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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
November 6, 2022
All Saints' Sunday

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, one of my more surreal experiences in life involves the time when I drove a tractor.

Now this would have been back in my first call, when I was serving a two point parish up in Klingerstown, about 40 miles north of Harrisburg.

There are a lot of fields up there, and a lot of farmers.

And one of my parishioners, who happened to own a tractor, although he wasn't a farmer per se, but this parishioner invited me over for a visit.

And one thing lead to another, and I found myself driving his tractor.

I wasn't actually plowing a field, as I said, he wasn't a farmer per se.

If I had been plowing a field, I am sure that it would have been unmitigated disaster.

But I had learned, at least back then...

Who knows whether it has changed with GPS and the like...

But I learned back then that in order to plow straight lines in the field, one needed to set one's sights on an object—a tree, a rock, what have you...

One needed to set one's sights on an object at the other end of the field, and one needed to keep the center of the tractor focused on that object.

And one couldn't be looking behind them, one couldn't be looking off to the side...

No, while driving the tractor, one needed to keep their gaze focused on that distant object.

Only then could one hope to plow a straight line in the field.

Again, I imagine that has changed.

Tractors today probably pretty much drive themselves with all the new-fangled technology available.

But I have committed that image to memory though, of a farmer on a tractor plowing straight lines.

And I think about that image every now and then, particularly around the time when farmers are preparing their fields in spring or even now in harvest season when I see the nice neat rows of crops.

I think about that image, because it is helpful in navigating, it is helpful in wading through the present times.

Because let's face it, the present times seem awfully dire.

The present times are filled with woes.

We have environmental woes.

We keep hearing about how the earth is warming.

We keep hearing about the loss of arctic ice, and the threat of rising ocean levels.

We keep hearing about extreme weather events.

And we have economic woes.

We keep hearing about rising inflation.

We keep hearing about employee shortages.

We keep hearing about supply chain problems.

And we have woes due to the war in Ukraine.

We keep hearing about the displacement of millions of people.

We keep hearing about the hardship Ukrainians and even Europeans will endure as winter approaches because energy is at a premium.

We keep hearing about the threat of a nuclear attack.

We have all these woes and then some.

And we can get so bogged down by them. We can get so depressed by thinking about them. We can become so pessimistic in the face of all of them.

PAUSE

But sisters and brothers in Christ, we don't drive the tractor by looking down at the ground immediately in front of us.

We don't navigate life, we don't wade through life with our focus fixed on the trials and tribulations that overwhelm us in the present.

No, we drive the tractor by keeping our focus on an object at the other end of the field.

Only then can we keep the line straight, only then can we traverse life.

Indeed, this is the message of our gospel reading today.

PAUSE

Now this gospel reading derives from what is called Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain."

It is Luke's equivalent of Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount."

Why MATTHEW has Jesus preach on a mountain is to give the impression that Jesus is the new Moses, who received God's Word, like Moses, on a mountain.

Why LUKE has Jesus preach on a plain is probably to say that Jesus doesn't Lord it over people but is down with the people on level ground.

Regardless, Luke gives us this "Sermon on the Plain," or maybe more in keeping with the theme of this sermon, we should call Jesus' sermon, the "Sermon on the Field."

The Sermon on the Field.

Why I say that is because "what is Jesus doing in this sermon?"

Jesus is teaching us to look out toward an object, look out in the distance, and focus on a point, an object on the other side of the field.

And Jesus is teaching us to plow ahead, to do the ministry of the gospel with that object clearly in view.

“Don’t look behind you.” “Don’t look to the side of you.” “Don’t look at the ground immediately in front of you.”

“Don’t become mired in the present troubles such that we go astray, such that our line becomes crooked, such that we fall into despair, and lose hope.”

Keep the object at the end of the field always in view and you will keep the line straight.

This, THIS is what Jesus is getting at in our gospel reading.

Yes, there are poor among us. Yes, there are those who are hungry. Yes, there are those who are weeping.

Yes, there are those who are traumatized by war, natural disasters, economic hardship, and by any number of trials and tribulations in life.

Yes, there is great suffering going on all around us, even suffering and grief that has touched our own lives.

There is great suffering, but we can’t allow it to stifle us. We can’t allow it to beat us down. We can’t allow it to make us lose hope.

Keep focus on the object at the other end of the field.

