night? How can he say, “we,” when only he has come?

How well, in other words, does Nicodemus know these other Pharisees and rulers of the Jews? Does he know them well enough to speak for them, to speak on behalf of them?

What could you tell me confidently about the person you know best? Surely you could tell me their likes and favorite things. You could probably tell me places they’ve lived and things they’ve done. And you could tell me some of the things they value and find important.

Children can tell us their friends’ favorite colors. Siblings can tell us what follies the others have gotten into. Friends can tell what books or hobbies or interests they have in common with the other. Spouses know what each likes to eat—or not—and what each thinks about this and about that. And much more, of course.

Do you know the person you know best well enough to speak on behalf of them? What would that person allow you to speak on behalf of them about?

Witness of John the Baptist

This is not the last that we hear of Nicodemus. After the crucifixion, it’s Nicodemus who helps Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus in the tomb. It’s incredible, I think, that it’s Nicodemus, and not any of the disciples, who helps. But he is not quite there yet.

What does Jesus have to say to Nicodemus (and these other rulers and Pharisees that he has mentioned)? Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born not only of water, but also of spirit. It’s God Spirit that gives man new life.

This is news to Nicodemus—a man who was a teacher of the law and a ruler of the Jews. It’s the kind of thing that he is supposed to understand, and yet he does not.

9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.

Just as Nicodemus used “we,” so Jesus responds in kind: “We speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen.”

What does Jesus mean by “we”? Who else does Jesus speak of? Who else has born witness to the ministry of Jesus? Who else has spoken about the Spirit thus far? John the Baptist.

[32] And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. [33] I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ [34] And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:32–34, ESV)

Here we have, at Christ’s Baptism, John the Baptist beginning to reveal the mystery of the tapestry of the Holy Trinity.

Whereas Nicodemus says that he and other Pharisees know that Jesus is a teacher and from God, John the Baptist has already proclaimed much more than that—that Jesus is not just from God, but the very Son of God, upon whom the very Spirit of God rests.

John has confessed something far truer and far more marvelous than Nicodemus.

Baptism

The world and our culture, I think, takes an interest in trying to mute, soften, round, and stamp down our confession about who God is.

Our culture is happy to agree with Nicodemus that Jesus is a teacher, but they are happiest in confessing that Jesus is *only* a teacher—and nothing more. Our culture is happy to confess that they are Christians, so long as Jesus is their teacher—and not their Lord or their God.

And they'll say things like: "We don't really know how much of the Bible is true, or what Jesus actually said. What we do know is that God wants us to be happy, and so I don't really worry or bother about the Bible or Church, because again, we know that God just wants us to be happy. If there is a heaven, I'm sure we'll be there."

What I want to explicitly draw out—in the clearest and most uncertain terms—is that when you hear things like that, we must understand that our culture is confessing its creed about God. Our culture is really saying something like this: "God doesn't care what we believe, or what we believe about him. That kind of thing couldn't possibly matter—and probably isn't knowable anyway. God wants us to like Jesus, because he was a nice teacher, but we don't need to believe or do or say more than that."

Once we realize that our culture is actually confessing a creed, we also realize just how different a confession it actually is. It's nothing like what we believe.

The Beauty of the Athanasian Creed

The word trinity is found nowhere in the Bible. Not once does the word "trinity" appear—not in the Old Testament, not in the New Testament.

And yet, as we have already seen from John the Baptist's witness: Jesus is God's Son, with God's Spirit visibly on him as a dove. The voice of God from heaven spoke: "This is my beloved Son." That, of course, means that God is Father, Son, and Spirit.

Our creeds are the infrastructure—the critical foundation—for getting who God is right. We cannot simply throw our hands up and say, "No, I don't know anything about the trinity," nor can we say, "the trinity doesn't matter." For all three creeds are trinitarian, and reveal who God is in this way.

The Athanasian Creed, which we confess this morning, is not a dead document, or even just a rather lengthy, rather repetitive document—as some may say. It's a living confession worthy of evoking our thanks and praise.

John the Baptist confessed Jesus as the Son of God. The Son of God—Jesus our Lord—reveals who he is, who God is. And who God is—even before the incarnation of Jesus, even before the creation of the world—is Triune—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and One.

