

21st after Trinity
Milwaukee 10/22/72

"WHO GETS THE CREDIT--OR BLAME?" John 4:46b-53

Jesus said to the official from Capernaum - "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went his way.

While he was on his way home his servants met him and told him that his son was living, and he asked at what hour he had begun to improve, and discovered that it was when Jesus said, "Your son will live." AND HE HIMSELF BELIEVED, AND ALL HIS HOUSEHOLD.

BUT WHAT IF HE HADN'T? Because his son lived, Jesus got the credit! BUT WHAT IF HE HADN'T LIVED? Would Jesus have gotten the blame?

Time after time the Gospel stories tell us of a miracle of healing, and the normal thing was that Jesus said - "Your faith has made you well!"

But what if the person hadn't been made well - would that mean that his faith was lacking?

If there are two families, each with persons who are terminally ill - and both pray earnestly and faithfully for their loved one to be restored to health and strength - and ONE LIVES and THE OTHER DIES, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

Does it mean that the faith of the one family was BETTER or MORE REAL or MORE SINCERE than the other?

If everything turns out all right, and everyone lives happily ever after, WE ARE PRONE TO SAY that we thank God for His many blessings! Or we might even BRING GOD'S WILL INTO THE PICTURE IN SOME WAY.

But - WHAT IF EVERYTHING DOESN'T TURN OUT ALL RIGHT, and EVERYONE DOESN'T LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

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Does it mean that God wasn't concerned about the one family - or that they didn't have a strong enough faith - or that for some unknown reason God had withheld His blessings from them?

I'm sure that all of us have driven along a highway underneath overhanging rocks, where we have seen the sign - DANGER - FALLING ROCKS! I've always wondered how a person was supposed to avoid them if they did fall.

But suppose that a huge boulder suddenly comes tumbling down the hillside and sweeps one car off of the road and all of the passengers are killed, but another car narrowly escapes? WAS THAT GOD'S WILL THAT IT SHOULD HAPPEN THAT WAY?

Are we then supposed to believe that GOD IS "UP THERE" PLAYING RUSSIAN ROULETTE? I don't think I like that kind of a God!

And if we can so easily PASS THINGS OFF AS BEING GOD'S WILL, I keep wondering why more people don't really GET ANGRY WITH GOD that He picks and chooses in that way - that we should be some kind of pawns to be easily sacrificed in the GRAND CHESS GAME OF LIFE!

And that is really what it is - because NONE OF US IS SO PERFECT OR BLAMELESS as to be exempt - and besides it doesn't always work that way. From time immemorial men have asked the question as to WHY THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER and WHY THE EVIL SEEM TO PROSPER.

These would be easy questions to answer IF IT WAS ALWAYS PREDICTABLE - then we would know what to do!

It is rather amazing HOW GOD HAS BEEN USED THROUGHOUT HUMAN HISTORY. He has been called upon to do many things for man - things which really are not at all in keeping with His will for man.

He was asked to BLESS THE CHRISTIAN CRUSADES, when

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men went out and murdered other men in the interest of fulfilling God's will IN RECLAIMING THE HOLY LAND FOR CHRIST.

Men thought they were doing His will in the INQUI-SITION, when "heretics" were imprisoned and tortured and pulled-apart.

We called upon God TO BLESS AMERICA, LAND THAT I LOVE, as our boys went to fight in World War II and many was the pilot THAT CAME IN ON A WING AND A PRAYER.

We've even used this imagery in two of the hymns that we sing this morning, the thinking being that EVEN WARFARE can be properly diverted and twisted to exhibit God's will and purpose.

Bishop Hallock of the Episcopal Church calls attention to our twisted thinking of this subject in yesterday's Sentinel - in the fact that BECAUSE FEWER AMERICANS ARE BEING KILLED IN VIET NAM NOW, it is no longer an object of great concern - as if the others who are being killed are less than human, and so are not the object of God's love and care.

These are difficult questions that we have raised - and it is not easy to find the answers. But let's try some, recognizing that THIS COULD BE THE OBJECT OF A GREAT DEAL OF DEBATE AND DISCUSSION AMONG US.

In speaking of THE WILL OF GOD, Leslie Weatherhead says - "I wish we could reserve those words for situations which we believe to be God's ideal intention. Then we should be delivered from the heresy, with which some still torture themselves, of calling things like cancer and polio, frustration and premature death, the will of God. God, the great creative Artist, cannot intend imperfection in the created object.

"If a man drops a baby out of a fifth-story window on to a hard pavement, I suppose one could

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say it is God's will that the baby should be killed, or He would have made babies of something like India rubber. But it was not God's will that the baby should so be dropped, so the baby's death is NOT HIS WILL in any true sense of the word."

In other words - we all suffer through THE HUMAN FAMILY'S IGNORANCE, FOLLY, OR SIN, as well as through our own.

IT IS GOD'S WILL to replace ignorance with knowledge, folly with wisdom, and sin with righteousness. So nothing that is caused by any of these things - or others - can truly be called God's will, FOR IT IS NOT HIS INTENTION.

We do get a glimpse of the will of God when, in the Gospels, we watch Jesus, not telling people that their illnesses were God's will, BUT HEALING THEM.

When a poor woman who had suffered for 18 years was brought to Him, He did not say IT WAS GOD'S WILL THAT SHE SHOULD SUFFER. He said it was the work of SATAN, and He healed her.

Granted that God's will is often temporarily defeated, yet the wonder of the truth is THAT HE CAN MAKE ALL THINGS SERVE HIS FINAL PURPOSES. Omnipotence does not mean that everything that happens is God's will. When we say that God is OMNIPOTENT, we mean that He cannot be FINALLY DEFEATED.

The CROSS is the IDEAL illustration. It was a crime brought about by evil men. BUT GOD USED IT AND WOVE IT INTO HIS TRIUMPHANT PLAN, which we call the redemption of the world.

