

## Sunday September 28

### Readings

#### Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

**1** The word of the LORD came to me: **2** "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? **3** "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. **4** For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son--both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die. **5** "Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right. **6** He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife or lie with a woman during her period. **7** He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. **8** He does not lend at usury or take excessive interest. He withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between man and man. **9** He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws. That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign LORD. **10** "Suppose he has a violent son, who sheds blood or does any of these other things **11** (though the father has done none of them): "He eats at the mountain shrines. He defiles his neighbor's wife. **12** He oppresses the poor and needy. He commits robbery. He does not return what he took in pledge. He looks to the idols. He does detestable things. **13** He lends at usury and takes excessive interest. Will such a man live? He will not! Because he has done all these detestable things, he will surely be put to death and his blood will be on his own head. **14** "But suppose this son has a son who sees all the sins his father commits, and though he sees them, he does not do such things: **15** "He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife. **16** He does not oppress anyone or require a pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. **17** He withholds his hand from sin and takes no usury or excessive interest. He keeps my laws and follows my decrees. He will not die for his father's sin; he will surely live. **18** But his father will die for his own sin, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was wrong among his people. **19** "Yet you ask, 'Why does the son not share the guilt of his father?' Since the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to keep all my decrees, he will surely live. **20** The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him. **21** "But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. **22** None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live. **23** Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? **24** "But if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, will he live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness he is guilty of and because of the sins he has committed, he will die. **25** "Yet you say, 'The way of the

Lord is not just.' Hear, O house of Israel: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? **26** If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. **27** But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. **28** Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die. **29** Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Are my ways unjust, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust? **30** "Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. **31** Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? **32** For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

#### **Psalm 25:1-9**

**1** To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; **2** in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. **3** No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse. **4** Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; **5** guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. **6** Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. **7** Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD. **8** Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. **9** He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.

#### **Philippians 2:1-13**

**1** If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, **2** then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. **3** Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. **4** Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. **5** Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: **6** Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, **7** but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. **8** And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! **9** Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, **10** that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, **11** and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. **12** Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **13** for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

#### **Matthew 21:23-32**

**23** Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" **24** Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question.

If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. **25** John's baptism-- where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' **26** But if we say, 'From men'--we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." **27** So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. **28** "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' **29** " 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. **30** "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. **31** "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. **32** For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

## **Sermon**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,  
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:  
Amen.

About ten years ago there was a big “to do” about whether organizations had properly understood the concepts of mission statements and vision statements. The internet was clogged with articles about how to come up with an appropriate mission statement, about where to find inspiration for your vision statement, and how to differentiate the two. Studies by firms like Bain and Company revealed that organizations that have clearly defined vision and mission statements outperform those who do not. Why does this all matter?

Well, you see, churches got caught up in this whirlwind of performance-centered thinking. All of the sudden, congregations were bent on looking like these successful corporations who had a strategic plan built upon corporate mission and vision statements. Why? Because churches wanted to be successful just like General Motors and AIG. Churches wanted to become transformative like Apple and yet remain family-centered like Smuckers.

Of course, this was all before the recession hit. Then the success of GM and AIG was really put into perspective, when they each ended up over fifty billion – with a “B” – in debt, and eventually were bailed out by the U.S. Government. Does the church really want this kind of success?

And then Apple, who once seemed Teflon coated to any sort of criticism, ended up caught in a scandal of privacy concerns, both leaking private photos of celebrities' private lives and mining data from our use of applications on our computers, phones, and tablets. Does this church really want to be about this kind of transformation?

At least we have Smucker's to look to, right? Family-friendly, hometown oriented J.M. Smucker Company. Y'all might remember that Orrville, my hometown, is also the home of Smucker's. And while they have been incredible at investing in the community – renovating downtown, providing community meeting space, keeping jobs in Orrville – even Smucker's isn't spotless. Though they've kept

jobs in Orrville, they've reduced their workforce through an increasingly automated factory. Once a partner in an industrial park that housed a dozen other businesses, Smucker's helped to usher out every other company, including our family business, so that they had sole control of the space. And while they bring many corporate gigs to Wayne County, most employees choose to live far outside of town that spawned this corporate empire. Does the church really want to be this kind of family?

Perhaps the problem is that the church forgot the source of our vision and mission. At some point we began to equate success within the corporate realm and the identity of the church. The glimmer of old enticed our eyes away from Christ's poverty. The

sparkling of celebrity took our eyes away from Christ's humility. Shopping malls and Mc-mansions, web access and technological prowess, making more money, having more stuff, **this all has taken our vision away from God's mission, and that is the problem we face as a church.**

In today's Philippians passage, we get a clear sense of God's vision for the world, and how vastly different that vision is from corporate success: *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* This is what a vision is, a kind of overarching hope that depicts an optimal future, something that aligns us in our work and inspires us to



continue that work in the face of difficulty. God's vision is that all people would come together under the Lordship of Jesus.