Family Life

The reality that the One God has always been Father, Son, and Spirit has enormous and real practical consequences for our faith.

Let's consider just one thing—the subject of John 3—being born of water and of the Spirit.

Because God has always been Father, Son, and Spirit, that means that God has always been—is always personal and relational. The inner trinitarian life—the mystery of God himself—is that he is family.

Think again about one of the favorite creeds of our world: "love is love." It's an ordinarily meaningless confession, that in today's culture now means "you must accept this kind of sex and relationship." This is actually a very narrow, very limited, and very low view of love.

Consider instead the love of God—the love of the Holy Trinity. When we confession the Scripture that God is love, we see that God is *able* to love, because within the Godhead there is perfect—the love of the Father for the Son and for the Spirit; the love of the Son for the Father and the Spirit; the love of the Spirit for the Father and the Son.

All of the perfect and delightful things we know are true about God, are true because God is personal, and He is only personal, because he is relational, and he is relational, because he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Our fullest expression of who God is therefore about who he is as three persons, as three relations, as three distinct members of the one family of God. And so, before time, before Creation, before the foundation of the world, God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—thought it good to make the whole world, good to make man and woman, good to make you and me.

And of course, God considered us a delight not only to make, but even to redeem—offering his Son for the sake of the world.

This means that everything has always been about family—about bringing God’s creation—men and women and children—into God’s own Family.

Are you a teacher of Israel and don't know these things?

Baptism is adoption, by God’s own Spirit, into God’s Family. We become, truly, the Father’s sons and daughters; the Son of God’s brothers and sisters; and we are blessed with God’s own Spirit.

16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

God has redeemed the world by bringing those who are not in his family, into his family. And this is, from before the foundational of the world, what he has long desired.

Praise

Who do you know best? What do you know about them? What could you tell me about them?

You could tell me many things about the ones you know best.

But here, this morning, we shall speak, with confidence, about the One who knows us best—the Holy Trinity. For the one true God has given us his Word, given to us by his Son, with his Spirit. We can therefore speak more confidently about God, than about anyone we know—even ourselves—for God has given us his own words, and his words are infinitely more reliable than our thoughts, our feelings, our expressions—more reliable and enduring than anything else we could say.

Let us, when we come to it, confess the Athanasian Creed with awe, with praise, and with the knowledge that God has brought us into his Holy Family. And let us now, in thanks and praise, sing of who God is.

God be praised—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—now and forever, Amen and amen.

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:19-31 | Responsibility

✠ Justin David Baker

Pastor, Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church

Lectionary Scriptures: Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 33:12-22; 1 John 4:16-21; Luke 16:19-31

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

Good morning.

Responsibility

What am I responsible for? It's a question we have to answer.

It's a question that touches on every facet of our lives, everyday, whether we consciously think of this question or not. And it's an excellent question for any graduate—because graduating high school and graduating college are two steps where you are asked to take on more responsibility.

It's not just a good question for graduates; it's a good question for all of us—for each of us. And this question—What am I responsible for—is also the question that's underlying and interweaving our Scriptures together as one singular thread this morning.

Our epistle of 1 John puts it plainly:

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

There's a responsibility for anyone who claims to love God, to also love his brother; there's no living faith in which we do not also assume responsibility for loving one another. This has been explicit since at least Cain and Abel. Long ago, Cain lured his brother into a field, killed him, and left him. When the Lord confronted him, Cain simply said: "Am I my brother's keeper?" It's the same as: "Am I responsible for him?"

Trisomy 21 [Jesse Ridgway]

Just a few days ago, a couple announced on X that they had aborted their baby because he was diagnosed with trisomy 21.

The man apparently runs an incredibly popular YouTube account, and perhaps because of this, this post became incredibly viral, with 24 million (so far) viewing it. They had posted before that, of course, the ultrasound pictures and the like. Whereas they were initially looking forward to the baby, things changed when they learned more about trisomy 21, and especially when they learned that up to ninety percent of parents choose to abort such babies. (Or, at least, that was their claim—it's a bit more accurate to say that it's in the sixty to ninety percent range.) Yet as high as that is, Denmark aborts at 98%, and Iceland at 100%.

