

Sermon for August 23rd, 2026
TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

READINGS

Isaiah 29:17-24

17 Is it not yet a very little while
until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest?

18 In that day the deaf shall hear
the words of a book,
and out of their gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind shall see.

19 The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD,
and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

20 For the ruthless shall come to nothing
and the scoffer cease,

and all who watch to do evil shall be cut off,

21 who by a word make a man out to be an offender,
and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate,
and with an empty plea turn aside him who is in the right.

22 Therefore thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob:

“Jacob shall no more be ashamed,
no more shall his face grow pale.

23 For when he sees his children,
the work of my hands, in his midst,
they will sanctify my name;

they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.

24 And those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding,
and those who murmur will accept instruction.”

Psalm 146

1 Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

3 Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

4 When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;
on that very day his plans perish.

5 Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD his God,

6 who made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them,
who keeps faith forever;
7 who executes justice for the oppressed,
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
9 The LORD watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
10 The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, to all generations.
Praise the LORD!

Romans 10:9-13

9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. 11 For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. 13 For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Mark 7:31-37

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. 34 And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” 35 And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

Our text for meditation this Twelfth Sunday after Trinity is on our Epistle reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

Faith is the lifeblood of Christianity. Without faith in Jesus Christ, there is no point to what we do, think or say as Christians. We do not gather together for the Divine Service because it is a nice community activity, we are gathered together because we believe in the Savior. If someone wants a “community activity” only, they can get it at a sporting event or a knitting circle. We do not engage in evangelism as a mere form of socializing, we do it to serve Christ who wants more souls saved. The Bible is not some ancient document we study for mere historical curiosity, but we study it *because we believe what the Word says*. Without real and authentic faith our religion is nothing more than kabuki

theater, a cover for whatever social program a bad actor might want to carry out.

Attempts to Separate Christianity and Faith

Such bad actors have arisen in history, men who tried to separate faith from Christianity, as though they were draining blood from someone's body. We cannot forget infamous cult leaders like Jim Jones, who preached Christianity until he was comfortable revealing to the “peoples' temple” that he never believed. For Jones, the church he founded and the doctrine he taught were nothing more than a way to push marxist politics.¹ In more respectable circles we find men like Paul Tillich, a “Lutheran” theologian who not only denied any real existence to God Himself, but also wanted the Church to be more of a therapeutic social program... and also a club for pushing socialism.² Another “Lutheran” theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, determined to make the Church into an existentialist ethical think tank after he “demythologized” the Scriptures.³⁴ His excuse for trying to take the supernatural out of the Bible? Well he was worried that Christians would be laughed out of the social sphere for believing in things like the Resurrection of our Savior, miraculous healings, or a six-day creation of the universe.

Jones, Tillich and Bultmann are just three examples among an ocean of false teachers just like them. What was the fruit of their efforts? In Jim Jones' case, his “peoples' temple” turned into a marxist commune in Guyana, where after he had his men assassinate a politician, he panicked and had his entire cult commit suicide: the fruit of his mission was 900 dead bodies in the jungle. Unlike Jones, Tillich and Bultmann both saw a great deal of success in their faithless efforts, to the point where their textbooks were required reading in many Lutheran seminaries. But what is the fruit of their unbelieving projects? Empty churches. The liberal “Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” adopted much of Tillich's teaching and became something of a social club; now they are dramatically declining like one.⁵

More on Tillich and his ilk. If you ever drive by empty Lutheran churches in America or Europe (and these empty churches are everywhere), they are by and large the graves of congregations which listened to Tillich's ideas and separated faith from Christianity. They were no longer about simple faith in Jesus and obedience to His Word, instead relegating Jesus to being a mascot for soothing existential angst. Making people comfortable was the aim of every service, and the only sins to be condemned were “oppressor” sins and bigotry. Gone was any drive to evangelize, to raise up children in the Lord, or to strengthen one's fealty to Scripture. So even to this day we see the cycle repeating endlessly in the liberal old guard churches which haven't shuttered their doors yet:

1. A congregation finds itself in steep decline, because their previous minister did not teach them to evangelize.
2. The old minister retires, and a new minister is appointed who promises to fix it.
3. He/she then proceeds to preach social dogmas like tolerance, charity, and open borders.
4. The Gospel isn't preached and evangelism is still not done.
5. Then the church closes.