Now at first, this may seem a bit narcissistic, or maybe a lot narcissistic, that all God wants is recognition in some sort of sick, self centered soapbox kind of way. But who is this Jesus that Paul talks about?

This is the person who was totally divine, but rather than staying holed up in heaven, descended to the dirt of earth and became human in every way. The Creator who became a creature. The King who became a pauper. This doesn't sound like a narcissist, like someone self-concerned with celebrity. This Jesus, once he became fully human, humbled

himself and became obedient to death on a cross.

Despite the divine power available to him, Jesus accepted death, Jesus took on the fate of humanity, rather than escaping the suffering and sorrow inherent to human form. This sounds like someone much more concerned with the fate of others than the status of self.

God's vision for us all to recognize Jesus as Lord has to do with recognizing the kind of lordship that Jesus brings, one of service and sacrifice. God's vision is for us to gather around the Lordship of Jesus that we too might take on lives of service, that we too might learn to sacrifice, that we might come to look, and love, and live more like Jesus. So this is not narcissism. This is the way which God seeks the end of

narcissism. This is not self-centeredness, but the very origins of selflessness. God's vision is for a world full of little Christs united under the leadership of the True Christ.

So if this is the vision – for all creation to come under the life and love of Christ – then what is the mission that God has in mind? What is our mission here at Christ Lutheran Church?

One incredible thing about the expansive vision of God is that it has the space to include all sorts of missions, as long as those missions work to support the vision.

Now, I know that seems like a tongue twister, but bear with me. Think about it this way. Some churches are known for their feeding program, like the Micah's

Backpack program run out of St. Michael's Lutheran in Blacksburg. Feeding people in the name of Jesus is a mission that helps to support the vision of all people coming to know Christ, and become more like Christ. Other churches are known for their intentional inclusion of people below the poverty line, like Fieldstone United Methodist in Christiansburg. Finding ways to include people at the social margins is a mission that helps to support the vision of all people coming to know Christ, and become more like Christ. Still other churches find ways to house homeless people of the New River Valley during the colder months through the To Our House Winter Overnight Shelter, a ministry supported by our friends at Grace Episcopal and Radford Presbyterian. Giving people

who are vulnerable a place of warmth, safety, and security, helps to support the vision of all people coming to know Christ, and become more like Christ.

Each of those particular missions – feeding the hungry, including social outcasts, housing the homeless – helps to accomplish the vision set forth by God in Christ to welcome all people into God's Kingdom and to help people become more like Christ. So again, I ask, what is our mission here at Christ Lutheran Church?

That is something that we must discover together. We've been invited by the Episcopalians and Presbyterians to partner with them in this housing ministry, and I hope we will do that. We've had conversations about how to develop new worship

services that focus on healing and wholeness for persons of all abilities, and I hope we do that. We've already got momentum in developing a campus ministry at Radford University, and I know we will continue to do that. These are the kinds of missions that help to bring people to Jesus, and help to transform people into God's image.

But here's the kicker there – we need to constantly be transformed into that image as well. This means all of our decisions as a church must be driven by the mission at the core of our identity. When we make decisions about our space, like the one to move away from pews and toward using chairs, we must make sure we are making our space align with God's mission in this place. When we make

decisions about our worship, like how to use language, what music to play, what instruments to employ, even in how to adjust my preaching style, we must make sure that we are aligning our worship with God's mission in this place. All of our decisions, from building to budget, from staffing to ministry structure, must be made in line with God's mission in this place. Why?

Because God has a vision that the world would become one of humility and service in the image of Jesus. This is difficult because, as Pope Francis recently said, *"There is the tendency to place ourselves and our ambitions at the center of our lives. This is very human, but it is not Christian."* This sort of self-centeredness is what led to greed in companies,

to invasions of privacy by businesses, and to the eroding of family identity from community corporations. Our mission, whatever it is, must embody the humility and service of Jesus. It must be Christian, because we are to be little Christs in the image of Christ, who humbled himself to serve us all.

So, as we go forward in this process of considering what our identity is in the New River Valley, we must remember that God has a particular mission for us. Some people already have great ministries covered in this area. But there are still unmet needs in our community that can become a central part of our mission. Needs of a larger commitment to housing the homeless in the coldest of months. Needs for a place that celebrates to those of all physical,



mental, and social abilities. Needs of a message of love and welcome on RU's campus. These are needs that we can meet with the help of God, all as a part of the vision that all people might come to know God, and come to look more and more like Jesus in every way. Let's together commit to make our community and our space a place that reflects God's mission for the New River Valley, and supports God's vision for all creation. Amen.