

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost. The scripture text is taken from Matthew 10:40-43

James MacDonald writes: "The church of Jesus Christ is not like a Target Store. It's not like you go in, get what you came in for, and then head home again."

The church isn't just about you getting what you need. It's about you participating in what everyone needs.

The Church of Christ, the body of Christ here on earth, the fellowship of the saints, the community of believers, are working together so that the church can be all God wants it to be.

One of the hapless beliefs the church has operated under for many years is that the Christian life is just a matter of getting "saved" and that is the end of it, nothing else until we get to heaven.

According to some, having our sins forgiven is what the Christian life is all about. One major evangelical theologian recently asked the question, "Did Jesus Preach the Gospel?"

He stated that there was only one place in all the Gospels where it indicated that he (Jesus) might have understood the doctrine of being justified by faith. Other than that not so much. I was dumbfounded, that a theologian (who claims to be so smart, can be so dumb). Talk about clueless.

Folks, Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God. He talked about what it meant to know God and to be a part of a Kingdom that was not a part of this world.

He spoke of a transformation of heart and character that enables us to be a part of what God is doing and wants to do in this world.

Jesus made it very clear, that only through faith in Him, one could "re-born" (to be made right in the sight of God) and to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. There was no "gray area".

It is, as James MacDonald said, "working together so that the church can be all God wants it to be."

As Lutheran Christians, we know, we cannot earn our salvation through good works, but good works are the natural fruit of salvation.

Good works are the evidence that we have been justified by faith, and that we have a relationship with the God who made the world, who loves the world, and wants to save the world.

Martin Luther once said: "It is not faith or works, it is a faith that works." As Jesus said in our gospel narrative for today, there are rewards for participating in the life and work of God here on earth.

In fact, Jesus uses the word, "reward", three times in those few short verses. The Christian life is not just about going to heaven, (yes, heaven is our goal and heaven is our home for eternity), but as far as our life in this world is concerned, this is about being God's faithful people who work to bring about God's Kingdom on earth, here and now.

There is a rather sobering scripture, which the Apostle Paul wrote, (this is in the Book of I Corinthians chapter 3 starting a verse 11)

Paul writes: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw. The work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward." (verses 11 through 14)

The Apostle Paul said that there was a reward for being faithful and having good works that accompany our faith. And even when we have done good works, they may have been done with improper motives.

For instance, the desire to be noticed, or the hope of gaining some personal benefit, or the hope of some profit in some way from our obedience, or a desire to just appear better than we are.

If so, our works will be burned in the fire of judgment and count for nothing. We may be "saved" but only as a scorched cinder.

On the other hand, the commendable works, we have done will be refined and come out like gold. If our desire is pure, and we desire nothing but carrying out the work to do that God has given us to do during this life-time and to advance His Kingdom, here on earth, there will be a reward.

The Apostle Paul says, elsewhere, (this is in the Book of II Corinthians) Paul writes: "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? Unless indeed, you fail to meet the test!"

Just as we used to serve a master (the prince of this world) who led our lives on a path to death, destruction and ruin, through God's plan of redemption, and by the merits of Christ, we now serve a God who gives us peace, freedom, joy, and life, abundant life. We have been set free from our former life and serve a Master who rewards us.

And the benefits and rewards of that life are not just in heaven, but are here and now. Through faith in Christ, we lead lives of holiness.

Through faith, we become agents of God to bring about His Kingdom here on earth. We are given eternal life, that begins now.

As I was working on the message for today, I began to think about the difference between wages and rewards. All of us know that wages are what you get from doing something, in other words, you provide a good or service, and you are paid for it, that's a wage. Wages are what you earn and deserve. Rewards on the other hand, are what you get, though that you do not deserve it. Rewards are a gift.

In the Book of Revelation, chapter 22, verse 17: St. John writes: "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let everyone who hears say, "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty, "Come." Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

The good news is that we do not get what we deserve, rather, we are given a gift, and that gift is life itself. It is a reward, not a wage. It is a gift, not something you have earned, nor could you earn it, even if you tried.

The message of Christianity, is not just that we can be saved, but that we can be transformed. We do not have to be a slave to our desires and weaknesses.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be made new. We are not just forgiven people, we are transformed people who are being made into the image of Christ.

We are not perfect people, we are “forgiven people”, who are growing in our ability to understand the kind of life, God wants us to live and the ability to live it. And we can not only be transformed, we can be used by God for His purposes.

Over the years, I have heard other well-meaning Christians say, that if a person is wanting to have a relationship with God, one should pray a prayer something like this: “God I thank you, that you sent your Son Jesus to die on the cross for my sins, so that I can be forgiven and go to heaven. I ask you to forgive my sins, so that I can go to heaven and have your Son, Jesus become a part of my life.”

That prayer is all well and good, but Christ Jesus did not come into this world to be a “part” of your life anymore, than He came into this world, just to forgive you of some, of your sins.

Christ Jesus, demands your whole life, and you must give up your personal kingdom, your rights, your privileges, and the ownership of your life. Deny self, pick up your cross, and follow Christ.

The Apostle Paul writes in the book of I Corinthians, chapter 6, Paul writes: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not own?”

The more I understand what Jesus came to do in this world, I think that we as Christians, when we encounter someone who does not know God, we should pray with them a prayer like this: “God, I thank you for creating all that exists. I thank you, that you love the world and the people you have created to live in it. I thank you for loving me, even before I was born. I thank you, that you sent Jesus as the Messiah to fulfill all that was foretold in your Holy Word. I surrender to you, I give my whole life to you, by your death on the cross and your resurrection, all of my sins are forgiven and the promise of heaven is mine. As I live, I want to be a part of your Kingdom that Jesus spoke of. Help me to take up my cross, die to self, and follow Jesus on the path of life. Lord God, help me to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ each and every day.”

You see, by grace, by God’s baptismal grace, God calls us into a relationship with Him. Through Christ, and only through Christ, can we have that relationship with God our Father in heaven.

Through faith in Christ, we are given this gift, this reward, this is not a wage, it is a gift, and this gift is peace even when face adversity, this gift is joy, even when we face sorrow, this gift is hope, even when we face hopelessness, and this gift is life, not only connected to God, but woven into His life.

It is a gift that brings purpose and meaning in our lives. It is the gift of having a relationship, with God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, We thank you for the gift of your grace, which you so freely give. As we walk by faith in this life, looking towards the day of Christ’s return, help us to use this gift of grace, so that we may go forth from here and share the Good News of Jesus Christ with those who do not know Him, as Lord and

Savior. Help us in our day to day work and ministry, to work to further your kingdom here on earth. All these things we humbly pray in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.