

SERMONS/DEVOTIONAL MESSAGES

Opening Service Sermon – Rev. Dr. Ralph Mayan

“Give Jesus Glory” “Far More Abundantly Than All That We Ask Or Think!”

Text: Ephesians. 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Far more abundantly than all that we ask or think! The biblical phrase describes what we’ve experienced in Lutheran Church–Canada. Pausing to reflect in this anniversary year and at this anniversary convention and service, what can we say but, Lord, you have blessed us **far more abundantly than all that we ask or think!** Our God is a faithful God– the breadth and the length, the height and the depth of that faithfulness surpasses our understanding.

Far more abundantly than all that we ask or think! Reflect for a moment. He has faithfully preserved in our midst the pure milk of His Word; He has permitted that Word to be preached and His sacraments administered in our 315 plus congregations; He has continued to provide shepherds who are committed to the Holy Scriptures as the inspired Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions as a true exposition of that Word; who faithfully proclaim the saving message of

Jesus Christ as they care for and love their flock and as they reach out with the Gospel to others who have not yet come to believe.

Far more abundantly than all that we ask or think! He has blessed His church with faithful laymen and women who by God’s grace seek to live out their “priesthood” through their various callings. They faithfully and generously support the mission and ministry of Christ’s church; They seek to share their faith as they have opportunity – always prepared to “give an answer to everyone who asks them to give the reason for the hope that they have.”

Far more abundantly than all that we ask or think! He has blessed the proclamation of His Word in our midst, in this country and in other places in the world. Are you surprised to hear that following our “Open House” event this past fall, a good number of visitors joined in adult confirmation and Information Classes. **Far more abundantly . . .** Are you surprised to hear how blessing upon blessing has been experienced in world missions? I wonder just how many of us who attended the founding convention held here in Winnipeg 20 years ago imagined that God would have opened doors for us in Ukraine, in Thailand, in Nicaragua and he just doesn’t stop opening them – now opening doors in Costa Rica, Honduras and Cambodia. **Far more abundantly than all that we ask or think!** You need reason to *Give Jesus Glory!* We have seen it with our own eyes! *To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen*

Far more abundantly than all that we ask or think! These words certainly paint a beautiful picture of our good and gracious

God! Our God is a awesome God, a faithful God, faithful to all His promises. These words also paint a portrait of us – but it's not so pretty. It's a portrait of a people who often find themselves surprised that God would actually keep His Word and bless His people.

Dr. Lehman, our President Emeritus, at the dedication of the seminary building in Edmonton, and speaking about the significance of the event quoted sainted Dr. "Wil" Hyatt, an LCMS church leader and friend of the Canadian church. "People sometimes suggest that the blessings we enjoy today are such that the generations before us would never have believed them. Well, I beg to differ," he said. "Of course they believed. If they had not believed, they would never have started what we are today continuing."

I confess to you that Dr. Hyatt was not speaking about me. At the constituting convention of Iglesia Luterana Sinodo de Nicaragua, I shared thoughts about my first visit to the mission. I told them that on my first visit my expectations were low. After all, what could one expect in the country which had endured civil war and a Hurricane Mitch. What could one expect from the labour of one missionary who had only a few years experience in ministry (As I recall Missionary Arguello choked a little as he translated my comments.) But what did I see? **Far more than all that we ask or think!**

"I had forgotten whose mission this was." It wasn't my mission. That would have failed. It wasn't Lutheran Church-Canada's mission. That too would have failed. It wasn't even Missionary Arguello's mission. It was and remains God's mission and God always does **far more than all that we ask or think**. I should have known better! Our God uses anything and everything, even Hurricanes and civil wars to bring His grace and love to bear on people's lives. After all, He's on a mission; He's building His church! We have witnesses to His abundant grace right here in our midst tonight. Oh Lord, how could I have been so weak in faith; so untrusting of your promises!

And what about you? Was Dr. Hyatt speaking about you? What kind of expectations do you have of your good and gracious God – this God who blesses **far more than all that we ask or think**? Do you put limits on what God can and will do in building His church in our midst, in your congregation, in what we do together in Lutheran Church-Canada. Is your faith in God acting limited by fear of failure? Is your trust in God circumscribed by your own limited expectations? Do you view challenges and new opportunities for service in life and in the church – exercises in futility or opportunities for our God who blesses **far more than all that we ask or think**, to really bless and build His church?