In these countries, the messaging is extremely clear: Parents are *not* responsible for their babies if they might have Down syndrome. And that was the message of this couple, too: if their baby wasn't going to be as complicated, if their baby wouldn't have had possible health complications, etc., then they would have been happy to have "kept" their baby.

The so-called health and medical field nudge people like these parents to abort their babies, supposedly because of the health complications that may arise. The post this man wrote reads like someone who was just so thoughtful to abort his baby, so that it wouldn't suffer. What this and the medical field neglect to emphasize is that those with Down syndrome are quite literally the happiest people on the planet—99% are happy; 99% love their siblings; 97% like who they are. No other group on the planet comes close to that.

Contrast this with another post, on the same account, by the same man, where he announced his dog was given just a few weeks to live, having been diagnosed with stage 4 kidney disease. He reported, over a year later, that his dog was still living.

He was fine to let his dog get a shot at a longer life, even though that certainly involved suffering, but he was not fine to let his own child get a shot at life.

What am I responsible for? *Who* am I responsible for?

Obviously, the man refused to take on the responsibility he was given; he refused to be a steward of the good gift to which he had been entrusted. He refused his own child.

Caiaphas

I'm going to bring up one more man who abdicated the responsibility he was given, and that's the man *Caiaphas*. I'll give you the hint that he shows up in the Gospels, and his name is mentioned in Matthew, Luke, and John. Do you remember who Caiaphas is?

Caiaphas was the high priest during the ministry of Jesus. It was he who was constantly scheming and plotting to put Jesus to death. It was he who agreed with Judas the price of betrayal. After Jesus' arrest, it was he who questioned Jesus, so that he might find a crime worthy of death. And it was he who, after pronouncing blasphemy, sent Jesus to Pilate so that he would be put to death.

And it was he who, after the resurrection, paid off the guards so that they would no one about the empty tomb, or the angels, or the resurrection. And it was he who, after the ascension, brought Peter and John in for questioning, after they had healed the lame beggar by the gate of the Temple. It was he who, after questioning them, threatened them and ordered them to stop proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus.

He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

What was Caiaphas responsible for?

He was responsible for being the priest of priests, for entering the holy of holies once per year, for ensuring that Moses and the Prophets—the Old Testament Scriptures—were known, taught, believed, and kept. If there was one person who should have had the best, fullest, most complete knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures, it would have been him. He knew what Moses and the Prophets had to say, and he certainly knew what they had to say about the Messiah, the Christ.

Let's ask our question a different way: Who was the most *irresponsible* during the ministry of Jesus? Who *most* squandered their responsibility, squandered the gifts that they had been given to steward?

We immediately get a litany of contenders, and even quicker to the short-list: perhaps Herod or Pilate; perhaps the Pharisees, the scribes, the teachers of the law, the Sadducees; perhaps the ruling seventy known as the Sanhedrin. But, I think the chief contender for the one who squandered his ministry most, his stewardship most, his responsibility most was the high priest—Caiaphas.

Jesus' Warning

Do you see the pieces of Jesus' warning from Luke 16 beginning to fall into place yet?

Those who have meditated on this Scripture long have wondered if this warning is just a parable warning against wealth or if there is something historical to it. There are some details that are just too specific, that are unusual for a parable. For example, we get real names: Abraham and Lazarus; both names carry a lot of meaning. But, at the same time, this passage has the feel of a parable.

My take is that this is a parable that *becomes* historical; it is a prophecy of sorts.

The parable opens by describing an extremely wealthy man. He is a man who is dressed in “purple,” which right away makes us think of what? Royalty. Perhaps even a king. And he is also dressed in “fine linen,” which makes us think of what? The priesthood. We are talking, right from the start, about a rich man who is priestly and royal.

Do we find this royal priest doing the sorts of things royalty does? What about the sorts of things that priests do?

In truth, we find neither. We find that this man feasts sumptuously every day. Most Christians tend to feast on Christmas and Easter, and it wouldn’t hurt to add a few more days of feasting. But I can think of no one who feasts everyday, nor can I think of any culture that approves of such feasting.

It’s important, too, that this is not just feasting, but *sumptuous* feasting. This is not just a meal of steaks and wine, but the whole cow butchered, the best wines brought out, the choicest fruits, the richest desserts, and so on. And this was done each day of each week of each month of each year.

