

The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity | St. Matthew 13:44-50
October 9, 2016 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Holy and Righteous God, You have not appointed us unto wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, and given us our allotted season of grace: we humbly ask You, since the days are evil and because we are easily misled through the weakness of our mortal nature, impart to us the grace of Your Holy Spirit that we may redeem the time, [believe in Christ] as our only Savior, walk soberly and circumspectly in this present world, give You praise and thanks always, and at last obtain the crown of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 168)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, beginning with the forty-fourth verse. We read as follows in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. / "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. / "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."
(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who promises to "rescue [us] from every evil deed and bring [us] safely into his heavenly kingdom" (2Tim. 4:18), dear fellow redeemed:

Less than a year ago, someone in California won \$1.5 billion in the Powerball jackpot. That person beat odds of 292 million to 1. That's a lot of money, but those are terrible odds. Think about your odds of catching a foul ball in a major league baseball stadium filled with 50,000 people. You could improve your odds based on where you sit, but catching a ball would be no sure thing. Even if we are talking about a community raffle, how many of those have you won in your lifetime?

Now think about your odds of being a believer in Jesus. There are over 2 billion Christians worldwide, which makes up a third of the total population. In America the percentage is even higher. Of an estimated 325 million Americans, around 75% still consider themselves Christians. But claiming to be a Christian and actually being one are different things. There are many self-identified "Christians" who could not name the three Persons of God or tell you the basic facts

of Jesus' life. Many of them believe that God is happy with them as long as they are happy, or say that whether or not Jesus rose from the dead does not change their relationship with God.

Judging by what we see in our society, the odds of a person actually believing what the Bible says are not good. There are not many who believe they are spiritually incapable and dead in their sins by nature, and that God sent His Son to redeem them. You do believe this, which means you beat those odds. Except it wasn't really you. It was the grace of God for you, and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring you to faith in Jesus. You did not find your way into God's favor by anything you did; rather, **The Lord Has Chosen You for His Kingdom.**

I

Have you ever been around someone who hears about God's grace and forgiveness for the first time? You can almost see the burden lifted off their shoulders when they learn there is hope for them in Christ. You can sense the excitement in their voice when they wonder if this is too good to be true. Before they came to faith, they did not know what they were missing. But now they realize there was a treasure waiting for them all along, which only the Holy Spirit could reveal to them. They rejoice in the message of salvation and devour the Scriptures to feed their starving souls.

That attitude is often lacking in those who were raised in the Christian Church and thoroughly educated in the teachings of Scripture. We treat our faith in Christ as if it were no real miracle, and the forgiveness of sins like it is no big deal. We go to church because we know we are supposed to, but we would just as soon be in front of our TVs or heading off to one event or another. This begs the question: What is the Christian faith worth to you? What would you be willing to give up for the Gospel? Would you give up your home, possessions, and wealth? Would you give up your job? Would you give up the people closest to you? Would you give up even your own life?

The man who found treasure hidden in a field sold everything he had to buy that field. He knew that greater riches were there than anything he had before. The merchant found one pearl of great value and sold everything he had to make it his. Jesus said this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. In other words, there is no going halfway. So are we children of the world, or children of God? Do we treasure earthly things above all else, or spiritual things? For his part, the Apostle Paul said, *"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith"* (Phil. 3:8-9).

Hearing these inspiring words, you may think as I do, "I wish I had a faith like this, a faith that clings to Jesus only." The world is full of so many distractions, so many things that tug on my heart and mind. Jesus described these things in the Holy Gospel for today (Mt. 22:1-14), when He said that of those who received an invitation to the wedding feast—the feast of salvation—*"they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them."* Today's hymn puts it well when it says that *"we are so sluggish, thoughtless, cold"* (ELH 511, v. 3). If entering into eternal life depended on our faithfulness to God, we would be barred forever from His kingdom. But our entrance into God's kingdom does not depend on us. It depends on Jesus.

You want to talk about odds? How about the odds of the virgin Mary being chosen as the mother of the Christ Child over 2000 years ago? Why Mary? Mary was sinful like you and me. She came from the royal line of David, but that distinction did nothing to change her status as a poor woman from Nazareth. There would have been no way to predict that Mary would have this honor above all honors of carrying in her womb "*the Word made flesh*" (Jn. 1:14). But she did. She gave birth to Jesus, the name told her by the angel, a name that means "*the LORD saves.*"

His name described His purpose. Jesus came to save. He came to save sinners because God is merciful. He does not want any to experience eternal destruction but to have eternal life with Him. In the scales of God's justice, Jesus offered His perfect life and innocent death against the sin and death of all humanity. Martin Luther wrote about this that "if God's death and a dead God lie in the balance, his side goes down and ours goes up like a light and empty scale.... But he could not sit on the scale unless he had become a man like us, so that it could be called God's dying, God's martyrdom, God's blood, and God's death" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 41, pp. 103-104). The weight of Jesus' work as God and Man means that on our side we are raised up to heaven as if floating on air.

II

But then why is it that not all are saved if Jesus did everything necessary to save sinners? It is because not everyone wants to sit in the scale opposite Jesus. In their unbelief they say they have no need of Him. "Church is for the weak-minded and the serious sinners," they think, "but not for me." This sad situation is what Jesus described in the parable of the net thrown into the sea. He explained that the good fish are the believers whom the angels will safely bring to heaven. But the bad fish are the unbelievers who will be cast into hell, into "*the fiery furnace*" where "*there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" It is striking that Jesus says the most here about eternal death in hell instead of eternal life in heaven. This is to give clear warning about what the future holds for those who reject Jesus.

But in the Holy Gospel for today, Jesus also provides a picture of heaven. He describes heaven as a great wedding feast. St. John's Revelation says this is the marriage feast of the Lamb, who is eternally united with His bride, the Church (Rev. 19:9). You are part of this Church through faith in Jesus. By yourself, you are imperfect, weak, and stained by sin. But in Christ, you are holy. The letter to the Ephesians says that "*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish*" (Eph. 5:25-27).

The Lord chose you from eternity to believe in His Son. He did not choose you based on any good quality in you. There is no logical explanation why you believe in Jesus while others who have heard the Gospel message do not. You believe by grace alone (Eph. 2:8-9). In His abundant grace, God chose you – dead in your sins by nature – to receive the gift of salvation. His eternal will was carried out in your life when you were brought to the waters of Holy Baptism and incorporated into His Church. Since then, He has continued to bless you and keep you in the saving faith through the Gospel, applied to you in Word and Sacrament.

Turning the parables in today's text around, we might say that Jesus came looking for you, lost and hopeless in the field, and gave up the glories of heaven to purchase and win your soul. To Jesus, you are that pearl of great price, for which He gave up all He had – even His own life – to make His own. You often are “sluggish, thoughtless, cold,” but the life-giving breath of God enlivens you; it fills your heart. His Word gives you the desire and the courage to forsake the alluring treasures of the world and to seek the treasures above.

The odds seem to be stacked against your believing in Jesus and being saved. If this depended in any way on you, the odds of winning a Powerball jackpot would be excellent in comparison. But because the odds rest with God, they are greatly in your favor. You did not choose Jesus; He chose you (Jn. 15:16). He chose you to be saved by the will of His Father and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Through a living faith in Him, God “*will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1Cor. 1:8). On that day, He will transfer you from this present kingdom to His eternal kingdom of glory.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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