How many opportunities are not seized; how many dreams unfulfilled, how many tasks incomplete – all because we do not act – trusting in a God who blesses **far more than all that we ask or think!**

Twenty years have now passed in Lutheran Church-Canada – Twenty years of God blessing us **far more than all that we ask or think** or for that matter deserve. Do we take to heart the implications of such an out pouring of blessing for our future; Have we written it on our foreheads and upon our hearts . . . or is it possible that we, like our Lord's other disciples soon forget those blessings when the next challenge comes and we find ourselves trembling in fear for the future - actually forgetting about the one who journeys with us in the back of the boat. A lack of faith and trust on our part? O Lord, forgive!

In their boat those disciples prayed. They pleaded for help. We too in our boat – in this church – we too can pray. And St. Paul provides us with the ideal prayer. It was his prayer for the church in Ephesus. It's my prayer at this convention for our beloved Synod.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be

strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Lord, strengthen us through Your Spirit in our inner being. Hearts need cleansing, Minds need renewing. Faith needs strengthening. It's a task that we can't accomplish on our own by thinking more positively or striving and struggling harder to improve in mind and spirit. It's a task accomplished only by the Holy Spirit! Only He renews and only He strengthens. Only He increases faith so that Christ more and more permeates our inner most being through faith. Only He. . . . Renew me O Eternal Light!

And He does. Through Word and Sacrament, He accomplishes his purpose enabling Christ to dwell in our hearts through faith *in order that rooted and grounded in love we may be strengthened to comprehend with all the saints the breadth and length and height and depth of His love.*

It's at the cross that we begin to comprehend that love. St. Jerome of the 4th century put it something like this: The upper arm of the cross points up; the lower arm points down; the crossing arms point out to the widest horizons. The love of Christ reaches up to include the angels; it reaches down to include even the evil spirits in hell. In its length it covers the people who are striving and in its breadth it covers those who are wandering away. In other words it reaches out to all; no one is excluded, not you and not me. No one is outside or beyond the saving power of crucified and resurrected Saviour!

In that cross, He has blessed us **far more than all that we ask or think** and most assuredly deserve. He forgives our sin, our lack of faith and trust. He removes our fears and our limited vision. He renews, He

strengthens and He empowers. He does it for you; He does it for me. He does it even in this hour as we hear His Word and feed on His body and blood. He gives us the strength to comprehend with all the saints the breadth and length and height and depth. . .

Of what? Scholars argue over what is being described. Is it a growth in spiritual comprehension, the kind that grows in all directions? Is it, as I have described previously, the vastness of God's love for all in Jesus Christ?

I like George Stoeckhardt's take on this. He sees it as a description of the vastness of God's building project, His Holy church. It extends through all times; It reaches out across every tribe and nation and people. It covers heaven and earth. As Luther says, "It is the assembly of all believers from the rising to the going down of the sun." Right now with our limited vision we see only a small part; It appears weak and helpless like a little flock in the midst of this vast unbelieving world more often than not reflecting our lack of faith and trust. But one day we shall see it as it really is - in all its glory around the throne. Lord give us the strength to comprehend it right now and the courage to be instruments in building it!

It is the infinite love of Christ, the Lord of the Church, that moved him to plan, to build and to increase the Church. He furnishes it with a kind of building material which softens hearts as hard as stone, that cleanses bodies sooted with demonic grime – that works faith in the faithless, trust in the untrusting; that washes clean the sinner and incorporates him into the congregation of the saints, that fills him with the fullness of Christ – the fullness of faith and trust.

This vision of the church gives insight into the love of Christ which surpasses human understanding. And it moves the church to emulate His love, a love that does all things, that believes all things, that hopes all things, that endeavors by all means to reach out to those who have not heard or come to believe

so that they too might join with the saints as they *Give Jesus Glory*.

Far more than all we ask or think! That's how we have been blessed these twenty years! We are witnesses to your grace and favour! Lord, Give us hearts that believe; minds that trust and hands that work in your

kingdom! And

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen!

