

Pentecost 13 (Proper 18)

September 7, 2025



You have two ways open before you, either towards heaven and eternal life, or towards hell; either with Christ or with the world... Therefore, if you wish to be a child of God, get ready for persecution.

– Martin Luther–

Sermon on Matthew 5

PROCLAMATION POINTS

The following are some thoughts and questions to be used for a text study on the weekly lessons, or for jump-starting the imagination of the preacher and hearer in preparing for the proclamation event.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Exclusive loyalty toward God is and always has been the most important aspect of faith in him. Our sinful human tendency, however, is to stray away from the Lord and wander after idols that do not give life. The result of having hearts that go astray is death. That's pretty harsh but it's the reality of being a child of God. Nothing and no one else can do what God does and he deserves our singular focus and adoration.

- *How do you know if you or someone else has a wandering heart? What does that look like?*

God told Israel that he had set before them life and death, blessing and curse (v.19). Then he told them to “choose life.” In the Hebrew, the word for “choose” is רָחַב (bahur) which can mean to test, distinguish a difference in, or examine.

- *As Lutherans, we often cringe at anything that suggests a choice on our part. How does knowing what bahur means in English, help you to interpret what God is saying to Israel?*

When Martin Luther spoke of the human will, he always pointed out that our choices have limits. Contrary to what people like to say, our fallen human will is not “free” but is “bound” to sin. Left to our own devices as sinners, we prefer to choose ourselves instead of God. Our “default” position is unbelief. This is the definition of Original Sin.

- *If on our own as sinners, we could never choose correctly, in what way must we depend upon the Holy Spirit to intervene? How is “choosing life” something the Holy Spirit must do in us?*

Psalms 1

It's probably no coincidence that the very first psalm of the whole psalter is a song about blessing. The Hebrew word used is ash-er, which means to be happy or privileged. The psalmist declared that those who are blessed (ash-er) are those who do not walk in the counsel of the wicked.

The psalmist proclaimed that those who walk in the ways of the Lord are like a tree planted by streams of water. They are nourished by God's love and holy presence and bear much fruit for the kingdom. On the contrary, those who keep company with the wicked will be tainted and kept away from the congregation of the righteous.

- *In what very real and tangible ways is happiness tied to putting God first in our lives?*
- *In what sense are we called to be “in” but not “of” the world? How does that include the company we keep?*

Philemon 1-21

Paul wrote to his friend Philemon who was a convert in the faith, thanks to Paul's efforts. He commended him for his faith in Jesus Christ and his love toward “all the saints.” Philemon was known for his gifts of hospitality since it was at his house that believers met and worshiped. Paul's true reason for writing was, as he put it, for love's sake (v.9). Philemon was the owner of a runaway slave named Onesimus. During Paul's imprisonment he became acquainted with Onesimus and was instrumental in his conversion to the faith. Now, Paul was asking that Philemon would receive Onesimus back in peace, not as a slave but as a brother in the faith.

- *Does Paul appeal to his friend with the authority of an apostle or with a kindly request from one brother in the faith to another? What is the difference?*
- *What does Paul say that he is confident that his friend Philemon will do in response to this letter? (v.21)*

The name Onesimus is based on the word “useful.” In verse 11, Paul uses this as a play on words, to speak of the transformation that Onesimus had experienced.

- *Why did Paul say that now, in faith, Onesimus was was finally “useful”? What makes anyone in the faith “useful”? What would have made him useless to Philemon?*

Luke 14:25-35

Jesus challenged his followers to count the cost of following him. He said that anyone who wants to gain his or her life must be willing to lose it. This includes us! Those of us who want to follow Jesus must be willing to take up our cross — be ready to suffer for the sake of the gospel. Discipleship is a costly endeavor.

- *Is the metaphor of “counting the cost of discipleship” that Jesus used here (the price of building a tower, or a king calculating the price of war) something that is lost in our culture of instant credit, repossession, and unpaid debt?*

Jesus goes on to call his disciples “salt” which he says is good as long as it doesn't lose its taste. Salt makes food more flavorful and it is a preservative. Disciples who are salty are enhancing the kingdom of God in the name of Christ.

- *In what sense does salt not exist for itself, but only benefits the larger whole it is a part of?*
- *In what ways are we “salt” for the world? How do we season our family, friends, and community with our love for Christ?*