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**Sunday 17 September 2023 to**

**Sunday 24 September 2023**

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Sunday 17 September 2023

**A kingdom of forgiveness**

by Neil Bergmann

***Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ (Matthew 18:21).***

Read [Matthew 18:21–35](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+18%3A21-35&version=NRSVUE)

The central message of Lutheran theology is explained by St Paul in his epistles – we are justified freely by God’s grace through faith in Christ Jesus. The gospels echo this message. For example, John explains that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life’ (John 3:16). Jesus says something similar to Martha before Lazarus is raised from the dead, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die’ (John 11:25).

However, Jesus also has another message that he repeats in the gospels over and over. In John 1:15, Jesus said, ‘The time has come.  The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’ This kingdom of God is also referred to as the kingdom of heaven, especially in Matthew’s Gospel. Whatever name is used, Jesus talks more than a hundred times about this new kingdom. It is like a sower in a field, a mustard seed, yeast, treasure in a field, a merchant looking for pearls, a net thrown to catch fish, a landowner hiring labourers, a wedding banquet, and ten virgins with lamps. It belongs to those with faith like children, those who are poor in spirit, and those who are persecuted. In Luke 9, Jesus sends out the disciples with just two instructions: ‘He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal those who were ill’ (Luke 9:2).

In the Lord’s Prayer, when we ask that God’s kingdom come on earth as in heaven, we ask God to grant us the strength to proclaim his kingdom in our lives through our words and especially through our actions. Today’s reading is a kingdom parable about forgiveness.  Because we have been forgiven more than we can ever repay, we proclaim the kingdom whenever we forgive others.

***God of unlimited forgiveness, please grant me the courage and wisdom to rejoice in that forgiveness, let go of hurts, and forgive others. Amen.***

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Monday 18 September 2023

**A kingdom of faith**

by Neil Bergmann

***When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’ (Mark 2:5).***

Read [Mark 2:1–12](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+2%3A1-12&version=NRSVUE)

As outlined in yesterday’s devotion, a key part of Jesus’ earthly ministry was proclaiming the kingdom of God. In today’s reading, a crowd had gathered around Jesus, and ‘he preached the word to them’ (verse 2). But some were desperate for more than words – they wanted healing for a paralysed man, and the only way they could get close was to go through the roof.  They had faith that Jesus would heal their friend if they could just get to him.

Jesus then does two remarkable things. Based on the faith of his friends, the paralytic is told that his sins are forgiven, and then, secondly, his paralysis is healed. The things that Jesus has done and the things that the visitors have done proclaim the kingdom of God.

The kingdom needs the good news to be proclaimed in words, especially the good news that Jesus is king of heaven and earth. It is a kingdom of forgiveness, where sin is no longer a barrier between humanity and God. In Jesus’ time, many probably thought that the paralytic was cursed by God because of some sins committed by himself or his parents. Jesus’ declaration of forgiveness is an invitation that all are welcome in his new kingdom.

The kingdom is a place of healing where the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the homeless are housed, and the refugees are welcomed. It is also a kingdom of faith. The Holy Spirit grants us faith to believe that a better place exists already here on earth and to choose to live in that kingdom.

Personally, I know that my eternal destiny with Christ is assured. Jesus has already done everything needed for my salvation. However, I find that living in the kingdom here on earth is much harder. It is very easy to choose to live in the kingdom of the world, looking after my own interests first and ignoring the cries of a hurting world.

***King Jesus, thank you for the forgiveness that welcomes me into your new kingdom. Please grant me the faith and courage to always choose to live in that kingdom. Amen.***

Tuesday 19 September 2023

**A kingdom of sinners**

by Neil Bergmann

***On hearing this, Jesus said to them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners’ (Mark 2:17).***

Read [Mark 2:13–22](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+2%3A13-22&version=NRSVUE)

There are many aspects of Jesus’ earthly ministry we look to as models for how we can proclaim the kingdom of God. We preach the good news through word and action. We examine God’s word in our Sunday services, youth groups, schools, community service agencies and electronic media. We care for and support our local communities through many different outreach activities, and we support the world’s poorest and most vulnerable through our national and international development agencies. We pray for the sick and provide practical care for friends and families who need it. These are all excellent examples of what it means to choose to spend our time in the kingdom of God rather than in the kingdom of this world.

