



Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
21 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.

I visited a member in her new home last week. She is happy to be settled and is slowly unpacking the last of her things to complete, what she hopes and believes to be, her last move into her final home, until she meets Jesus, and moves into his house. I had never been to any of her previous homes. And my expectations of her welcome and hospitality were met in every way. As she opened the door and recognized me, a smile lit up her face. She gave me a very brief tour of her studio apartment and then asked me to sit down. Her apartment is warm and welcoming and after we talked for a while, I asked her if she would like to receive communion. As is always the case, when I lift up bread and wine and say, “In the night in which he was betrayed,” for just a moment, I become the host and offer the welcome and the hospitality to the one who is about to receive the presence of Jesus into their life once again. When we finished communion, I offered a blessing and prepared to make my exit. And without even a pause, the woman I visited, immediately took over her duties of hostess and hospitality. “It was so good to see you. Please come again.” The woman I visited, knew the value of her hospitality – she understood the power of her welcome – she was the hostess offering all she had in that moment to her pastor.

It reminded me of the day Jesus visited the temple treasury, sitting across from the offering box, he was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. One poor widow came up and put in two small coins - a measly two cents. Jesus called his disciples over and said, “The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they’ll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford—she gave her all.” It is what God asks of all of us – to give not from the extra we believe is we will not notice missing, but to give the entirety of who we are – so much more than the contents of your wallet.

The story Jesus tells today reminds us that there is more than one way to look at the world. Though, in this day, it seems we are each committed to only seeing the world as it makes sense to us. Hold on to that for just a moment. The rich man finds out his manager is squandering – wasting - the rich man’s property. The rich man tells the manager he is going to be fired. And the manager is smart enough to know he is not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg, aren’t we all. So the manager decides to be even more reckless with his master’s property. He reaches out to the rich man’s borrowers. How much do you owe? 100 jugs of olive oil – take your bill and cut it in half. And to another, “how much do you owe?” One hundred containers of wheat. Quickly, change that number to eighty. And the rich man, who lost even more of his property, commended his dishonest manager. I’m sorry Jesus, could you say that again? Did you just tell us that the manager who lied to his master and then changed the amounts owed his master, was celebrated by the master he stole from? I don’t get it. I mean, I keep reminding my children to be honest. I am pretty sure I remember a commandment about not stealing. But here, Jesus seems to tell us something different.

¹⁰ “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? It is no easy task – to be a pastor in this this time and place. I am convinced that is why I still feel called to this place – to all of you in ministry. I am not sure that was ever written into our letters of call. Pastor Tony? Pastor Edwin? Do you remember reading that in your letter of call? Ascension will be an easy church. Your pastors are expected to be faithful in very little and also faithful in much. We are expected to be faithful with what belongs to another – to borrow a phrase from our Savior this day. I have been a pastor for a long time. Longer than most these days. I have also served here at Ascension longer than most pastors serve in calls anymore. It seems that pastors who are younger, or second career, are often led to believe, by themselves or someone else, that the grass might be greener in another pasture. I am sure that is true at times. But as one author and pastor wrote, “there is something to be said for the long pastorate – where the relationship between pastor and people climbs many mountains, travels many valleys, and reminds us that the journey of faith is often a long road towards home not a short walk to the corner because only God knows what’s around the bend. A pastor’s call is also remembered to be authored equally by congregation and the Holy Spirit. Where there is challenge the call is still active and alive. And to be fair, this community of faith, all of you, offer plenty of challenge, and for that, most of the time, I am grateful.

So, imagine the challenge of last Sunday, after the death of Charlie Kirk, the previous week – a few members were challenged, upset, that we did not pray for him by name – or at the very least his family. In all honesty, I wrote the prayers and although we lifted up “all those who have suffered gun violence in the past week” that was not enough. I did wonder why no one was challenged that the week before I did not pray for the families of the two students who died in the gun violence in Minneapolis, because I wrote those prayers also. If you are to believe the social media over the last two



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weeks, the advice went something like this: if your pastor did not mention Charlie Kirk last Sunday, it is time to find a new church. And well, of course, on the other side, if your pastor did mention Charlie Kirk last Sunday, it is time to find a new church. I am grateful, you have all come this day, thinking freely for yourselves, and not led down one road or another by some anonymous voice on Facebook telling you to give up your spiritual home for one Sunday's perceived pastoral transgression. The journey, my friends, is farther than the short walk to the corner. And your pastors are asked to welcome and provide hospitality to everyone who enters through the doors of the sanctuary. It is what we do. And what we do, I believe, quite well. You ask us, no you expect us to welcome everyone, with every opinion, with every expectation, and these days with every truth you know for yourselves – and somewhere in there we should also do our best to squeeze in the actual truth of the story of Jesus Christ, which if I am being honest, does not always find a lot of wiggle room in between expectation and one's own personal truth held on to tightly with both hands. Even now, some of us want their pastor to praise the faithfulness of Mr. Kirk and others want me to denounce him for too many speeches that don't sound very much like the Jesus we know and read in the Bible we all claim as the living Word of God. Except, as Christians of the Lutheran flavor, tell me, who exactly is outside of God's grace? Certainly not Mr. Kirk? Certainly not you or me? Luther often lifted up the belief that we are at all times both sinner and saint. Sinner for what we have done. Saint for what God's grace has done for us. And there is the challenge – to preach to a people who more often than not live on separate sides of the street Monday to Saturday and come together to offer their worship and praise to God as one people, with one voice, for one precious moment of unity. And somewhere in that precious moment, your pastors, pray to God to not muck it up. When we step into this pulpit and speak on behalf of God – which still gives us goose bumps and makes us sweat and causes our mouth to go dry when we carry the message the Holy Spirit leads us to preach. And oh, by the way, offer welcome, offer hospitality – because someone here today needs to hear that they are loved and that God welcomes them – not with rules but with redemption.

Last Monday, I visited a woman in the hospital. Her family said that she was having a procedure done, and they were not sure how the procedure would go. I was unable to get to the hospital until after her procedure which went well, but later on that evening she began to decline. By the time I arrived the next morning, she had transitioned to hospice, and the family was unsure whether or not she would live out the day. Hospital rooms, at times, can become someone's entire existence – for a day, a week, a month or for hours as they look to their last breath – that hospital room becomes a home. It is the place where stories are shared, tears are shed, laughter is heard, and goodbyes are said. Though I had not known the woman very well, her niece, her son, and other family welcomed me with grace and smiles even as they were preparing to say goodbye. Again, in this home, I was not the host – I was welcomed into their midst to hear stories and offer a word in prayer that the resurrection of our Savior on that first Easter day became the resurrection promise for all of us. And when I asked if they would like to receive communion, they smiled and said yes and once again, I, for just awhile, became host in their home, “in the night in which he was betrayed.” The welcome and hospitality I had been offered, was now mine to offer on behalf of our Savior – the One who breaks the bread for each of us. And when bread and wine had been shared, the niece, a member here at Ascension, asked me to sing. Hours later, the woman surrounded by love and covered in song, opened her eyes in the Kingdom of God. The hospitality and the welcome of our God, overwhelming another child, hungry to know that the promised house of God does indeed have many rooms. And in those rooms – there are no rules to remember – only redemption to be relished. ¹³ “No slave can serve two masters,” says Jesus, “for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” No, we cannot. We cannot serve both God and wealth, but we can serve God with the wealth of welcome we ourselves have received from God. And that, I believe, will be enough. After all, this is Ascension. It's what we do! Amen.