Praying for people must often puzzle us. It may even seem fruitless. We pray for A and he recovers. But we pray for B and he dies, and we don't know why in either case.

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The cynic says that A would have recovered in any case. Leslie Weatherhead says - "We pray every Sunday that the Queen may have "health and wealth long to live," but the nation supplies the wealth, and the longevity of the Royal Family is not longer than that of any other. A million people regularly prayed for peace before the last war began."

There are two replies that occur to the Christian.
1) He is commanded by Christ to pray; not necessarily to understand whether it will WORK IN THE WAY THAT HE WISHES OR NOT; not necessarily to understand it at all. 2) He knows that Christ Himself prayed for others, and we can hardly say, "I am not asked to follow Him there."

It will help us, however, to understand a little of how prayer MAY work. A nurse who rigs up an oxygen tent for a patient does not cure him. ALL HEALING IS OF GOD ALONE. But she does cooperate with God in giving the healing energies of God a better chance.

Intercession for others may be a means whereby we "supply the oxygen" of our love and faith, our courage and optimism, our caring, and let them surround the mind and soul of the person for whom we pray.

And this may be JUST THE COOPERATION WHICH GOD ASKS FROM US TO ACHIEVE HIS OWN WILL. Sincere prayer for another cannot be wasted, but we cannot assume that IT WILL ALWAYS WORK THE WAY WE WANT IT TO.

Our problem is that FOR US THERE IS ONLY ONE ANSWER. We are LIFE ORIENTED - and we assume that for a person to live IS THE VERY BEST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN.

IT MAY NOT BE AT ALL - but we cannot understand why at that moment. And we do need to remember that the problem is never IN TRYING TO RECONCILE AN ANGRY GOD to be favorably disposed toward us.

The problem is IN RECONCILING OURSELVES to God's

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purpose for life. And then we always have to assume THAT DEATH IS ONE OF THE POSSIBILITIES!

During the Great Plague, thousands of people prayed ardently that GOD WOULD HEAL THEIR DEAR ONES. If God had done so, PLAGUE MIGHT STILL BE WITH US. Men would have put - as it were - a prayer in the slot, drawn out a cure, and never bothered further to find out those causes which lead to prevention. Maybe CANCER stands now where PLAGUE stood then.

God intends that we SHOULD COOPERATE WITH HIM in every way IN TRIUMPHING OVER THE PROBLEMS that cause man pain - and that includes warfare.

Perhaps no other words sum it up more clearly than those which St. Augustine once wrote - WITHOUT GOD, WE CANNOT. WITHOUT US, GOD WILL NOT. That means that as we pray, we are cooperating with God, not overcoming a DIVINE RECLUCTANCE, but cooperating with a DIVINE WILLINGNESS.

AMEN.

TRINITY XXI
Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee
November 11, 1973

"A TUG OF WARS"

"Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one." (Ephesians 6:14-16)

The writer of Ephesians was not the first man to see life as a battle. We have all used cliches which echo a similar refrain: "the battle of life goes on;" "life is a constant struggle;" "where there's life, there's conflict."

Yes, our human experience is so often an ongoing process of advances and retreats; at one time delaying, at another taking action; here a victory, and there a defeat. Neither individuals nor institutions escape these struggles. To live without battles IS NOT to live.

But the major battles are two, or so claims Frederick Buechner, an American novelist and clergyman who comments on the text before us. And I find myself inspired and in agreement with his commentary.

The first is the war of conquest. To conquer, to be somebody, to stay on top, to have a position that I can proudly claim is MY PLACE - - these are the battle cries of our wars of conquest. And we all fight in this war, because we all want a place in the sun.

We all fight to be visible - to be recognized - to win a place in the light. We feel that we must conquer a territory that we can call our own. We feel this struggle is a necessity

for a meaningful life -- AND IT IS!

The desire to do the battle of conquest is a givenness of life. God has given us this ambition. Through this pulsing drive to secure a place, our lives take on meaning and purpose.

But like every battle, the war of conquest is NOT without its dangerous and caustic effects. For this battle is fought against flesh and blood. The foes in the field are other human beings. And the banner carried by all has the same insignia on it -- it reads: ME, MYSELF, I! And that banner can blind us to the needs and concerns of others.

And in the emotion of the conquest, all that we finally see is the single banner which reads: Myself, or Myself and My Family, or Myself and My Country, or Myself and My Race. Yes, the war of conquest can become a dog eat dog battle

And as we turn again to Ephesians, we clearly see WHY and HOW it becomes ~~such a~~ battle. For we realize that in the war of conquest, we have put on the whole armor of man. And under these conditions of battle, our armor might be more like this.

Do not gird your loins with truth - gird yourself with whatever will be to your advantage. Put on the breastplate of arrogant self-confidence, for if you show any signs of weakness, you will be crushed. Let your feet be shod with sneakers, for you must be crafty at dodging and superior at deception. Above all, take the shield of security -- hide behind your degrees, your status, your position -- go along with the group, join the mob, but above all, don't expose your principles

of compassion or fairness, or your fear of losing.

Yes, these can become our armaments when we engage in the war of conquest as the major battle of life. As I have previously said, we all wage this war throughout our lives. God has given all of us the desire and ambition to succeed -- to gain a place of recognition -- to feel we have accomplished something. But God has also offered us a choice of armaments, as well as a choice of battles *strategies.*

We can choose to make the war of conquest the MAJOR AIM of our lives. In so doing we can choose the armor of man -- for the war of conquest best succeeds with the armor of man.

But God also reminds us that the war of conquest lasts only the age of a lifetime. The successes, the status, the place in the earthly sun diminish quickly as the sun sets on my life and yours. And we ask ourselves: Now what?

