



Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
7 September 2025

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen. A woman arrived at the gates of Heaven. While she was waiting for St. Peter to greet her, she peeked through the gates. She saw a beautiful banquet table. Sitting all around were her parents, and all the other people she had loved and who had died before her. They saw her and began calling greetings to her. "Hello, how are you!" "We've been waiting for you!" When St. Peter came by, the woman said to him, "This is such a wonderful place! How do I get in?!" "You have to spell a word," St. Peter told her. "Which word?" she asked. "Love," replied St. Peter. The woman correctly spelled "Love," and St. Peter welcomed her into Heaven. About a year later, St. Peter came to the woman and asked her to watch the Gates of Heaven for him that day. While she was guarding the Gates of Heaven, her husband arrived. "I'm surprised to see you," the woman said. "How have you been?" "Oh, I've been doing pretty well since you died," her husband told her. "I married the beautiful young nurse who took care of you while you were ill. And then I won the multi-state lottery. I sold the little house you and I lived in and bought a huge mansion. My wife and I traveled all around the world. We were on vacation in Cancun, and I went water skiing today and fell and hit my head, so here I am!" "What a bummer!" she replied. "How do I get in?" he asked. "You have to spell a word," she replied. "What word?" he asked. "Czechoslovakia," she replied.

Thanks be to God—our family members and friends, those we may have struggled with in this life, do not hold the keys to the gates of heaven. The love of God is that which cannot be explained to someone who is not hungering for that love. In other words—unless someone knows they are hungry, thirsting, willing to admit that they are in need of the kind of love that is unconditional, and unexpected—they will never be able to truly comprehend the love God offers to each and every one of us in this life. The words of Jesus this day share with us that challenge... Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one's own self—can't be my disciple. Anyone who won't shoulder their own cross and follow behind me can't be my disciple. The woman who made her husband spell out Czechoslovakia understood all too clearly the importance of God's love and yet she allowed her own feelings to get in the way of her husband's arrival in the kingdom. For you and me it is our struggle to give up that which we hold closest to our hearts that offers us challenge as we look to the gates of heaven, the friendship of other believers, the eyes of our Savior. What do you hold on to the tightest in this life? Most often times that which we hold nearest and dearest is not what we first imagine when asked that question. Jesus tells us today that we must refuse father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters... Tough words for you and I to hear this morning and yet my guess is that the worst part is still to come..., because Jesus continues on with these words... yes, and even one's own self. I think for most of us the idea of leaving or losing family and friends is difficult enough—but to lose our very lives—to set aside our own needs and desires, hopes and dreams can be more painful.

The little boy on the screen, I met in El Salvador. Well not so much met as ran into. On the day we played games in San Jorge, we began with about 40 children or so – but word traveled quickly as did the sounds of children laughing and suddenly there were some 80 children running around the field. After a time of multiple games, it was decided to gather everyone together to play football – soccer to the Americans. Pastor Edwin counted us off, and we divided on the field. I went for the goalie position. Little running and lots of standing around – sounded perfect. The other team was well stacked with talent – a 13-year-old who had A LOT of talent and speed and then our friend Jhonson – who grew up playing soccer and played varsity at West. Well, I blocked the first goal – to great cheers and high fives from my teammates. But the second ball went in – and then the third. And then this little child of God – all 3 feet and 5 years of him – walked up to me. He did not speak any English. I did not speak enough Spanish to understand him – but when he took his whole body and pushed me out of the goal and took my place – I understood I had been replaced. And though my pride may have been hurt, I was not finished yet. When the ball came down towards our goal, I waited until I saw our brother Jhonson almost trip another kid and I yelled – penalty! And took Jhonson out of the game for three or maybe 7 minutes to give my team a better chance. I looked back the little kid, as I stood next to Jhonson, and



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he gave me a thumbs up. And I was redeemed. And I did not feel bad about benching Jhonson for even a second! It turns out that the little boy helped me to refuse my pride and in doing so provided me with an opportunity to help the team in even better ways – by benching the star player on the other team for an extra-long penalty. Not unlike our young friend, asked to carry the cross this morning – a cross too big for them to carry alone – but sometimes we get by with a little help from our friends – in this case – our friend is Jesus.

It is not hard to believe that most of us heard this reading today and said, “Jesus doesn’t want me to refuse my family. He just wants me to put God first. He just wants me to be a little nicer and a little more forgiving and a little more active in my congregation and a little more generous.” All the while avoiding the idea that the selfishness buried deep down within us has to be drowned daily. It is often hard for us to admit that following Jesus means the death of everything in us that just wants to be a little different but not so different as to draw attention to ourselves or heaven forbid – actually transform our lives into that which might reflect more of who God calls us to be when we claim to want to follow. Happily, some of us will sit somewhere new in the sanctuary - yeah right?! Begrudgingly we might be persuaded to change worship times. Should we buy the new hymnal – mercy, already? And don’t even get us started on the taste of the communion wine. Yes, we might embrace the thought of change, but the actual changing can be a different story. Telling the story of what it means to be broken is easier than taking those first staggering steps towards actual transformation. Anything is possible Jesus, just don’t ask us to refuse our very life – don’t ask us to die to ourselves.

My friends, every lesson that I have learned, that has mattered, has been taught with some degree of suffering or pain. I have had to suffer the deaths of loved ones, relationships, ambitions, and even a few dreams along the way. One author writes: “While we might prefer to make a single dramatic sacrifice as an expression of our commitment to Jesus, usually the way of faithfulness involves laying down our lives in little pieces, through small decisions and unremarkable acts of kindness and generosity and honesty.”

I have had to tell people the truth when I knew that they would not want to hear it. Sometimes, I have had to listen to the truth even when I did not want to hear it. In all of that, God has been molding me not as I intended or wanted but as God willed. And what is true for me, is also true for you, God is far from being done with either of us just yet. All of that pain, some of it self-inflicted, has been the stuff of death. But each act of refusing to follow my own desires, and dying to myself, has given rise to the occasion for becoming more of what God intended in the first place. “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple,” said Jesus. What I know is that it is hard to pick up the cross and follow until we are willing to lay down everything else we thought we needed in this world.

The good news is that Jesus is right there in the midst of our juggling and struggling to remind us that he too has known the temptations and powers of this world. Jesus will be there to help us let down the world’s burdens that he might help us pick up the cross he has already carried and now carries with us into each new day. People of God—the good news is that Jesus calls us – invites us to follow. The call to follow might not always be easy, but we do not have to follow alone. Around you today, is an entire community of people who are also hearing the call to follow and wondering if they are ready to let go, in order to pick-up what Jesus invites us to carry. This community has a long history of love and support for the world outside these doors and for each other.

Whether this is your first Sunday at Ascension or your 621<sup>st</sup> Sunday at Ascension, this place is like no other.

In this place, Jesus is Lord.

In this place, you are never alone.

In this place, you are loved.

This is Ascension: It’s what we do. Amen.