Was this royal priest a faithful steward? Was this royal priest being responsible for the things that were entrusted to him? Not even close. Quite plainly, the feasting this priest was doing ensured that he was abdicating his role and responsibility of priest. He cared nothing for sacrifice.

There is one more detail in this passage that just seems too coincidental, and it’s that this rich man has five brothers. Would it therefore surprise you to learn that Caiaphas—the high priest—had five brothers? There are just too many dots that connect here.

Caiaphas was the rich man clothed in purple and fine linen; as the chief priest, he is the royal priest. He, along with the rest of the Pharisees and rulers, feasted sumptuously. He, though knowing Moses and the Prophets, rejected them. And he—though knowing the guards had reported the resurrection, and knowing that Peter and John preached the resurrection—still rejected the resurrection.

It did not matter to him that Jesus had risen from the dead. He was the chief priest, after all. It turns out that this passage passage is Jesus’ warning to the high priest, Caiaphas, and to all who might be like him.

What do you think happened to Caiaphas and his brothers? Just a few decades later, the Temple was destroyed, and with it, the Office of High Priest was removed. Caiaphas, his brothers, and the rest of the high priestly family were out of work. Their stewardship was over.

It was given, of course, to the only One who is fit for the Office—our Lord Jesus Christ. It is our Lord Jesus, who as our High Priest, intercedes for us in the very throne room of heaven, for it is he who offered himself—a perfect, holy sacrifice—for us.

Thanks be to God that He is our High Priest, and no other.

Responsibility

What am I responsible for?

I am not—and we are not—responsible for our salvation. Neither Abraham nor the apostles could do anything to earn their salvation.

It is our Lord Jesus who, in spite of the opposition of both the high priest and satan, nevertheless remained sinless, perfect, and fit to be offered on the cross. It is he who offered himself for us, so that he might share with us the everlasting life he won.

Luke, as we have seen in both *the Glimpses of Jesus* study and the *Acts* study, takes very seriously the fact that the Old Testament Scriptures foretold the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Christ, and the spreading of the news about him. Like Abraham, like the apostles, we are responsible for *believing* what God has told us. We are responsible for believing that the Lord Jesus died and rose, that he ascended, that he is coming again to judge the living and the dead, and that he offers forgiveness through a baptism for the repentance of sins.

As it turns out, just possessing this news—the news of Jesus and his resurrection and his forgiveness—is extraordinary. It's news to which we have now been entrusted; it's news for which we have now been made responsible.

If we could see with the eyes of faith, with the perspective of eternity, we would understand that neither Bezos nor Musk is wealthy at all, but rather that we, as Christians, are the possessors and inheritors of enormous, inordinate wealth. How could there be anyone more wealthy than the ordinary believer?

Because Jesus has given us his life, himself, we are made like him. We are mini-high priests. We are little royal priests. We now have a share of the same ministry that Caiaphas forsook, that Caiaphas squandered.

Will we forsake it? Will we squander it?

Living Belief

What am I responsible for?

There was a man—forty years old—who was lame from birth who was daily brought to the Temple gate. Caiaphas did nothing for him. Day after day, Caiaphas continued his feasting, continued to use the Temple funds as his own, continued living lavishly in luxury, and continued ignoring this lame beggar, day after day.

But after Pentecost, when Peter and John caught this poor man's eye, they healed him. And that healing set in motion many opportunities for Peter to preach the resurrection of Jesus, and by the end of that multi-day series, thousands more had come to believe that Jesus was the Christ, and that he is risen from the dead.

Cain was responsible for Abel—and not just because he had killed him—he was responsible because he was his brother. The couple who killed their baby, of course are responsible for that death as the parents. Caiaphas was responsible for all the duties of high priest, though he did not carry them out.

We are responsible for the message of the resurrection of Jesus, and of forgiveness through a baptism of repentance. Jesus is alive, and because of that, he forgives all those who come to him, who believe in him, who are washed in the waters of Baptism by him.

But we are also responsible for our brothers, our children, our parents, our fellow church members, and those whom God puts along our paths—like the lame man at the gate of the Temple. We cannot be like Caiaphas, and pretend that those around us do not matter, or that those who are inconvenient, are not worth our time.