As we ask ourselves that question - regardless of what point in our lifetime -- it is at that time that we see the second and more important battle of life -- the battle to BECOME whole and at peace inside of this flesh and blood. This war is the war to become a fully human child of God.

My friends, this is the goal that we are really after and that God is really after for each of us. Power, success, and security are secondary substitutes as we envision the significance of this struggle.

For this is not the battle against flesh and blood - this is the battle against the forces of darkness, which we have traditionally called the devil. Paul writes: "For we are not

contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rules of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

Yes, this is the real battle of life -- we struggle to be set free from the darkness in ourselves that we never fully see or fully understand or fully feel responsible for. Paul said it another way: "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

Our battle is to be free of the evil we do not want yet which we often find ourselves caught in. No one but a madman, for instance, wants to blow up the world, yet we live in a time when some of the sanest and wisest men could do just that. No one but a fool likes to feel guilty, and yet we so often do those things which plunge us into the pit of guilt. No one but a glutton could stand to see another **person without** home or food, and yet doesn't our energy crisis tell us something about our consumption habits?

Yes, we all have experienced the strategy and the scars of the forces of darkness -- we never rest from the charge of these forces. They surround us and hem us in on every side, and we cry out: Who will deliver me from this body of death?

And Paul says: Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. . . . Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one.

Yes, the eternal battle of life -- the war against the darkness and evil of life -- is won with the armor of God. God has offered us that armor, and we cannot lose as long as we wear it.

He girds us with truth - because he girds us with Christ. Christ is truth, because Christ helps us to see who we really are. He helps us to see our darkness -- and by so doing, he helps us to confess this darkness. And he helps us to see our light, because he forgives us regardless of the degree of that darkness. How great it is to be girded with that truth -- that is the girding of victory!

And God offers his breastplate of righteousness. His breastplate of love. This is love which WILLs our good even though he despises the darkness in us. To put on this breastplate enables you and me to WILL the good of another, even though we despise the darkness in him.

With God's breastplate of love, we love a person in all his ugliness in order to make him beautiful. We do this because God has loved us even in our darkness - our ugliness - and he thereby changes us into his children of light.

Finally, God offers his shield of faith. And as we take that shield we realize that it offers NO SECURITY against further struggle or battle. But that shield does offer us a hand to hold even in the midst of the darkest struggle -- and there is security in knowing that we are cared for and loved even while being battered around in the world.

And so the battles go on. And we will continue to fight the war of conquest even while we struggle to become more whole and at peace. For to live life is TO ALWAYS BE CAUGHT BETWEEN A TUG OF WARS.

with the battle

But we need not worry much about the war of conquest - even though we'll continue to be caught in it. For it will continue to have its part in our lives, but as we remain in God's light, we will soon realize that the war of conquest will not be the final victory. Or if we should not succeed, it will not be the final defeat.

For even if we do not finally find the place in life that we wanted, this will not really mean defeat. Because as Christians we continue to fight the decisive war-- the struggle to become fully human -- to become compassionate, honest, and bravely loving.

And no one fights this conflict alone - for we fight it together, and God is on our side, giving us his armor - his truth, his love, his gospel of forgiveness. With his armor, we will not be defeated by the forces of evil.

Today, Loyalty Sunday, we again pledge ourselves to use his armor -- we pledge ourselves in time, talent, and gifts, with the assurance that we will share the final victory with all the saints who have worn the armor before us.

Amen.

PENTECOST XXI
Luth Church of the Master
Oct. 12, 1975

"R. S. V. P."

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come.

Matt 22:1

How many invitations must you process within a week's time? I'm sure there's not one of us here who isn't faced with at least a half dozen invites a week. They range from invitations to church - to committee meetings - to civic functions - to birthdays - anniversaries - weddings, marriages, social groups, business luncheons, baptisms, and on and on. One only need look at the bulletin announcements to realize that nearly ten of those represent some form of invitation.

It is no easy task to be alive. Every day offers invitational options - shall it be the football game or the Mendenhall presentation? Even the daily routine of work is an invitation requiring an RSVP.

Obviously, some invitations are essentially obligations - like work and caring for the family. But many invitations offer us options, where our priorities often dictate the choice we'll make.

For instance, Mich football fans probably chose yesterday's game over the marriage tune-up. We esp tend to choose the festive over the laborious. Most of us are positively inclined toward feast functions - esp when they allow us release from tension and our hectic tempo.

Such was the evangelist's view of the kingdom in today's gospel. He compares it to a wedding feast - obviously, a festive event - one which often allows tension release & provides joy. The kingdom, then, is that moment or event wherein we find release from our dull and devious

ways. It is that joyous moment that we experience wholeness -- reunion with God and his intent for us.

But the parable makes equally clear that many Jews in Jesus' day WANTED NO PART of this feast. Obviously, the son of the story represents Jesus. And their response to sharing his presence was to make a joke of it - they simply went on with business as usual - some even mistreated the servants and killed them.

Sounds hard to believe, doesn't it? Sounds like an exaggerated tale? And yet today we surely know how many are laughing at us for our conviction in Christ. I am certain that you are laughed at more frequently than even me.

Yes, daily this parable is confirmed for us -- often even by our friends or civic leaders. Just within this past week, I can name several specific instances where we might say "the kingdom was at hand" -- that is, where one person was inviting another to RE-UNITE with God's intention for man - to come to a new wholeness -- an honest, truthful, and merciful wholeness with God and his creatures.

from one leader

The RSVP ~~esp~~ in one specific case - to BE say- ing, "merciful to a whole community -- was rejected through honesty and mercy will not be profitable to me personally." The invitation to the feast - to share Christ's presence of truthfulness and mercy for a community - was turned down. And even much like the parable - it had a threat attached to it.

Yes, friends, whether the conference table is the U.N., city hall, or the corporate ~~political~~ hierarchy - there are still many leaders who prefer NOT to be released from devious, deceitful ways. Their RSVP to Christ and his way is -- "sorry, I don't dig your ^{lowing} style." Christ is often overlooked for business as usual.

