

American Lutheran Church of Sun City

The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

July 20 – July 21, 2024

Rev. Scott Klimke

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

It's a good thing we can count. Lutherans of all people should know this. Ours is a movement born of a priest and biblical scholar who counted and counted and counted how we might be justified before God and the final count on the basis of Scripture was that God's grace at work in Jesus and the Holy Spirit's gift of faith is our only shot. And if Luther's example doesn't convince you that it's good we can count, there's this. Far before we developed languages sophisticated enough to write plays and poems and novels, history tells us we first figured out how to count things out in the form of primitive contracts and receipts.

If you're curious for an example, down in the Andes of South America, contracts and receipts were first written by tying an alphabet of knots on a variety of colorful cords called a quipu. But just because we've long known it's good we can count, doesn't mean we always do it. Frankly, I acted as if I were living before the invention of the quipu on Thursday morning when I went out for a five-mile walk. As rare as it might be in this area during July, I didn't account for the possibility of rain and therefore had to leg out my last mile and a half in a downpour. It's but one example of what can happen if we don't claim what we previously counted to be true in

daily life. Sometimes we end up wet in a hot and muggy climate where it might feel good for a time. Sometimes the consequences can be a lot more severe. And unfortunately, there's just no guarantee we're going to claim what we've previously counted to be true in daily life.

The absence of such a guarantee is something the gospel of Mark has been emphasizing a lot this year. As we've gathered for worship during this year of Mark, there have been very few weeks, if any, when the evangelist hasn't stacked Jesus up against others who count themselves to be religious and political leaders. The difference has very consistently been that Jesus actually claims the moral and ethical responsibilities that are inseparable from his ability to count himself as our prophet, priest, and king. With all sinning and falling short of the glory of God other than Jesus, this is never a fair fight. Jesus will always come out on top no matter the competition. Too often we humans, leaders included, just don't claim what we count to be true about ourselves and our position in life when the rubber hits the road. But Jesus, he was and is different.

In today's reading from Mark, Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, doesn't count titles or hours worked or even the potential for malnourishment as a justification for closing up shop. There's no retreat to Kennebunkport, Martha's Vineyard, Hawaii, Mar-a-Lago, or Rehoboth. Congress isn't let out for this or that recess. The Supreme Court is accountable and accessible to the people its lawbooks and legal movements are to serve if they're wrong about anything. How could it be any other way? There are people, throngs and throngs of them, Mark tells us, who are like sheep without a shepherd. In Mark chapter six, tired and hungry as he is, Jesus claims the moral and ethical responsibility accounted to him on the day of his baptism and becomes the shepherd they need, not on his schedule. The message is that in Jesus the counting and the claiming get married with a consistency that makes Jesus stand out from the crowd. After all, earlier in Mark chapter six, as we just heard last week, the counting and the claiming don't

get married in King Herod Antipas. Unlike Jesus, here's a king who counts and counts and counts, but never claims.

Think about it! Just before today's reading, Herod Antipas counts a crown and a throne, his brother's wife, parts of a kingdom he's ready to give away on a whim, and the political partners before whom he does not want to lose face. There's counting and more counting, but no claiming, and the innocent head of John the Baptist ends up on a platter because of this profound failure. At least in this world, there's no shepherd to protect John. I've suggested, this is just one example of how those who like to count the perks and privileges of leadership in our world too often fail to claim the moral and ethical responsibilities that justify the perks and the privileges and their position in life. Down here under the sun, I'm afraid light years often separate our lived reality from the Kingdom of God which has forever started to draw near in Jesus. What are we do? Where, oh where, shall we discover the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference?

A good place to start would be to claim deep down in our hearts what we count to be true about Jesus. Through the Nicene Creed and its summary of Scripture, we count Jesus as our Lord, as the only Son of God, who came down from heaven for us and our salvation; even going so far as to be crucified for our sake under Pontius Pilate. In today's reading from Ephesians, we count Jesus as the one who through his blood has brought us near to God; so near in fact that it's said we're now God's dwelling place. In, by, and through the Holy Spirit who alone makes it possible, let's now claim what Martin Luther spent his whole life counting based on the creeds and Scripture. In the Spirit's gift of faith, let's claim, claim, claim that we have forever received God's eternal thumbs up in Jesus. We're not sheep without a shepherd. Whether we die or whether we live, we belong to the Lord who has already prepared a deluxe apartment for us in

the sky better than any ever known by George, Louise, and Lionel of the TV sitcom “The Jeffersons.” In the Spirit who alone makes it possible, let’s claim this deep, deep down inside; to the point that we’re also ready to claim Jesus as our Way and our Truth through the living of daily lives that are very obviously Christian. And if we have any questions about what it means to claim Jesus as our Lord and our Way and our Truth in daily lives of this sort, perhaps this example drawn from life at ALC might provide them.

As you may know, the week before last we finally sold our bus. Before this took place, things probably reached their most fevered pitch when after months of waiting and thousands in repair costs the bus worked for only one ride; the one back from the garage where it had supposedly been repaired at no paltry price. When this was discovered, it was almost as if Herodias, the aggrieved lover of Herod Antipas, had been reincarnated. The feeling was: May heads hit the platter! May faces be ground in the dust until noses are gone! May a haboob of litigation bury those responsible for this travesty. But then a still, small voice emerged from the shadows, saying, “This isn’t us. We’ve got a more excellent way available to us. It’s the privilege and the opportunity to claim in daily life what we count to be true about Jesus while in church and that’s that Jesus is our way, our truth, and our life, today, tomorrow, and forever.

Now contrary to what you might expect, this still, small voice did not belong to a wimp or a pie-in-the-sky idealist. It belonged to a retired Pentagon officer who knows all about what it means to be a warrior. But thanks be to God, this warrior values his identity as a sheep under the care of the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ more than he values all the bars and medals his distinguished military career has enabled him to count. And when things were handled in his calm, gentle, and peaceful way, it was almost as if we were dealing with a different garage. Suddenly we no longer had to pay for additional towing and suddenly the bus was really and

truly available for sale with no additional whopper of a bill needing to be paid first. For me, and I hope for you too, it's all one of the most moving and powerful accounts of what can happen when we do it Jesus' way rather than the world's way. And so, living, as we do, at a time when the Church needs to be the Church more than ever, let's go be the Church thanks to the Holy Spirit; claiming in thought, word, and deed all the things we count to be true about Jesus, who we do count and confess to be the Christ who is God's only Son and our Lord. Amen!