We are responsible for what we have been given—a gifted mind, a happy heart, an agile body, a discerning hear; our wealth—debt, a dime, a dollar, a few million; our time—for all of us, it's always however much we have left; and our faith—we are to treasure it, for it is our wealth.

Thanks be to God that we have been given the treasures of the faith, the gift of our life, and responsibility in this world. May God have mercy on us, and make us good, gracious, and responsible stewards.

Christ the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever. **Amen and amen.**

The Third Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 14:15-24 | Excuses

† **Justin David Baker**

Pastor, Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church

Lectionary Scriptures: Proverbs 9:1-10, Psalm 34:12-22; Ephesians 2:13-22; Luke 14:15-24

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

Good morning.

By the end of today, we'll have heard three answers to three big questions over the course of these three weeks: (1) Two weeks ago: *Who do you know best?* (2) Last week: *Who am I responsible for?* (3) And this morning: _____

Family

On Holy Trinity Sunday, I preached that asking—*How is God Trinity? How could God be the Holy Trinity—the great Three-in-One and One-in-Three? How could God be Three Persons, yet one God?*—that asking this questions is unanswerable and the wrong question. It will get us out of sorts; we will not be able to do it.

Yet when we approach the Holy Trinity through how God has revealed himself to us, we will find ourselves to have an enriched faith. We trust that God is Triune, because that's what the Scriptures reveal, and the central place it's revealed is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry at his Baptism: the Spirit descends on the Son; the Father speaks, calling Jesus, his "Son."

There we learned that God has *always, eternally* been One Family. There's two huge things that follow from this. First, if we allow our brains to be stretched just a bit, we'll see that in order for the things we believe about God to be true, he has to be Triune. In order for the Scripture, *God is Love* to be true, God has to be Triune.

All of the perfect and delightful things we know are true about God, are true because God is personal, and He is only personal, because he is relational, and he is relational, because he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If God were *only* One, he would have had no one to love and no way to receive love until *Creation*, and that would mean he were imperfect in and of himself.

Second, because God is personal and relational, because he is love and loves, he did not withhold his love from anything, and so he created the world *out of his love* in order *to love*. And all this he did so that, through Baptism into Christ Jesus, we become true brothers and sisters to Jesus, and true sons and daughters to the Father, thanks to the outpouring of his Spirit.

We therefore found a surprising answer to our question: *Who do you know best?*

Who do you know best? What do you know about them? What could you tell me about them?

You could tell me many things about the ones you know best.

But here, this morning, we shall speak, with confidence, about the One who knows us best—the Holy Trinity. For the one true God has given us his Word, given to us by his Son, with his Spirit. We can therefore speak more confidently about God, than about anyone we know—even ourselves—for God has given us his own words, and his words are infinitely more reliable than our thoughts, our feelings, our expressions—more reliable and enduring than anything else we could say.

And still there's more—there's no way to plumb the inexhaustible depth and riches of who God is. The best thing to do therefore is not to shake our heads in confusion, but to erupt in songs of endless praise—for God, who has made each of us members of his family, is eternally worthy of praise.

Responsibility

Last Sunday, we heard the story about the rich man dressed in purple and fine linen who feasted sumptuously everyday, and I posed this question to explore this story: *Who am I responsible for?*

We heard about the youTube influencer who aborted his child, because it was diagnosed with Trisomy 21. We heard how this is extremely common—sixty to ninety percent in the US—and that’s how this man justified it to himself and to his “followers.” And we heard how, despite the complicating conditions that may arise, those with Downs are, by far, the happiest people on the planet. In a culture that says they just want people to be happy, it’s a shame that sixty to ninety percent of the happiest people don’t get a chance at life.

Who am I responsible for? It’s the same question that’s driving the story Jesus tells about the feasting rich man: *Who is this rich man responsible for?*

The purple and linen connect this man to royalty and the priesthood. And yet, every day this man enjoys the most lavish feasts, all the while Lazarus, covered in sores, lies at his gate, hungering for any morsel of food. This man, whoever he is, has abdicated, has neglected his responsibilities of royalty and the priesthood. That neglect is a warning, of course, to those who were members of the religious elite—the Pharisees, scribes, Sanhedrin, and the rest—for repeatedly Jesus finds them derelict in their responsibilities.

