

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany; February 23, 2025

+ Luke 6:27-36 +

“Forget the Buffet; Take the Bread”

“But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you one cheek, offer the other too. If someone takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes away your things, do not demand them back.

“Treat others just as you would want them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? To be sure, even the sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same thing. If you lend to those from whom you expect to be repaid, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners lend to sinners in order to be paid back in full. Instead, love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the unthankful and the evil. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

479 years ago this past Friday, Martin Luther died. You may recall that the – what shall we call it? – “nickname” of our church, “Lutheran” comes from his name. That name was placed on churches of our confession not by Luther but by his enemies. Luther’s last words are a matter of debate. Probably the last word he spoke was “Ja!” when asked if he believed in Jesus and his Word unto death. But probably the last words he wrote were: “We are all beggars. This is true.” Luther, and Christians who bear his name, live and die believing that we live based on what we receive from the Lord’s hands.

And so we have no reason to brag or to be proud. Those last words of Luther are often referred to. But you know what people tend to forget? Second-to-last words. Here’s what he wrote just before that: “Let no one think he has become an expert in the Holy Scriptures, unless he has governed the Church with the prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, John the Baptist, Christ, and the apostles for one hundred years. Do not attack this Holy Book, but bow down before it and adore where it leads.”

Do you see the connection between his last and second-to-last words? Talking about humility and needing God’s grace is one thing. Showing that humility by allowing your gracious God to use his Word to lead you where he wants you to go – that’s another thing.

Do you see another amazing thing about Luther’s second-to-last words? A man who spent decades translating, lecturing, commentating, preaching, expounding, and confessing the Scripture was by his own standard still about seventy years short of qualifying as an expert on it. No one could claim expertise, unless they governed the churches with Christ and his messengers for a century at least!

What do you think of the Bible? Do you think you know it? Do you love it? Do you bow down to it and humbly let God use it to lead you where he wants you to go? Is this Bible where you turn to let God feed you what he knows is right, or your buffet from which you pick and choose what you like?

Someone once told me, wisely, that modern Christians in the Western Hemisphere form their faith the way they form their quilts: this color that I like, that color that I like, this pattern that pleases me, and that pattern that pleases me. It’s not whole cloth; it’s patchwork. And so it goes for many Christians. It is so easy and natural to filter the Scriptures through pre-existing mindsets and standards. “Yes, that’s something I think God would say, so I will accept it. That verse, though, I’m not sure God would say that,

and if he would I'll need to understand it in some other way than it actually speaks. I'll find a preacher over here who treats the passage the way I want, and a fellowship over there who will get creative with me in how we read it."

Patchwork quilts are beautiful for bed coverings. You don't need whole cloth. But when it comes to faith, the problem with patchwork quilts is this: Jesus came to give you his whole life. All of it. The whole life of Christ is his gift to you as your very own. He didn't come just to give the part where he says, "**Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.**" He also came to give you the part of his life, his Word, that he speaks in today's Gospel: "**Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other cheek also. And from one who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic, either. Give to everyone who begs from you. And from one who takes away your goods, do not demand them back.**" It dawned on me as I studied these words of Christ closely. Do you know what Jesus is basically asking of you here? To be a mother to everyone around you. Is this not exactly what good mothers do for their children when those children are bratty and ungrateful? Your kid cusses and slams the door on you, and you keep loving them. They toss their dishes into the sink without offering to help clean or thanking you for the meal, and you do the dishes and then pray for them before you fall asleep that night. You buy them clothes, and they ask for more, and you buy more. They take and take and take and give nothing of monetary value back to you, ever.

Mothers do that because they love their children like...well...mothers. But to treat everyone that way? Now we want to filter and modify and re-interpret. Literally turn my cheek to the one – anyone! – who strikes me? Let's call this hyperbole, or some other kind of figure of speech. God wouldn't give you more than you can handle (I'm pretty sure that's in the Bible somewhere, and if it's not it should be!), so he'd never lay on you the burden of praying for someone who abuses you! It's just fine to charge interest for a person-to-person loan. No! Right here, as clear as summertime sunshine, the Son of God does say all of those things. If someone grabs your coat, give them your shirt. And don't expect anything back.

