

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost • October 2, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 17:1-10

“Thankless”

It's October 2016. Pumpkin spice has pretty much completed its takeover of the American food and beverage scene. But looking back on the past week or the past month, you could be forgiven for thinking that things aren't all that great in America. In that time, we've heard of even more school shootings – two words that shouldn't have to be joined together. Police-involved shootings have escalated tensions on our nation's streets and sports stadiums, shining a spotlight on race relations. Floods, storms, and wildfires devastated homes and lives. On top of all that, we're heading into the final stretch of an historic election season, one that's causing heads around the world to shake in wonderment, concern, and despair. The rest of the world doesn't look to be doing any better, with cease-fires breaking, violence escalating, and freedoms being trampled. Where can it go from here?

The world is messed up – in numerous and specific ways. So many ways, in fact, that seems like nothing that you or I could so would even begin to fix it. Like the prophet Habakkuk from today's first reading (Hab. 1:1-4, 2:1-4), you might be looking for God's action against the evil and brokenness that plague the world today. It'd be so much easier if He just stepped in and brought an end to injustice, cleaned up the environment, or gave us a president who would serve justly, wisely, and selflessly in what might be one of the most thankless positions in the world. The messed-up-ness of the world seems so great. What can be done about it? What great thing will God do?

Maybe we shouldn't be too hasty in our asking, though. If God were to intervene and deal with injustice and hate and selfishness – all that messed-up-ness, wouldn't that mean He'd have to do something about us, too? Because He would, and He does.

Do you ever wonder why we come together as Christians in congregations like this one? Gathering with your fellow believers for worship might seem like a thankless task – especially if you, your spouse, or your kids would rather be doing something else with the time you'd spend here. But God brings us together to experience His plan for all that messed-up-ness: yours, mine, and the world's. The Holy Spirit has called you here today to hear the good news that God's kingdom has broken into the world. God Himself has come to be with you, taking on humanity and experiencing all our messed-up-ness, overcoming it with perfection. It was a thankless mission, and He died on a cross finishing it. Then He rose so that you and I might have life that's overcome with perfection right here, right now.

Last week, my infant son was baptized here at St. John's. His Savior washed him and gave him new life in a restored relationship with his loving Creator. God welcomed him into the family of faith that we share, the family that the Holy Spirit gathers together around Jesus' cross and empty tomb. Our heavenly Father made him an heir of Christ and a part of His kingdom at work in this time and place.

Next week, we will celebrate our congregation's 60th anniversary as an outpost of God's kingdom in this time and place. We'll come together again to give thanks for and celebrate the great work that our Lord has done and continues to do among and through us. And as we do, it won't be as “members” of an organization who are entitled to anything but as followers of Jesus who are called and sent in his name.

Today's Gospel reading from Luke 17, instruction given by Jesus to his disciples and the apostles, gives us guidance on what it's like to be a congregation of messed-up people in this broken world. **Part of that guidance speaks to how we are to live together.** You and I each need to pay attention to ourselves and the teaching of God's Word, so that we do not mislead others who are learning and growing in Christ. Pastors have a greater degree of responsibility there, certainly, but it's still one we all share as a congregation. We must also be vigilant against sin: both in our own broken lives, and in the life of our community gathered around the cross, standing ready to forgive whenever a brother or sister in Christ repents.

The other part of Jesus' instruction points us out into the world through faith that serves. Faith does great things in the world, things that would otherwise be impossible. That's God's kingdom – his reigning – at work to bring healing to our world in Christ. You and I share in the faith and the work of the apostles as we go and serve in Jesus' name. As Paul wrote to Timothy, God has given His people the spirit of power and love and self-control. (2 Tim. 1:7) You have that very same spirit by God's grace. In that

spirit, you and I are called to go out, following Jesus, to work in our world of overwhelming messed-up-ness.

Don't go out following Jesus if you're looking for thanks. From the world's perspective, following Jesus is thankless service. Living in faith often leads to rejection or disrespect. Paul himself suffered and was imprisoned for proclaiming God's work in Christ (2 Tim. 1:12). You might not experience the same – and I hope you don't have to. It might not seem like much is happening as you serve in Jesus' name, let alone great and dramatic signs like trees being uprooted and planted in the sea. And yet, God is at work through you to do great things. When you listen to your neighbor's need and are there for them, God is at work. When you support disaster recovery efforts, God is at work. When you take a stand against injustice by working to reconcile conflict through Christ, God is at work.

As we go out in faith, serving in Jesus' name, we aren't doing it for thanks. The truth of our situation is that God owes us nothing and we owe Him everything. Like the servant in Jesus' final illustration, we have no right to expect that we'd come in from our time working in the world in our master's name to have him serve us. Yet that is exactly what our Lord does! Your life matters to your Master so much that he gives his life to care for you. In the Lord's Supper, he gives his body to feed you, and he gives his blood to enliven you. You and I, who are but servants, are served by our Savior.

Jesus' guidance to the apostles in Luke 17 is particularly applicable to those of us who serve in the leadership of the congregation. We shouldn't go out expecting thanks for our service. It's somewhat ironic, then, that this month of October is being billed as "Pastor Appreciation Month" (primarily, it would seem, by companies that offer cards and gifts you could buy your pastor). We do, however, want and need your support in prayer. Pray for your pastors. Pray for those in leadership roles in our congregation. Pray for our families. Pray for your fellow disciples in this congregation. Pray for our church body. Pray for our country. As you go out and join Jesus on his mission each day, listen for opportunities to pray for and with your neighbor. Be praying people.

It's October 2016. We're here as a congregation to follow Jesus in faith. It's a **thankless** calling – and that's not a bad thing! When we do what God has commanded, we simply say, "*We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.*" (Luke 17:10) God is at work through us. God is at work through you. By faith, He will do great things.

Amen.