But - thank God -- he does not call off the

the banquet on the basis of ^{man's} our response.
No matter how many negatives he receives -
he persists and continues to offer his feast --
he simply makes known that his guest list
includes everyone, regardless of how good or
bad we've been. The great feast with Christ
will not be canceled.

But this all sounds pretty abstract so far.
How does God really make this real. Very
simply - he offers us the Sacraments of
Baptism and Holy Communion. These are his
standard invitation to feast upon his love.
Both require an RSVP from us.

But he hardly leaves us at that point with
those few drops of water and wine - and that
morsel of bread. Those substances are God's
vehicles reminding us of his REAL INTENT and
his REAL ACTION OF LOVE for us. They are
just an EARTHLY fortaste of the heavenly
kingdom.

They are specific REMINDERS of God's example
of giving -- reminders that God gives to us
NOT because of our badness or goodness - but
because we are his children. He gives to us
because he knows we need release from our
destructive - deceitful habits.

He creates, redeems and sanctifies us WITH
THE HOPE THAT WE WILL FULFILL OUR POTENTIAL
according to his lead (in his image). That is
the Christian RSVP - to follow God's lead.

God's lead is to continually ^{yes, daily} offer the
feast of love. His banquet is everlasting --
not a one time bash. Likewise - to follow his
lead IS NOT A ONE TIME response -- it's not
like sending a card back to him telling him
that we'd like to attend the party.

That might be a proper response for our earthly
wedding feasts - but following God's lead is more
than checking the right box on a membership form
or baptismal certificate - ^{by} it is more than a
one-time response to his offering

The Christian RSVP is just like God's daily provision of life -- it is a daily response of giving out of thankfulness. God provides the first fruits - we continue to share them in thanksgiving.

It is my prayer that we will remember this, esp. as our cottage meetings and Loyalty Sunday approach. The invitation to this meeting -- just like the invitation to pledge -- ~~are~~ hardly EQUAL to the invitation to the kingdom.

But the meeting and the pledge are *two specific* indications of where our priorities are and what invitations we consider important. Most of us have chosen to respond to the invitation of REGULAR MORTGAGE PAYMENTS - some as high as \$400/month.

Our time, talents and resources are three important reflections of our daily RSVP to God's invitation TO SHOW NOW that we desire to follow his lead -- to show NOW that we are serious and thankful for his invitation to the FINAL FEAST. -- *to show now that*
AMEN

we desire his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

PENTECOST XXI

Luth Church of the Master, Troy
October 23, 1977

ONLY ONE OUT OF TEN

Then Jesus said, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Luke 17:17-18

The ratio of one out of ten is not considered too successful these days. The sport's team - the baseball batter - the passing quarterback that either only wins or connects one time in ten IS CONSIDERED A REAL LOSER.

What does that say for Jesus Christ, then? Only one out of ten returned to thank him. That's not a very good batting average for Jesus Christ. That seems to indicate that you and I are following a loser.

If Greg Landry hit only one in ten passes - we surely wouldn't believe in him. And yet Jesus succeeded in getting a response out of only ONE in ten - and we say we believe in him.

Well - it should be obvious that the dilemma here is not one caused by Jesus - but rather by humanity. In fact, Jesus was better than 1000 per cent. Ten asked to be healed; and he healed all ten.

The facts of the case before us are almost too obvious. Ten people were healed. So - ten people should have returned to give thanks. But only one returned. Where were the other nine??

The easiest - and most tempting thing to do with this text is to develop a sermon of condemnation. To condemn those other nine for not giving thanks. And the fact is THAT THEY DESERVE CONDEMNATION. The fact is that they were ungrateful. And further - the facts are that YOU AND I are often like those other nine. We're often UNGRATEFUL!

But a sermon of condemnation won't help those other nine be more thankful. It will only make them feel guilty. Likewise - if I compare you and me to those other nine, then

we'll just feel more guilty too. Because the facts really are THAT WE ALREADY know that there have been many times that we have been ungrateful.

Instead - let's handle this text the way Martin Bell has in his book THE WAY OF THE WOLF. Instead of condemning the nine - he investigates THE OTHER NINE. Obviously, his investigation is pure speculation. But it enables YOU and ME to understand more clearly why we too often get trapped into being UNGRATEFUL.

So - what did happen to the other nine? Well, one of them was frightened - that's all. He didn't understand what had happened - and it frightened him. So, he looked for a place to hide. Jesus had simply scared him.

A second did not return because he had NOT been required to do something difficult before he was healed. It was all too easy. He had expected months, maybe years, of fasting and prayer and washing and righteous living to be the requirement. He did not return because he had not earned his reward. His motto was "you get what you pay for." He hadn't paid the price - so Jesus offended him.

The third realized TOO LATE - that he had not really wanted to be cleansed. He just plain didn't know what to do - or how to live WITHOUT his leprosy. Even though he fervently pleaded to be healed - NOW he knew how much he needed his disease. It was his crutch! It had defined him as a person. Now, Jesus had taken away his identity.

It's difficult to explain why the fourth leper did not return. Maybe it's difficult because it's so simple. In a word - the fourth leper DID NOT return because in his delirium of Joy - he just plain forgot. That was all - he just forgot! He was so happy - that he forgot.

The fifth leper was unable to say thank you ANYMORE to ANYBODY! He had been burned out by his life as a social outcast. Here was a man who had to beg - who was shunned by others - who was begrudgingly thrown a few coins -- and for those few coins, EVERYONE ALWAYS EXPECTED HIM to say "Thank You" politely. After these years of such

humiliation - he just didn't say "thank you" to anyone anymore. Not even Jesus Christ.