In today’s story, Jesus models another challenging aspect of the kingdom. He eats with sinners and tax collectors. From our modern Christian perspective, we would rightly believe that we are all sinners (and also all saints), and we can rejoice because Jesus chooses to be with us, even though we are sinners. I don’t think that is the point of this story.

By sinners, I think Jesus is calling us to be in solidarity with society’s outcasts, those that we normally wouldn’t think of inviting, those who make us uncomfortable. And Jesus doesn’t just want us to help them; he wants us to eat with them and spend time with them, get to know them, and make sure they know the kingdom of God is something real and that they are welcome there. Luckily, even though this is hard, we don’t do it alone. The Holy Spirit is there to guide and support us.

***Jesus, friend to the outcasts, help us to be generous, welcoming and hospitable to those the world tells us are unworthy. Amen.***

Wednesday 20 September 2023

**A kingdom of rest**

by Neil Bergmann

***So the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath! (Mark 2:28)***

Read [Mark 2:23–3:6](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+2%3A23+%E2%80%93+3%3A6&version=NRSVUE)

Sometimes, when we look at the world around us, there seems to be hurt, injustice and oppression everywhere. As children of the kingdom of God, we are called to shine a light on that injustice and to care for everybody as our neighbour. The need is so great, and it seems the little we can do makes hardly any difference. We suffer from burnout and give up.

When you look at Jesus’ earthly ministry, you never get the feeling that Jesus was in a big rush to get everything that needed to be done in a few short years. He had time for individuals and their personal circumstances. He found time to retreat and pray. He rested.

How do you treat the commandment to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy? Paul tells us, ‘Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds’ (Romans 14:5). In other words, as New Testament Christians, we are not given a formula for how we are to treat this Sabbath commandment, but each of us is called to meditate on what it means and act on our understanding.

In today’s story, Jesus explains that ‘the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath’ (verse 27). The Sabbath is a blessing of living in the kingdom of God, not a burden. We all need time to rest and recharge. Our bodies, minds, emotions and spirits all benefit from rest. That rest will be different for each of us, but it is always a gift of God.

***Jesus, you are Lord of the Sabbath. Please help us find our rest in you. Amen.***

Thursday 21 September 2023

**A kingdom of followers**

by Neil Bergmann

***Jesus went out to the lake with his disciples, and a large crowd followed him. They came from all over (Mark 3:7).***

Read [Mark 3:7–19](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+3%3A7-19&version=NRSVUE)

How good are you at sharing responsibility and delegating tasks? I admit that I’m not very good at this. I prefer to do things myself rather than trust others to do a job the way I like it. Surprisingly, when a task is just too big to do alone, and I have to rely on others, they always do a much better job than I would have! Also, when we do stuff as a team, it is much more enjoyable.

Imagine then what it was like for Jesus during his earthly ministry. Everywhere he went, crowds appeared and were hungry for his message of forgiveness and the physical and spiritual healing he offered. But Jesus’ time was short, and he needed helpers to spread the word and continue his work after he had gone. How could Jesus trust his disciples to continue his work when they continually seemed to miss the point of his preaching? Yet, it is what Jesus did and continues to do.

As children of the light and followers of the risen Christ, we are called to join in proclaiming the good news – the coming of the kingdom of God, here and now, on earth as in heaven. Jesus knows that we need help, and so the Holy Spirit comes to guide our words and our actions. Jesus knows that we won’t do a perfect job, maybe not even a good job, but he still invites us, over and over again, to join his mission to proclaim his kingdom through word and action. In today’s reading, Jesus ‘called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him’ (verse 13). He wants us and calls us today. Will you come to him?

***Lord, fill me your Spirit so that I may answer your call, come to you, and help to proclaim the good news through word and action. Amen.***

Friday 22 September 2023

**A kingdom of life**

by Neil Bergmann

***Anyone who does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother (Mark 3:35).***

Read [Mark 3:20–35](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+3%3A20-35&version=NRSVUE)

In today’s reading, Jesus is in trouble again. Firstly, he is in trouble with the religious authorities because he is casting out demons. Their logic seems to go something like this: We are important religious people, true representatives of God’s people, and we can’t cast out demons. So these demons won’t answer to God. They must only answer to Satan, and if they can be cast out by Jesus, then Jesus must be a representative of Satan. Their argument doesn’t make much sense, and Jesus quickly refutes it. Jesus is God’s true representative because he is healing those people that Satan is seeking to destroy. God is indeed much more powerful than any demon.

