

P Christ is risen!
C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

What is your prayer and what outcome do you seek in your prayers? I ask this because yesterday we celebrated and gave thanks for the life of Robert Oblender. Bob's life and his love for Dot were in my thoughts as I read over this Gospel passage that is known as The Farewell Prayer of Jesus. So, in our Gospel today we listen to Jesus praying.

What is your prayer and what outcome do you seek in your prayers?

Before he died, Bob told me his prayer. Bob's prayer was that God would take him. Bob didn't want to linger, he wanted to be with his beloved wife Dorothy. But before Bob left us, Bob would say he was very blessed with a wonderful life and a loving family. There was one thing about Bob that I learned when talking with the family and it really moved me and that was that he had a strong sense of community and knew the importance of community.

In this community, here at St Paul, we are centered in Jesus Christ who forms our faith, feeds our faith, and strengthens our faith in this gathering, this community...what then does that mean for us, what do we do with our faith after worship and after our prayers are prayed? Do we simply use these prayers and sense of community as nice words and ideals to be said and thought about during our time together? Will our faith remain in this place, safe within this "community" or will we grow beyond the walls that contain our community?

Once again...what is your prayer and what outcome do you seek in your prayers?

Today we hear prayers throughout our lessons. Prayers are our conversations with God and so our lessons begin with conversations because our communities begin to grow and develop through honest and sincere conversations. In our first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles we hear the disciples' conversation with Jesus. And our lessons close with Jesus praying for his followers and the coming Church that comes from the community of followers of Jesus Christ who were bold enough to take the conversation about the Good News of Jesus Christ beyond their community.

Within the appointed Gospel lesson today, we hear the longest prayer of Jesus in any of the Gospels. This prayer is known as the *Farewell Prayer* or the High Priestly Prayer. Jesus in his prayer prays for his disciples and the community of followers. And in his prayer we hear Jesus telling us what eternal life is in verse 3:

And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

We tend to think of "eternal life" as the kingdom of God or heaven. Perhaps in our thoughts and prayers have we asked similar questions like that found in our in our first lesson:

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)

But more than that, we probably pray and wonder if God will restore our community. Perhaps in our thoughts after our prayers for ourselves we have asked:

What is the kingdom...is it heaven?

What is heaven...is it where I will end up...is this the restored kingdom I go to when I die? Does restoring the kingdom have anything to do with me...is it restored when I go there? Am I part of the restoration? And then the million-dollar question...have I done enough and was I good enough to get in?

I don't like to make broad assumptions because yes, assumptions do what they say they do, however...I will go out on a limb and assume that we all have wondered if we have done the right thing as far as earning God's favor or our entrance into the "kingdom" or "heaven." But it's funny, not funny in a ha, ha way, but funny in a peculiar way that as human beings and even as Lutherans we tend to look at what we *did* rather than what God has done and what God enables *us* to do through faith.

Through faith God has enabled us to know the eternal kingdom...through faith God has enabled us to know the eternal kingdom...this is the eternal kingdom as Jesus prays for it: that we may know God as the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom God has sent to us...to free us from the earthly bondages of sin and death. We tend to look back quantitatively out of comfort and assurance rather than looking forward into the unknown and imagining what can be done...such as sharing the Good News of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, we look to the Lord and ask in different ways just as the disciples are asking the Lord this morning in our first lesson, "When *will you* restore the kingdom?" "When *will you* restore the kingdom?" This question is SO US!...Its always the OTHER GUY, isn't it? Even when it comes to faith, we tend to accuse and blame others...even for the delay of the kingdom. But what have *we done* to restore the kingdom?

It seems that the church has done a pretty good job at isolating itself in it legalized ways. Are we willing to truly give of ourselves or are we just here to preserve the "community" we have built for OURSELVES. Moreover, if we ourselves don't have a firm grasp on the understanding of the kingdom, how then can we blame others for its delay? Regardless of our confusion and uncertainty, the Lord hears us and the reply is right before us,

"you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

And this is what we are a witness to:

³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

We have been blessed with the strength and the power through the Holy Spirit to be God's witnesses to His kingdom and to assist with the restoration of God's Kingdom and part of that kingdom is the community we build here on earth...here and now...by letting others know the only true God among us, Jesus Christ whom God has sent and we make known through our service to others with acts of mercy and grace. But we tend to leave that thinking for those other bigger churches, they'll take care of that because we really don't have that ability. But we do

have the ability, we have the ability because we were given that ability through the waters of our Baptism.

In Holy Baptism our gracious heavenly Father liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are born children of a fallen humanity; in the waters of Baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church which is the body of Christ. As we live with him and with his people, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.¹

This Baptismal promise is central to who we are as Christians. This promise is Jesus Christ...and this is what we share, so that the glory of grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. (*2 Corinthians 4:15*)

Here, within this promise made to each of us and through our faith, is the Kingdom of God being restored through us and by us. The kingdom is not some ambiguous celestial place we end up, it is faith shared and encouraged in all of us, right here...right now...in and through each of us, and in each of us three hours from now and two days from now...beyond the walls of this building...we are blessed with the gift of faith...a faith to share as freely as it has been given...a faith that when shared...builds the glory of God. This is the kingdom and this is how the kingdom is restored.

As we go about our ordinary lives that are called into discipleship to serve the Lord I think there is no better understanding of the call to discipleship than that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who has written:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brothers (& sisters) when we learn to listen to him.....listening can be a greater service than speaking.

But he who can no longer listen to his brothers (& sisters) will soon be no longer listening to God either; Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother (& sister), but only for himself and for his own follies.²

Our faith is building God's Kingdom, but just as each one of us looks different in appearance, so too our faith is reflected in the same way. So too, we all serve God in different ways but each way builds and restores the Kingdom of God. Likewise, Bonhoeffer reminds us again,

God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me, that is, in my own image; rather in his very freedom for me God made this person in His image. I can never know before hand how God's image should appear in others. That image always manifests a completely new and unique form that comes

¹ *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1978. Order of Holy Baptism, page 121.

² Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together, A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Pub, 1954. Taken from the discussion in Chapter Four on Ministry under the heading of "The Ministry of Listening" page 97-98.

solely from God's free and sovereign creation. To me the sight may seem strange, even ungodly. But God creates every (person) in the likeness of His Son the Crucified.³

How blessed are we who are called into a promise to share the glory of God! What is your prayer? My prayer is that of St. Peter's when he wrote, let us,

^{5:6} Humble *ourselves* therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that *God* may exalt *us* in due time. ⁷ Cast all *our* anxiety on him, because he cares for *us*. ⁸ (*Let us*) Discipline *ourselves*, keep alert. Like a roaring lion *our* adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in *our* faith, for *we* know that *our* brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

¹⁰ And after *we* have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called *us* to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish *us...as His own*. ¹¹ To him be the power forever and ever. ~~Amen.~~ (1Peter 5:6-11a)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...amen.

³ Ibid., page 93.