The sixth leper was a woman -- a mother and wife who had been separated from her family for eleven years because of the leprosy. Her healing meant she was now free to rejoin her husband and family. She did not return to give thanks because she was in such a hurry to get home. Like a wild animal released from captivity -- she had been freed by Jesus. And like the wild animal - she just simply darted straight home.

The seventh leper just didn't believe that Jesus had anything to do with his cleansing. He knew he had been healed -- but WHY and HOW were still unanswered questions. He surely did not believe in any hocus pocus miracles by Jesus -- none of that stuff. He figured there was a perfectly intelligible reason - it had nothing to do with Jesus. He didn't return to give thanks - because from his point of view, Jesus had nothing to do with his healing.

But the eighth leper, on the other hand, ~~DID~~ DID NOT return precisely BECAUSE HE DID BELIEVE JESUS HAD HEALED HIM. He believed the Kingdom of God and the Messiah had come. With Kingdom of God so close at hand - there was no time to return and give thanks. There was just time to run and publish the good news! So that's what he did.

And the ninth leper. Well he's still a mystery. He was one of those people that nobody really knew -- one of those people who just never relate to anyone else. He was one of those people who seem to have a marble or two missing. No matter what tragedy or triumph came along - he just never showed any feelings or emotion. He was almost a non-being. And so when he was healed -- he was just like he had always been - COMPLETELY UN-RESPONSIVE.

So goes a possible anatomy of the ungrateful nine. And where are those nine? Some are hiding in fear, some refusing to believe, some offended at what they call cheap grace, some lost because they no longer can use their disease as an excuse, - some just plain forgetful.

I'm not trying to suggest that we should be like these nine. But after investigating their reasons for not GIVING THANKS -- it's even more obvious that many times we're just like those nine.

So - what's the point. The point is that even when we don't return - God continues to provide and to heal us with forgiveness. The point is that God does not make his offering DEPENDENT UPON OUR OFFERING. The point is that God still gives -- even when we forget to do it.

And that's why YOU and I are here today -- because we have seen that our God is a dependable father -- who always forgives and heals. A father who gives life - who forgives life - and who receives life into eternity.

And for that offering to us -- we are among the 10% who continue to return to give thanks. And God help us NEVER to give up on the other nine. Because he hasn't given up on them -- and we are his messengers - commissioned to help them return TO GIVE THANKS for his never-ending care.

AMEN

PENTECOST XXI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
October 16, 1994
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE PRICE OF ADMISSION"

Jesus, looking at the (rich) man, loved him and said,
"You lack one thing; go and sell what you own, and give the
money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then
come follow me." Mark 10:21

It wasn't a rich man, but it was a highly respected
leader of Hope who recently came to me and asked a question
very similar to the one in today's gospel. He asked: What
should each of us really give to Hope in terms of being the
right financial gift? In a sense, this man was asking:
"What's the Price of Admission to belong to Hope Lutheran?"
Like Jesus, it would have been so easy for me to simply offer
a few "commandments of giving" ... like, GIVE more than your
fair share ... or GIVE at least 10%, a tithe ... or GIVE
cheerfully but generously. But notice that Jesus went well
beyond the commandments in responding to the rich man. He
told the man: "Go and sell all you own, give it to the poor
... and then come and follow me."

Maybe that's what I should say every time a person asks
"How much shall I give to Hope? What's the admission price?
EVERYTHING YOU'VE GOT! But really - why did Jesus confront
this man with such an overwhelming challenge: "Give everything
you've got to the poor and then follow me!" We all know the
answer, don't we?!? The man's riches had totally blinded him
to a meaningful relationship with God and everyone else in
life. Just the fact that he was seeking Jesus was a clear
indication that something was missing from his life; his
wealth had not given him peace, harmony or happiness. In
fact, his possessions had become his god. He had become
possessed by his possessions.

There's not one of us in this room who is not aware of
how much our possessions have possessed us. Daily I now wonder
how I got along before without a computer and copy machine and
fax machine and beeper and car phone and all the other gadgets
that have begun to possess me. It reminds me of the farmer
moved in next to an Amish family ... and the Amish man watched
as the movers delivered delux refrigerators with ice cube
maker/ state of the art stereos with compact disc drives/ and
remote TVs with 46" screens and VCRs/ the latest in computers
The next day the new resident

But Henry Ford even goes one up on this story. Mr. Ford once asked an aggressive young engineer to name his chief ambition in life. The young engineer quickly responded that he wanted to become one of the wealthiest engineers in the world. That was his whole ambition. Sometime later, Mr. Ford presented him with a package. Opening the box, the engineer discovered a pair of medal-rimmed glasses. Oddly, silver dollars were welded into the places normally filled with lenses. "Put them on," Ford urged. "Now what do you see?" "Nothing" replied the industrious engineer, "the money blocks out everything from sight." "Maybe you should rethink your life's ambition," responded Ford and walked away.

The rich man in today's gospel was very much like this Ford engineer - only a little further advanced. His money had become THE PRICE OF ADMISSION for his whole life. His dependence was not upon God or anyone else -- his money was the way he bought his way to whatever he wanted in life ... and also the way he intimidated people when they didn't go along with his point of view. The point that Jesus is making here is that anything that we make the CENTER OF OUR LIVES has become our god. Obviously, that is often money, but many times other things. Today, many people have made sports their god. Their whole lives are dictated by sports schedules, sports routines, sports for the kids, and sports and more sports. These people live and die for sports. To such a person, Jesus would say: "If you want to follow me, give up your sports so that you no longer see the world only through sports. Much like the man in the gospel -- many people would go away hanging their heads ... BECAUSE GOD FORBID, THEY WILL NOT GIVE UP SPORTS FOR ANYONE OR ANYTHING!