And when we asked *Who was the most irresponsible?* during the ministry of Jesus, a clear frontrunner emerged: Caiaphas. Jesus' story of this rich man and Lazarus is almost certainly a prophetic indictment—a glimpse of what was to come for Caiaphas. For which man is best described as royal and priestly, except for the high priest?

Caiaphas, along with the Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes and Sanhedrin, loved their feasts and their money, and they did not love the poor and the downtrodden. Caiaphas could not wait to get rid of Jesus, and was glad to give Judas money, and gladder still to accuse Jesus of blasphemy, so that he could send Jesus to the Romans to his death.

What's more, the high priest Caiaphas had five brothers, just like the story, and the high priest rejected the news that Jesus had risen from the dead—even though he heard it from the guards themselves (and then paid them off!) and later from Peter and John. Rather than rejoice at the resurrection, Caiaphas tried to cover it up and silence the news. I’m not sure there was one more *irresponsible* than him.

Who am I responsible for?

What’s clear throughout the Scriptures is that the Gospel—the good news of Christ’s death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return—is a treasure chest, an enormous amount of wealth, one easily and far surpassing Elon’s now 1T net worth. No amount of money can compare to the good news with which we have been entrusted.

But for a moment, suppose each of you were given a treasure box of money instead, of varying amounts—ten thousand, ten million, ten billion. Would any of you do *nothing* with it? Would any of you *keep all* of it for yourself? Would any of you never share your wealth with anyone?

Neither should we keep the eternal riches to which we have been entrusted to ourselves.

The Context

This morning Jesus again tells us a story about a feast, about the Pharisees and religious elite, and about those who were invited *rejecting* the feast when the time came. It’s important to mention that Jesus tells this story about a feast *at a dinner party* at a ruler of the Pharisees house. Jesus tells this story immediately in response to this:

When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15, ESV)

Yes, blessed are they indeed. But as our Lord Jesus explains in his parable this morning, those who eat bread in the kingdom of God may very well not be those whom we expect.

Every one of the religious elite gathered for that dinner feast that night believed he was one of those who would be feasting in the kingdom of God, and so, among other things, this man likely meant *blessed* are those who are gathered for the dinner party, feasting with Jesus, because they also will be feasting in the kingdom of God.

There were gathered, at this dinner party, important men of the Temple and important men of the Scriptures and men of money. Note therefore the care that Jesus has for them in this parable of warning and of grace.

What is Jesus up to in this story? What is trying to accomplish in telling this story at this dinner party?

You might have heard that Jesus dined with sinners, and you're right, he did. Here he is—dining with the religious elite, and he takes them to task. We might describe part of what he is doing here as the annual job performance review. Jesus has taken note how these religious elite have been.

They are the ones who are meant to be teaching the Scriptures, leading the prayers, interceding on behalf of the nation, taking care of the downtrodden, but they instead are enjoying their money and their feasts. Jesus has found that they enjoy their wealth, their prestige, and their feasts too much, and they do not enjoy their fellow man very much at all. He has found them wanting.

Our culture overall is only too keen to believe in karma, that the things that happen to anyone—over the long haul at least—are what is deserved. If someone becomes rich, they deserved it. If someone becomes poor, they deserved it. If someone has something bad happen to them, they deserved it. “Whatever happens to me—I deserve it.” In other words, we live in a very legalistic culture, one very much like the setting of this parable, where the religious elite believe that they deserve these things. The Pharisees like to go to feasts at this ruler’s home, because they believe they deserve to feast. They don’t believe that the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, deserve a seat at the table. They believe they deserve the seats of honor. In other words, none of these men believe that humility is good. And that’s a big problem, you see, for the Son of God humbled himself to become man, one of us. The Son of God certainly believes that the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind should have the gift of a feast. And so if no one will offer them a feast in this life, God will offer them a feast in the life to come.

The Religious Elite

Any time you hear a story or parable in the Scriptures about the religious elite, you can apply that to your pastor—me—and to the rest of the clergy, and to the leaders of the denomination. It will always be worth asking: *this thing that the religious elite were doing in Jesus’ day, is that kind of thing being done right now?*

Am I administering the Sacraments with fidelity? Am I preaching with fidelity? Am I teaching the Scriptures with fidelity? Is it all a ruse—or does my life conform to what I’m saying, too? Does my practice match my preaching? It’s worth asking this of me, and of the pastors and leaders and bishop of our denomination, too.