PAUSE

Now, it probably goes without saying, but I will say it anyway.

You probably know that object of which we keep ever before our eyes. You probably know of what I speak.

It looms large before us in this room.

The cross hardly goes without notice when we enter into our worship space.

And, so yes, here, sisters and brothers in Christ, here we are reminded of the hope we have in Christ’s death and resurrection.

Here we are reminded that God’s love ultimately wins out against all obstacles, all impediments.

Pain, and suffering, and death, have their time, but God’s love wins out through the power of Jesus Christ and his cross.

That is what Jesus is getting at in this gospel reading.

That is why Jesus gives us this litany of woes in the present day, but speaks of their transformation in the world to come.

In short, Jesus is declaring that... ONLY IF we allow the present to oppress us, ONLY IF we focus our eyes on the ground immediately before us such that we fail to look to the cross and its victory there in the distance, ONLY IF we are short-sighted do we fall into hopelessness.

ONLY IF we GIVE OUT because of despair, and so GIVE UP our mission, and so GIVE IN to indifference, does the world turn utterly bleak.

ONLY IF we fail to see the future hope.

PAUSE

Which takes us to today's festival of All Saints.

Blessed are we on this All Saints' Sunday, because this day is a reminder of the vision of the future, a reminder of the image that is out there, a reminder of God's heavenly communion of saints who gather with us even now in worship to sing God's praises.

We remember the saints, those who are already victorious because of the cross.

We remember the saints, who have plowed a straight line, who kept their focus on the object at the end of the field.

We remember the saints, who are an inspiration to us, we who still journey in life, we who still plow ahead in life, by faith.

We remember the saints, George Sheleman, Fay Nelms, Ellavene Rutter, Irene Nanov, Millie Horvath, Daniel Kreischer, Phoebe Drake, Wendy Snyder, and all those who have gone before us.

We remember the saints and we give thanks for they are part of the culmination of the journey, they are part of that vision at the end of the field.

PAUSE

And so what do we do here in this place and time, as we continue to plow a straight line.

What do we do?

Well, we keep the hope of Christ alive as we said by focusing on the object that is the cross.

And Jesus tells us in the reading today from Luke, we continue the work of the gospel.

We love our enemies, as difficult as that may sound.

We strive to love even persons like Putin.

Why? Because if for no other reason, it is healthy to our own person not to let anger and hate get the better of us.

As ironic as it may sound, we should strive to let our enemies bring out the best in us, and not the worst.

Indeed we should strive to bless others who curse us.

We should even pray for those who abuse us.

Jesus even goes so far as to say that if someone strikes us on the cheek, we should offer the other as well.

And if someone takes our coat, we should not withhold even our shirt.

In short, Jesus says, "No more of this tit-for-tat stuff."

"No more of this I-have-to-get-even stuff."

Of course, I do think we have to qualify Jesus' remarks somewhat.

Because when we look to the situation say in Ukraine, it is hard to believe that our Lord would say that the innocent people of Ukraine should let themselves be doormats.

That the Ukrainians should roll over and allow themselves to be annihilated, wiped out, which is exactly what it seems the enemy wants to do.

"Consign yourselves to be Russian like us, or be killed."

So what does one do in such a situation, but defend one's life, defend one's statehood, defend one's ethnicity...while even praying for Putin, that he would change his mindset.

That he would end the violence. That he would have mercy.

Does Putin know he is prayed for? Does any diplomat behind the scenes tell Putin that? Do they say to Putin, "The world is praying that you would be merciful."

All we hear is that Putin only responds to force.

I am not saying the world should stop applying pressure on Putin militarily.

I just wonder what would happen if Putin knew the Church in the West was adamantly praying for him to have mercy.

And what would Putin's response be anyway were he asked, "What does mercy look like to you?" as opposed to "What is your endgame? How do you see this conflict ending?"

"What does mercy look like to you, Putin? Do you, Putin, have the capacity even to show mercy?"

PAUSE

Our gospel reading concludes with the words: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

And so, we pray for the souls of our enemies because that is what we would want the other to do for us.

We pray because through the power of prayer our souls are made right by God.

We pray because that is the beginning of plowing, prayer is putting the hand on the wheel of the tractor and heading toward the object across the field.

Plow straight, my fellow Christians, and know that there is a brilliant sign of hope always before us to help navigate this world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.