So let's go back to the original question: "What must I give to be a GOOD member of Hope Lutheran? What is the Price of Admission in this place? Well, first and foremost, there is and never will be any dollar figure that's appropriate for anyone who joins the church. No one dare ever quote anyone else what might be called a "fair admission price." Likewise, the "tithe" today is not an appropriate standard for giving. The whole matter gets back to the problem with the question raised by the man in the gospel and often raised by each of us here: WE ASK THE WRONG QUESTION!! The first question of every faithful Christian is NEVER "What must I give?" but always "What has God first given to me?" That question always shows the FOCUS OF FAITHFULNESS -- never a matter of dollar signs but always a matter of a dependent relationship. And once we

small percentage of his life ... or just a little creation ... or just a small portion of his power and love! HE GIVES US HIS WHOLE BEING, HIS FULL POWER, HIS TOTAL SACRIFICE OF HIMSELF! And that power thru Jesus Christ makes anything possible -- it is guaranteed to overcome any obstacle of alienation or greed or sin or fault or anything else that has come between God or his people.

Let's be honest with God and everyone else. God knows the real facts about each of us. We own too much; we owe too much; we hurt too much; we sulk too much; we insult too much; we fight too much; yes, we sin too much! **But God pays the full price for all of this silly human arrogance and greed. What is always too much for us is never too much for God.** He surrenders his life totally for us with the hope that it will remove the blinders from our eyes and finally help us to see just how blessed we are! God willingly makes the ultimate sacrifice for us because he has seen how sin has made us too cheap to make that real sacrifice ourselves.

That was classically illustrated in a business decision made by William Orton, then president of Western Union Telegraph Co. Mr. Orton turned down an opportunity to purchase all of the telephone patents of Alexander Graham Bell for the mere price of \$100,000. Orton said there was no way that he was going to make that kind of exorbitant sacrifice. Not long after those same patents were worth billions of dollars. Orton was suffering from the Ford engineer's stigma: he couldn't see beyond the rims of his glasses because he was blinded by his own silver-dollar-greed. How many times has the church had a great opportunity to make an investment in its future mission but we were blinded by our own greed or unwillingness to tear off the silver-dollars from our own vision of a better future.

That's why Jesus sometimes comes off rather harshly to the rich and kindly to the poor. He knows the poor must depend upon nothing but the power of God. But the rich too often make their own wealth the source of their vision rather than God's gracious & sacrificial goodness the object of their admiration. And not only the rich suffer from the stigmatism -- we all get trapped into crying for more money rather than cultivating our dependence upon God's goodness. I can't resist telling the story again -- because it shows how pastors become just as selfish as everyone else. It was the story of the lady in Nebraska who asked her Lutheran pastor, "Would you please conduct a funeral for my pet dog?" Thinking this was

The anonymous parable is so true:

Money will buy a bed, but not sleep;
Will buy food, but not an appetite;
Will buy medicine, but not good health;
Will buy entertainment, but not happiness;
Will buy a house, but not a real home!

So again, that brings us back to the original question: How much should each of us do in our giving to God? As already indicated, **that question is never answered in dollars but always in degrees of gratitude.** How grateful are we that nothing was too costly for God to give himself totally to us? Does that kind of love mean anything to us or is it just a lot of religious jargon? Well there's one time that the sacrificial love of God makes all the difference -- when you and I are contemplating our last meal, our last breath, our last whatever on this earth. Because in that moment - money or sports or muscles or status or investments or technologies don't mean squat. Only then do many people finally come to the realization that there is nothing in this world that can save us -- assure us of God's love! Then and only then we are faced with the real question: "What did I give back to God for what he first gave so sacrificially to me?"

Yes, THE PRICE OF ADMISSION to God's kingdom and to the church has already been paid in full for each of us by Jesus Christ. We don't have to fret any longer about amounts or commandments or degrees of our goodness. He has paid the full price of admission to the kingdom! But when we enter -- will it be joyfully singing "Now Thank We All Our God," or will we be hanging our heads in sadness FOR NOT GIVING BACK AS WE WERE FIRST GIVEN UNTO?

So finally again - what is the price of admission? Certainly no dollar figure, no tithe, no specific amount that I or anyone else can tell you to give. Rather, the PRICE OF ADMISSION IS a confession of faith which clearly shows THAT THE LORD IS MY GOD AND YOUR GOD ... AND HIS GLORY AND GOODNESS IS A SHINING LIGHT OF GENEROSITY EACH AND EVERY DAY THAT WE ARE GIVEN ON THIS EARTH!

AMEN.

Pentecost XXI
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
October 20, 1996
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE?”

Then Jesus said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperors.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor (Caesar) the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s!” When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. Matt. 22:20-22

Well, did you listen to the presidential debate on Wednesday nite? Or were you like me, you were a “flicker” for the night -- you kept on “flicking” back and forth between the Cardinal/ Braves game & the presidential debate?? Being an old Braves backer from Milwaukee, you can understand why my loyalty was not quite as strong for Dole vs. Clinton.

But a big issue in this year’s presidential parade has to do with taxes. One party says it will give everyone a 15% tax cut. The other party doesn’t say too much at all about tax cuts, except many fear that it will raise rather than lower taxes. And here we sit, just 16 days away from the election; and many of us are uncertain whether we could vote for either of the major candidates. But one thing is certain from the debates and everything else in this election: it has posed the old tax question: **WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE?** And depending upon your political leanings -- you will probably draw that line differently. Republicans feel strongly that we are being too heavily taxed; Democrats don’t want to appear as “tax advocates,” but that’s they way they are being characterized.