Secondly, Jesus is in trouble with his family. They seem to think he is doing too much, isn’t even taking time to properly eat, and is upsetting the religious authorities. They’d like him to dial it back a little, not rock the boat and take things a bit more slowly. It seems like they are ready to stage an intervention (for his own good, of course).

These gospel stories often act as a mirror to our own thoughts and motivations. As proclaimers of God’s kingdom, are we ready to rock the boat? Are we prepared to take on the demons of our time? Or do we believe those messages that the world tells us – you aren’t good enough, you need more stuff to make you happy, you can’t make a difference to injustice and hatred, look after number one because no one else will, don’t rock the boat? Are we too busy caring for ourselves to spend time in the kingdom of God?

The Holy Spirit wants to fill us with the wisdom and courage, to choose life in the kingdom of God. The world wants us to reject God’s strength and depend on our own to choose death, separated from the only one who can save us. Choose life!

***Lord of Life, open my eyes to the lies of this world of death. Help me to choose you – to choose life. Amen.***

Saturday 23 September 2023

**A kingdom of praise**

by Neil Bergmann

***One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts (Psalm 145:4).***

Read [Psalm 145:1–8](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+145%3A1-8&version=NRSVUE)

It can seem like hard work living in the kingdom of God. It can feel like there is so much we should be doing, and so little actually gets done. Many congregations are shrinking and ageing. It can be a struggle just to keep the doors open for a weekly worship service, let alone be able to make an impact in the wider world. Congregation volunteers – as well as pastors and other staff – suffer burnout from trying to do more with less. Hope turns to despair, trust turns to anxiety, and joy turns to depression.

The psalms were written for times like this, especially those like today’s psalm of praise. The kingdom of God is not a transactional community. We don’t first wait until God blesses us with everything we want and then praise God for doing what we wanted God to do.

Instead, the kingdom of God is a relational community. We praise God because God is great and always worthy of praise and always here, beside us, in all our struggles and grief. We praise God to remind us that we do not have to do it by ourselves, but we have the ruler of the universe as our personal protector and guide. We praise God to draw ourselves out of our inner darkness, where we often go in hard times, and into the glorious life-giving light of the kingdom of heaven.

Talking about Jesus, John the Baptist said, ‘he must increase, but I must decrease’ (John 3:30). Through praising God, our timid, fearful self decreases, and the life-giving power of God in us increases. Re-invigorated, we can step forward confidently because God is always with us, whatever happens.

***Life-giving God, your creation praises you from morning to night. Fill me with your joy so I can join in that unending praise of your glory. Amen.***

Sunday 24 September 2023

**The age of entitlement**

by Sal Huckel

***‘Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last (Matthew 20:15,16).***

Read [Matthew 20:1–16](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+20%3A1%E2%80%9316&version=NRSVUE)

Sometimes, I wonder whether we live in a culture that has redefined entitlement. Upon reading this parable, though, I note that Jesus tells a story that presses all the right buttons and shows that he understood humans were dealing with the same issues while he was walking on this earth.

There’s the entitlement of those standing around waiting to be given work. There’s the entitlement of those who later find that workers have done less than them but are paid the same. A figure they agreed to as a fair wage from the outset. The order in which they were paid. Ouch!

While we can find many ways to look at this parable (let the Holy Spirit show you the angle for you today), we must focus on the core message: The last will be first, and the first will be last. We find Jesus turning our expectations upside down so many times in Scripture. Here, the general cry is, ‘It’s not fair’.

We don’t get to make the rules; God does. Grace and salvation are available to all of us, whatever time we arrive – and however slack we may have been for ‘part of the day’ if we are some of those standing around waiting to be told what to do. On that point, also take away from this parable: The vineyard is the kingdom of God, and there is work to be done. Don’t expect the ‘few’ who started early to do it all. Roll up your sleeves, be thankful to be included in this heavenly workforce, and your reward has already been named. If you feel you arrived a little late, don’t worry! He wants you here; you have been chosen and are just as precious.

***Father God, thank you for calling me to work in your vineyard! Help me to continue with the work you have for me, be faithful to you, and remember to put others before myself, wanting the best for them. In Jesus’ name, Amen.***

Sal is married to Pastor Matthew Huckel, and they live in Victoria with their six children. Music, theology, literature and languages are passions the family share and explore together. Sal loves writing, speaking, and walking to the beach at every opportunity.