When Christians treat the Word of God as a buffet as not the whole loaf that Jesus feeds them, these are often the first words that get flicked off the loaf, like the crusty end that's too hard to chew. These words are the lima beans and broccoli of the buffet.

But this is all part of the loaf to consume and make part of you. Because this is the life of Jesus, is it not? The prophet Isaiah writes: **As the sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.** Jesus went to slaughter uncomplaining. They struck him on the cheek and he turned the other. They took away his cloak, shirt, and tunic to gamble for them. He did not demand them back. They cursed and mocked him. In return, he prayed to the Father for their forgiveness. He loved and blessed his enemies to the end.

To this day, he gives mercy to all who ask for it, without demanding anything in exchange. Or else his mercy would be a purchase, and not true mercy. We ask him for the food and shelter we need, and his answer is, "Yes. And I give you eternal life, too. And my Father is now your Father. And I will raise your body in glory in the new creation. More than you asked for, more than you could imagine, I give you. I place you as my child in a worldwide family called my Church. I will watch over you throughout your entire life. You – who were enemy because your sin against me. I love you." And I say, "Well, all I was really thinking about was some rent money." And he gives me all that.

After Jesus says, **“But I say to you who are listening...”** everything he says in this Gospel is autobiographical. And it still is. If you have received Jesus’ holy life and sacrifice of your sins by faith, then take the whole loaf of Jesus Christ. He is not calling you to a buffet. He calls you to believe in him and live that whole life of his, every piece of it.

And please understand: Jesus doesn’t insist that we take all of him the way sinners often do. Have you ever heard someone say something like this? “If you want to love me, you have to love all of me, warts and all. Love me with my faults, or not at all.” And it’s almost threatening when we say, “Take all of me, just as I am!” We mean, “Take the bad, too, because nobody’s perfect!”

We don’t hear that from Jesus here! This is meek, gentle, generosity that wants you to receive all of who he is. He wants you to have the joy of living as he lived, of giving yourself to others as he did to save them. Where will it lead you, to be someone who loves enemies and blesses those who curse? Where will you end up when you pray for those who abuse you? Will it lead you to bruised cheeks? Maybe even into the grave? Short-term, it might. Long-term, you will be saved through your faith in Jesus, and every action that imitated him will be greatly rewarded, as he promises. Will living like Christ also lead you to let go of those grudges that are crushing your mind and soul? Yes, it will do that, too. Will it lead you to pray more than you have every prayed before, because now you’re including those hate you? Of course. And God will answer and bless those prayers.

There’s definitely a challenge here: to give up our patchwork approach to the Word and instead take up our cross in the way we treat others, following Jesus in how he treated others. It is the challenge to treat every person in this world as valuable as you are, just as you want to be treated.

It’s scary. But so is the birth of a new child. So is being asked out on a date by a quality person you weren’t expecting to invite you out. So is swimming for the first time as a little child. So is a ski lift carrying you over a mountain to see a view you’ve never seen before. New life. New love. New vision. It’s always scary. But what goodness they bring!

And maybe we should ask: what exactly makes this scary? Who or what is it really scary to? Only our sinful and stubborn nature that resists the Savior. Only that sinful nature that still screams, “Resist! Only do what you’re already comfortable with! Eat at the buffet! Pick your patches!” That sinful nature will never be ready for something so good and pure as Jesus to pierce it.

Consuming the whole life of Christ is its own reward. Before you today has been placed the whole life, the loaf, of Jesus. It is love not only for you but also for your enemies. It is filled with mercy and kindness not only for you, but also for those who hate you. It is bread not only for your soul, but also for every soul. It is a challenge that comes with pain, at least temporarily, with a cross to bear. But that pain is proof that it’s the crucified Lord who calls you to this life. The challenge is proof that the Lord wounded for your sins is extending it to you. The difficulty of it is proof that it’s the call of the risen man with nail marks still in hands.

Bow down before your Savior and his Holy Book. And adore every place it leads you. Amen.

St. Stephen: 17

St. Paul: 119

St. Mark: 259

Our Savior: 152

Trinity: 248
Funeral: 44
Wedding: 22
Conference and Special: 9

Total: 870