Well, that same question confronted Jesus as he faced two opposing parties nearly 2000 years ago -- the Pharisees and the Zealots. And both were ganging up on him over a tax question. The Pharisees were the “right-wing” legalists, opposed to the Roman government and all of its taxation (somewhat like the Republican party today). They were hoping Jesus would answer the question, **“Pay taxes to Caesar!”** Then they could accuse him of blasphemy -- of being a religious coward and calling for allegiance to the emperor. The Zealots were the “left-wing” Jews -- they had swung their allegiance to Herod, to a Roman beauracratc centralized government (similar to what some see as the Democrats today). They hoped Jesus would say, **“Deny taxes to Caesar.”** Then

us be careful when we say that religion has nothing to do with politics. Martin Luther called this the "Two Kingdoms" doctrine. He wrote that every Christian is a citizen of two kingdoms, an earthly kingdom and a heavenly kingdom. He suggested that God rules with his left hand through civil government and with his right hand thru the kingdom of grace. Thus, God rules both kingdoms. So, as Christians, we can't choose one over the other. In short, everything belongs to God; but equally so, some things are uniquely given to the government. Namely, a Christian owes his government support -- thru taxes, thru voting, thru military or special service, thru honoring any leader who is elected by the consensus of the people. So, Whoever we elect on Nov. 5th, we owe that elected president our respect & support!

So, when it's a choice between Caesar and God, WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE? Quite frankly, the only answer we can give is: WE CAN'T DRAW A LINE! There is not one line to be drawn. Jesus does not make faithfulness a simple matter of mathematics. That's what the Old Testament did. It said that every faithful person was to give God 1/10 of his goods -- a tithe! Now that's a good guideline -- that's a good beginning line to draw ... but for some that line is too stringent, and for others it is far too easy. For instance, a welfare mother or aging parent on social security could be hard pressed by a 10% line. But a professional worker making over \$150,000 a year (of whom many I know) that \$15,000 returned to God is simply a good beginning! As Tony Campolo said in today's FORUM, when will we really get honest? We must ask: "when people have everything they need -- why do they need to spend \$10,000 on Christmas presents or go out and buy a \$50,000 automobile."

So, what can we say about faithfulness to God vs. allegiance to the government. Well, in matters where the sacred is pitted with the secular, it means we must STRUGGLE! Both the sacred and the secular are essential; both need our faithfulness and support; but sometimes we go overboard in the one and totally fail to be faithful to the other, or vice versa.

For instance, if the Pharisees had asked Jesus, "Is it lawful to worship Caesar?" Jesus could have responded simply and emphatically: NO!! But their question was one of worldly administration: "Is it lawful to support one's country with taxes?" And Jesus' answer is "Yes," but then he follows by saying "and you owe your whole life to God!" Maybe we can better understand the whole question if we go back a few years and give a couple of examples of how

"You poor guy -- you're really out of it! Start living your religion; get out of the sanctuary and get out on the streets!"

And that's exactly what a lot of my fellow pastors were doing. They were traveling to marches in the south and giving their whole ministry to one cause: equal rights! Be assured, I was a strong advocate and still am for equal rights; I worked on a "justice and social change" team with several black leaders. But I did not feel that the churches message should become totally politicized; I don't believe that God called the church to get into bed with any particular political movement or group. Just as we see today from the "religious right," when the church becomes just another political voice yelling in the streets, the primary purpose of the gospel is adulterated/weakened.

But I have also seen the other extreme -- where churches and individual Christians seemingly have no concern at all for what's happening in the world or civil government. As Tony Campolo said in today's Forum video, salvation is not merely the assurance of heaven ... it is assurance that we are graced -- we are fully o.k. with God's so that we can make a difference to others who are hungry, to those who are alone, to those in prison, to the least ... for these are the ones whom Christ would serve in this world. The author who wrote, "Listen, Fellow Christian," said it far better than I could ever say it:

*I was hungry, and you formed a humanites club
to discuss my hunger. Thank you.
I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly to your
chapel in the cellar and prayed for my release.
I was naked, and in your mind you debated the
morality of my appearance.
I was sick, and you knelt before your God and
thanked Him for your health.
I was homeless, and you preached to me of the
spiritual shelter of the love of God.
I was lonely, and you left me alone to pray for myself.
You seem so holy; so close to God. But I'm still very
hungry, and lonely, and cold.*

When Bible study and prayer and worship become an end in themselves without any thought for people who are poor or disadvantaged or discriminated

First, "to give God the things that are God's" means that God needs a time when he can be heard apart from all the other noise in this world. In a world where most of us cannot get through a day without the constant drone of music and the never-ending flicking of changing channels -- we need to set aside a quiet moment when only God does the speaking. In case any one needs a reminder, that's what we're doing right now. And I thank each of you for being Godly enough to give him an hour of your week this week.

And as we listen to God, we must become his image in the world. And no story better illustrates that "image of God" reflection than the story of Henry who was a member of a Michigan congregation served by a friend of mine. Henry fell and broke his leg. Obviously, a lot of people have done this; but Henry's case was different. He had been a polio victim as a child and this meant doctors could not operate and pin the break as they would have normally done. The treatment prescribed for Henry was to remain flat on his back in traction for a period of four to six months.

I had to lie flat on my back for eight hours after a heart catheterization. I have never spent a more uncomfortable eight hours in my life. Can anyone imagine what it would be like to lie flat on your back for six to eight months?? In fact, Henry reached the point where he was having difficulty maintaining contact with reality. But the doctors told my pastor friend that they were sure that one of the things that kept him from snapping was that members of the congregation visited him every single day he was in the hospital. The congregation had arranged that a different member would visit him about the same time every day for five months. Each visitor was instructed to tell Henry the day of the month and year and share any other personal information that might be helpful for him. The visit always concluded with a brief passage of scripture and a prayer.

Henry made it through those five months because that congregation "gave to God the things that were God's" -- they lived the grace and mercy of God, rather than just listening to it on Sunday morning. WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE? We never draw a line, because whenever we give whether through taxes or through our ministries of the church ... these become expressions of God's grace in this world. "So, give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's ... and to God the things that are God's ... and that includes everything!!

Pentecost XXI
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
October 12, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“THE STUFF or THE STAFF of LIFE?”