Many young men have commented to me that when they visit their local churches, this is the situation. Either the church is full of old people and they are the odd man out, or it is closed entirely and the website wasn't updated. Typically I try to help them set up a congregation with the Catacomb Synod, but there is always a bit of mourning at the sheer loss that our world has faced. What was once

1 <https://minds.wisc.edu/items/07cf03b6-5e0d-48d7-94a0-dc12f0b3fc0e>

2 <https://aeon.co/essays/my-grandfather-paul-tillich-the-unbelieving-theologian>

3 <https://philosophydungeon.weebly.com/rudolf-bultmann.html>

4 While Bultmann believed God exists and that Jesus “reveals” Him, he denied that Jesus rose from the dead, died for our sins, etc.

5 <https://lutherancore.website/2026/01/12/what-we-can-all-learn-from-the-elcas-dramatic-decline/>

a grand Lutheran presence in the world is now a pile of ruins with relatively few living congregations. But my friends, it didn't have to be that way with them, if only they had authentic faith in our Lord! And thankfully, it doesn't have to be that way with us either. If we hold on to legitimate trust in our Savior, then we shall find ourselves saved, blessed and thriving.

The Centrality of Faith in Salvation and Blessing

God saves and blesses those who confess and believe. The outward form of worship – what we *confess* – must come from hearts that are truly entrusted to Jesus Christ. This is true both on the individual and congregational levels. If a Christian wants to be saved, then he believes and confesses that Jesus Christ our risen Lord is his Savior. If a church wants to continue on, then they must be *full* of those individuals, that as one body they confess and believe with true hearts. Then there is a continuation, a lampstand among those Christians which does not go out. While some days remain harder than others, the congregation stands firm in the presence of the Holy Spirit who keeps them firmly established. By the Grace of our Lord, there are churches to this day which demonstrate by their continued faith and operations that His Word is firm on the matter.

I mean it when I say blessing by the way. St. Paul did not stutter when he said that God bestows His riches on all who call on Him. Yes, our Catechism says that God gives to everyone their daily bread whether they pray or not,⁶ and Christ teaches us that God sends His rain on the just and the unjust alike.⁷ The nonbeliever receives blessing as a demonstration of God's love for them despite their sins, and each blessing is an earnest call for them to repent and believe in the Gospel. But when a *Christian* receives blessing, it is even more. Every blessing God gives you is a foretaste of the even greater things to come. Not only does God love you and provide for you, but He bestows *His* personal riches upon you, promising an eternal inheritance which shall never perish nor be stolen. The nonbeliever gets blessed as God says to him “you should be Mine;” the believer gets blessed as God says to him “I rejoice that you *are* Mine.”

St. Paul spends much of Romans teaching the marvelous truth that Gentiles inherit the same promises, blessings, and eternal life as the Old Testament saints. As the Apostle says, “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all.” No longer is covenant with God something that only the Jews could receive, for now that Christ has gone to the Cross the centrality of faith comes to the forefront. The God who gave us Gentiles life and breath and food and family and all good things *also* tells us that we may enter into eternal life with Him – *without* having to get circumcised, do pilgrimages, make animal sacrifices, or hide ourselves whenever we get a boil on our skin.⁸ Jews who convert to Christianity are liberated by faith from the strictures of the Old Covenant; we Gentiles find that we never had to bother with it in the first place, being brought to Christian freedom immediately by faith.

This means my friends that we are justified before God by faith alone, no matter who we are as Christians. Everything in Christianity springs from that, for it is the very faith which inspires us to live the Christian life in the first place. Why go to Church and receive the Sacraments? Faith in Christ. Why read the Scriptures and obey the commandments we find therein? Faith in Christ. Why do we pray without ceasing, take the Sacrament, confess our sins, forgive our enemies, control our appetites, help the poor from near to far and gather as one body every week? None of that happens without faith in Jesus my friends. Everything we do flows from it, until we are with our Lord in the New Heavens and New Earth.

⁶ In the explanation on the Fourth Petition: <https://bookofconcord.org/small-catechism/the-lords-prayer/>

⁷ Matthew 5:44-46

⁸ These are all, of course, requirements for ancient Israelites as found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Conclusion

This is why every attempt at “secularizing” Christianity or separating it from faith fails. Without a firm belief in the Word, held in honest fact without any “demythologizing” or political substitutions, there simply is no Christianity. Bultmann was wrong; our religion does not need to be “rescued” from the doctrines that the Scriptures teach. Yes, we believe that a Jewish Man from 2000 years ago turned out to also be God, that He died to pay the penalty for our sins and rose again so that we could live forever. So what if that makes an atheist balk? We have eternal life and the atheist doesn't. So what if we're “missing out” on some goofy political organizing trick? That's certainly better than ending up like Jim Jones's cult. No my friends, such things are entirely foolish. Faith is the lifeblood of Christianity, and that it flows through the veins of our souls is the simplest proof that we are alive – and eternally so.

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.