Friday Opening Devotion – Rev. Brad Schollenberg

“You Are Called: To a Place You Don’t Want to Go”

When have you ever heard of God calling someone to an easy task? When have you ever heard God say to someone He has chosen, "I'm going to give you an exorbitantly high salary, too much vacation time, and a life of total convenience? I'm going to guard you from all interruptions, keep you away from the hassles of day to day life, insure that you have totally smooth relationships, and never let the stress level in your life get too high. And I'll just keep making your life easier as you get older so that you can have a smooth and uneventful transition into your heavenly home."?

Look in the Bible for that and you'll never find it. Instead you'll find Noah building an ark on dry land. Not only was the work hard, but the neighbors probably got pretty ugly about his latest home improvement project. You'll find Abraham, called to leave everything familiar and to start a new life in another land. You'll find people like Esther who had to confront a powerful king with some very bad news. You'll find people like the prophet Hosea who was called by God to marry a woman who would be unfaithful to him so the people could see a living demonstration of their own unfaithfulness. God does not call you to a life that is easy. The person in the Bible who did that, who called someone to a satisfied, comfortable, and famous life, was the devil during his temptation of Jesus. God's calls are different.

You'll find Ananias in Acts chapter nine, called by God to meet face to face with a raging persecutor of the church, Saul. You'll even meet God's own Son, Jesus, called to be rejected, ridiculed, tortured, and put to death on the cross as payment for the sin of the world. God does not call you to a life that is easy. Your life is too important to Him.

God's call brings transformation to life. It brings His message, His redemption, His love. It is significant things that need to be done in His kingdom, so He calls people to serve Him. And as you look through the pages of the Bible, you'll find God calling you too. That's how Isaiah 43 begins when God said, *I have called you by name, you are mine*. Then He added, *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned...For I am the Lord, your God...your Saviour*." WHEN you pass through raging waters that come crashing down, not IF. WHEN you walk through the searing heat of what life brings, not IF. WHEN you walk through situations that you would rather not be in, not IF. Yes, through it all, your Savior is with you, God says. But your call—and let me define that as the time and place God has you living in right now—your call is not designed to be easy.

That's what Jesus talked to Peter about. In John 21:18 Jesus said to Peter, *I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed*

yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.

For Peter, this would be a journey from younger to older, from immaturity to maturity, from his destination to God's destination, from serving self to glorifying God. John said that in verse 19: *Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.* That was Peter's call.

Honestly, he didn't like the idea. Who would? No one wants a hard life. Peter saw John following along and asked, "What about him?" Maybe there was a better deal. Do you ever look at other people and think: "They look so happy. They seem to have their life totally together. No challenges seem to be dragging them down. Why is their life so good and mine is so difficult? Is my life really the way it's supposed to be?"

I think people are asking those questions more now than ever. People are restless today. They seem more adventurous. The world is changing so fast. There is no stability. Life seems hectic, and with that comes frustrations. And with that there is so much anger these days. People are hurried, and cruel in their hurriedness. Just wait in line, whether in your car or at an appointment. So many adults and children are suffering from depression. Happiness and contentment seem so difficult to find. All the promises of happiness that new products, new technology, new diets, new exercise programs, new cars, new TV shows, claim to make for your life just don't pan out. Years go by and struggles keep surfacing. So you ask, "Is this the way my life is supposed to be?"

Do you know what I wonder? I wonder if we're asking the wrong question. I wonder if, instead of trying to find a magical place where we're totally comfortable, we're supposed to be recognizing God's call. Instead of asking, "Is this the way my life is

supposed to be?" should we not be asking, "What does God want to do with me here and now?" And, "Will I let Him?" "Will I let Him lead me to places I would rather not go?"—places like working through difficulty in marriage, places like being challenged to show kindness when you're tired and crabby, places like finding your mission as you lay in a hospital bed, places like taking the path of humility during conflict, places like willingness to be flexible, places like exercising self control over your passions. And, "Will I bring to those places the message of God, His redemption, and His love?" That is your call.

Your call—the time and place God has you living in right now, the hard life that you may struggle with—your conduct, your work, is to build up, not to demolish.