The man asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ... “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me.” ... And the disciples were perplexed and asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Mark 10:17, 21, 26-27

Ethel Barret’s book, *Will the Real Phony Please Stand Up*, tells the tragic story of Hetty Green, once the richest woman in America. Even with more than \$100 million, Hetty 1) padded herself with newspapers to keep warm in winter; she 2) resold the morning paper after she’d read it; 3) she sat up all night “in coach” rather than renting a Pullman berth when traveling; 4) she sorted out white rags from colored ones because the junk man paid a penny-a-pound more for white rags. Her investments were largely in NY, yet she lived in cheap flop houses under assumed names to avoid paying taxes. And when lying on her death bed - the attending nurses could not wear white uniforms for fear that she would not die in peace if she suspected she was paying the tab for nursing care. Money was her master. She lived for it; she worshipped it; she craved more & more. She did not own her wealth; her wealth owned her. She was possessed by her possessions.

Likewise the tale of Howard Hughes: in *Heir Not Apparent*, his bizarre story reveals he had everything except PEACE OF MIND. Here was a man who died with no verified will and no immediate relatives. His estate became the object of intense wrangling. Yet the bulk of his estate went to the IRS and the lawyers -- the two entities he despised the most!!

Some of you may have read story of Henry Ford and one of his young engineers. He asked this engineer: “What is your ambition?” The young man responded: “To become rich; everything else is secondary!” Some days later, Ford handed the man a pair of spectacles but had removed the glass pieces & replaced them with silver dollars. He asked: “What do you see?” The young man answered: “Nothing! The money blocks out everything else!” Ford retorted, “Maybe you should start rethinking your ambition!”

The young engineer of the Ford Co. & the young man in today’s gospel had the

become the **ONLY** goal of his life. He wanted to be a faithful follower of Jesus -
- but his stuff had become more important than the staff of life!

Many of us would like to think that such a condition could never happen to us. But Stanley Hauerwas, Professor of Christian Ethics at Duke University, believes that before allowing anyone to join the church -- he or she should answer four questions before the other members of the congregation:

- 1) *Who is your Lord and Savior? [answer: Jesus Christ]*
- 2) *Do you seek to follow him as a faithful disciple? (answer: I do)*
- 3) *Will you be faithful to this congregation? [answer: I will]*
- 4) *What is your annual income?*

Obviously, Prof. Hauerwas does not serve a congregation. But his fourth question would be the telling tale of truth in every congregation -- it would quickly reveal to what degree each person is willing to *“surrender to God what is all God’s in the first place.”* Or to say it another way -- are you willing to tell the truth as part of the cost of being a disciple of Christ?? *The young man in today’s gospel was not willing to tell the real truth -- his sense of self was still coming from his money rather than from knowing that he was loved by Jesus Christ.* And look at the text again -- Jesus did not try to humiliate him or force him into anything. In fact -- this is the only place in scripture where we’re told that Jesus “loved” this man before asking him to follow him.

Yes - today’s texts present us with life’s real dilemma: *do we kneel before the Stuff or the Staff of life?* And this problem infects all of us -- clergy included. I’m reminded of the pastor in Nebraska who was asked by an elderly member, *“Pastor, would you conduct a funeral for my beloved poodle, Skippy?”* Thinking this was beneath his Call to the ministry, he politely told the woman her that his schedule was too full on that day for a dog funeral. She asked if he might suggest another pastor. He advised her to call the Baptist minister down the street. But before leaving his office she said, *“By the way pastor, would a \$500 honorarium be acceptable for the Baptist minister?”* He hemmed & hawed and finally said, *“Well, now that I think about it--I could rearrange my schedule to do the funeral. You should have told me that “Skippy” was a Lutheran.”*

Yes, whether pastor or people, we really can’t follow Jesus until we come clean with him. He asks: *Will it be Almighty God ... or will it be the Almighty dollar?* Essentially, Jesus asked the young man and asks each of us: *Where does your most important sense of self come from?* For the young man -- his most

For the Christian -- only God can truly give us our most important sense of our selves. And how does He do that?? Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book, "When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough," says "that our souls really do not hunger for wealth, status & power. Our souls really yearn for meaning -- that is, we want a sense of self that says THAT THE LIVING OF OUR LIVES MATTERS! Each of us wants to know within ourselves that the living of my life has made this world a little better than it was before." Regretably, most of us are led astray into thinking "this better life" comes from money or status or power.

We need only look at the life of Jesus Christ to see how wrong such thinking is. In his world - Jesus had no money, no status, and no real "power" as the world thinks of power. He was earthly poor, yet spiritually rich. And it's because of what his life stood for -- loving others, caring for others, serving others, and ultimately sacrificing for others -- because He HUNGERED & THIRSTED for these ... his life has made this world a better place for 2000 years. And that's why we call Him the Staff of Life ... because His Life is God's Life ... and ONLY with God's life are all things possible!!

Jesus came into this world to free us from any other other stuff that might become our god. That's what the grace of God is ... a power that frees us from making any other thing or any other power the most important sense of self!! That's why the gospel is called a two-edged sword. Because it heals us through forgiveness ... but at the same time it cuts us away from anything less than Jesus Christ as our God.

And that's what Jesus lovingly asked the young man in today's gospel ... as he also lovingly asks each of us:

"Will you follow me ... become free from having to possess things!"

"Will you follow me ... become free from making your bank balance your most important sense of self."

"Will you follow me ... become free from the deadly grip of materialism!"

But the young man was shocked and went away grieving -- for he could not give up the god of possessions. Jesus asks us to ponder the same question: Will we be glorified for our faithfulness to the Stuff of Life ... or to the Staff of Life?? Hopefully no one at Glenwood will ever have cause for shock ... and hopefully no one would ever go away grieving because God was forced to say: "You lack only one thing: go and sell