One of the things our constitution explicitly lists as one of my duties is to be the *chief evangelist*. When we come to passages like the ones from last week and today’s, I find, in my own estimation, that I am lacking here. There are certainly things that I have done here that are evangelistic in nature, but notice that in this morning’s parable the language is very direct—go to the hedges and the highways and compel people to come. Compel? I haven’t done anything of the sort.

I find myself just making excuses. “I’m in a hurry! I’m too busy! What would I even say to them?”

Excuses Excuses

Excuses are what we hear in our parable this morning. “I’ve bought a field. I’ve bought five yolk of oxen. I’ve married a wife.” Notice that these excuses are on the whole, pretty good ones. But we will think that only until we remember that these men all made excuses *after* they had been invited and *after* the details were already set. These people knew when the feast would be, and then found things to do instead of coming to the feast. These people would *rather* do these sorts of things then come to the feast. It’s an important corrective for me—I had

better be re-trained, *re-catechized* to prefer evangelism to other things. For after all, what will I do with the treasure chest of the good news to which I've been entrusted.

But, of course, this sermon isn't only for me, and these kinds of excuses are not mine alone.

A version of these same excuses takes place in the Church today. What I have in mind is those who believe in their legacy, more than their belief in God. It happens in all denominations in various ways, but in the Lutheran tradition it happens much the same as in the Catholic tradition: a baby is born, and so the baby must be baptized. It doesn't much matter that the parents, or at least most of the family no longer attend church, because they'll start coming again for a little while, because everyone who's Lutheran or Catholic knows that babies need to get baptized. But then there's a lapse again—probably for a decade, give or take a couple of years. And you know what time it is then—it's time for Confirmation. It doesn't much matter that most of the family doesn't attend church, because everyone knows that a baptized child needs to get Confirmed. And so, the family—probably fewer this time—again begins attending, or at least the child does. And after a year or two or three, the child is confirmed. And then the family may be gone again—until the next baptism, or confirmation, or wedding—or, worse yet—a funeral.

Some—perhaps even most!—of these families or children were genuine in their intent. But their practice demonstrates that they believe *only* baptism and confirmation are necessary—and nothing else. These families neglect the strengthening of their faith that comes from weekly worship; these families neglect offering praise and thanksgiving to God with the church; these families neglect nourishing their faith with Holy Communion.

There are truly good reasons to miss church, but even many good reasons aren't good reasons—that's part of the lesson of this parable. There are, of course, many bad reasons, too.

But let's use this as one metric: the Sunday before the Lord returns, whenever that may be—Is the kind of thing I'm missing church for worth missing before the dawn of the Lord's return?

Churches are to be filled with people who believe that there is nowhere else worth being, nowhere else more important, than singing God's praise, being in God's presence, hearing God's Word, eating Jesus' body and blood, and bringing him our thanksgiving and our requests. Where else on earth could we possibly do that except church?

The plain message is this: come to church every single Sunday. And tell your families and your friends to do the same. And if they won't hear us, go to the highways and the hedges and compel them to come.

Because beyond the excuses, the overwhelming message of the parable this morning is one of extraordinary grace. None of us deserve a seat at this feast, and yet we were invited all the same. And this feast—the heavenly feast in the kingdom of God of which Holy Communion is a foretaste—will not fully begin until God's house is filled—until it is full, and there is no more room.

This feast was offered to the Levites and priests and Pharisees, but also to the beggars, the stragglers, the sinners, the poor, the lame, and the blind—and the vagabonds and thieves along the hedges and the highways. The central reality again is this—none of us has earned a seat at the table; none of us deserves a seat at the table; all of us are offered a seat at the table. That's grace.

Yet who will respond to the invitations? Who will be *compelled* by God's grace in Christ Jesus, crucified, risen, and ascended? Thanks be to God that is up to God. We are simply those who have the treasures of this message.

Christ the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever. **Amen and amen.** *The Third Sunday after Pentecost* ✠ Justin David Baker