Jesus said to Peter, *Feed my lambs; take care of my sheep; feed my sheep.*

You say, 'But how can I serve the Lord? I'm not important. What I do is so common and of little consequence. Anyone can do what I do.' But I say to you: 'Every time you meet another human being you have the opportunity. It's a chance at holiness. For you will do one of two things, then. Either you will build him up, or you will tear him down. Either you will acknowledge that he is, or you will make him sorry that he is... You will create or you will destroy...' I say to you: 'There are no useless, minor meetings. There are no dead-end jobs. There are no pointless lives. Swallow your sorrows, forget your grievances and all the hurt your poor life has sustained. Turn your face truly to the human before you and let her, let him, for one pure moment, shine. Value them as important. How do you say Hello? Or do you say Hello? How do you greet the strangers? Or do you greet them? Do you burden your customer, your client, your neighbor, your child, with your troubles? Even by attitude? Even by crabbiness, anger, or gloom? Or do you look them in the eye and grant them peace?'

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep." Edify, build up, bring my love and my new life.

If you're considering your call and your conduct, Jesus has two final things to say to you today.

First, He asks, "Do you love me?" He asked Peter that question three times: "Do you love me?" It wasn't as much a quiz as it was an invitation. And it is Jesus' invitation to you today. For your life that can be very hard, for your call to places that you would rather not go, for the challenge you face every moment to bring the edifying love of God instead of the demolition of your own bitterness or orneriness, Jesus invites you to love Him. And you know what that means. John said it later when he wrote to believers in 1 John 4, "We love because He first loved us" (vs.19). Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" and John thinks about you and says, "You can say Yes. You can love Jesus and love everything He is about. You can say Yes because He first loved you. You can say Yes because He gave His life for you. This is Christ making you a new creation. Just like He did Peter."

Maturity in your walk as someone who follows Christ does not happen because of your determination or your personal strength. You grow only because Jesus' amazing love for you. In Him is life. He lets

you love Him. That is the course you are on. Your life is full of opportunities to love.

"Follow me," Jesus said it to Peter. Of course. That was the answer to this challenging call of Jesus. Why wouldn't he want to follow the Savior who would provide everything He needed?

"Follow me," Jesus says it to you. He's got everything you need as you live out your call. That is the course you're on—even as you are called to places you would rather not go. Amen.

(Following the devotion above, Pastor Schollenberg presented the video *Get Service* from www.sermonspice.com) The video depicts a typical man in a rush, concerned about his agenda, grumbling and complaining to himself about all the minor nuisances he has to face in a simple commute to work. He is so focused on himself that he neglects to see the needs of others. While he is impatiently waiting for his coffee a mysterious man gives him a pair of special glasses. When the glasses are put on he can see what is going on in the lives of the people around him. They help him to see what Jesus would see. He learns to look beyond people's sin and see their need. Life is not about "getting service" but about giving "service". We are called to places we do not want to go.)

Saturday Opening Devotion – Rev. Jan Pastucha

Text: 2 Tim. 2:15

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

This week we gather in a room filled with pastors, professors, church workers, volunteers and lay people who all have a number of different vocations. All of you

are craftspeople at your vocations; All using different tools in those vocations.

One of my latest passions is rebuilding a 1929 Ford Model A into a street rod. The fabrication shop where it is being worked on allows me to use many of their tools...I have had my hands on tools I've never seen before let alone used before - plasma cutters, metal grinders, impact guns. In my hands they could be pretty dangerous, but they are tools of the trade. My tools as a pastor are

God's Word and Sacrament. These are tools that we all use in our vocations.

As I look out my hotel window on the seventeenth floor I can see the store where my father used to work. It's not the same store, but the store painting is still visible.

My father worked for 35 years at a furniture store in Winnipeg called Wilson's furniture. He was a cabinet finisher, maker. For him woodworking was not a job, but a vocation he was proud but also humble and thankful about. It was integrated into all he did. It was a job however; he swore to his sons that if we ever took up he would break our hands. So my two brothers and I had to find our own vocations.

My father worked with special tools as well. He knew how to use his tools, clamps, lacquer sticks, burning knives, and he had a certain way of approaching each project. He even had a secret recipe for furniture polish. He was a craftsman.

I also know he used the tools of God's Word in his vocation. How he approached and talked with customers, how he treated his fellow employees and employers. He was thankful to God for giving him a trade that allowed him to come to Canada. He somehow saw that God had given him these gifts and he used them daily to provide for family and a service to the community.

I was fortunate enough to have summer jobs with him and know he used God's Word. I remember how he would take a moment for a quiet prayer. I was aware that he obviously talked to others about our family and they were fully aware of our faith life and vocations. He modeled a faith filled life.

I said my father often said if any of us followed his trade he would break our hands. So we had to find our own vocations. We did. Two of us became pastors, and one

is an artist. What he taught us was to become craftsmen in our own callings and gifts. His example of how he approached his trade, his work ethic, allowed us to do the same thing in our vocations, to be craftsmen. I still use the same tools he used...the Word. My brother the artist has also found ways to include the Word of God into his art.

The work that all of us who are gathered here do is similar. My father worked in a shop, some of you also work in a shop, or in an office, or outside, or in the home, some work in a study. We work with the scriptures and texts of God in our daily living. Our tools are the Word of God, in our hands they proclaim God's love in Christ and bring the word of life to His people.

Paul reminds us that this is our task; the proclamation of the gospel. St. Paul writes a letter to Timothy: Paul in prison, perhaps nearing his death, to a younger pastor/colleague, who was with Paul on a journey, now a craftsman too. Paul writes in 2 Tim. 2:15

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

As we gather here this week, as delegates, as we hear the Word of God, make decisions for our national church, elect leaders and learn, each one of you is a skilled workman who has no reason to be ashamed of where God has placed you, of your craft and ultimately in your capacity to handle the material of the faith. *The Word of Truth*, that is your guiding principle. This is a gathering of craftsmen – and a craftsman knows there is always more than one way to accomplish a particular thing – so do your work as workman approved. Through the saving work of Christ in his death and resurrection, our work is glorified and we can fulfill our vocations, giving glory to God. Amen!

Sunday Opening Devotion – Rev. Alex Klages

“Give Jesus Glory— for Peace”

Text: Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God. Or let us have peace with God. Whether you read the verb in Romans 5:1 as a subjunctive or as an indicative (the manuscript evidence could lean either way), the point is the same, ultimately. Through Jesus Christ we sinners are now forgiven, at peace with God. That peace is ours through God’s declaration of grace, received through faith.

That peace is why we can gather as a convention this weekend. That peace is why we joined together in the Lord’s Supper on Thursday evening as a convention, hosted by Immanuel, the oldest LCC congregation in Winnipeg, the congregation which was the mother of the parish I serve in Winkler and Morden. That peace is why we have gone to various LCC congregations in the greater Winnipeg area this morning and heard and received once again the precious Gospel. That peace is why we wish to be a synod—a group of congregations and pastors and deacons walking together in the light and truth of the pure Gospel, united by the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, seeking to be one in word and deed.

This oneness we seek is not always as present as it should be. It is easy to allow our human opinions to get in the way of simply hearing God’s Word and submitting to what the Lord says. Our overtures and resolutions speak to the fact that the unity which Jesus desires of His Church and which we desire to have as Synod are not always present. We need these convention times to speak the Word to one another, both in-session and in our informal gatherings, to listen to each other, and to work through our

differences constructively, being normed by the Scriptures and the Confessions, taking rebuke and reproof where necessary, but always and only with the goal of proclaiming the Gospel in all its truth and purity to our communities and to our world.

For we stand as a church in and by God’s grace alone. Any human efforts we propose will falter and fail. Any stance we take which is not grounded in God’s Word is doomed to fall. But where God is working through His means of grace, those means by which we have peace with Him, the gates of hell cannot and will not prevail.

As such, whatever may come upon our little band of believers—and what is the 75000 of LCC compared to the 6 billion people of this world?— we rejoice! We rejoice because Jesus has taken our sins upon Himself and given us His righteousness. We rejoice because the sufferings, afflictions, struggles and trials we face are there to produce endurance, character, and hope. This hope will never fail or disappoint because “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:5)

Give Jesus glory, for He is the one who has made peace for us with God, who gives us His peace through His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead on the third day. Give Jesus glory, for He has sent His Spirit to call you by the Gospel, enlighten you with His gifts, sanctify and keep you in the one true faith. Give Jesus glory, for He is your hope, your peace, and your life. God grant you His peace this day and forevermore!

Amen.

Monday Opening Devotion – Rev. James Fritsche

“Footprints In The Sand”

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Dear Friends in Christ,

One day at chapel I asked the school children to solve a little riddle. Let's see how you do. It's a “what am I” riddle. Here it is:

“You take me with you wherever you go. Sometimes you can see me very clearly, while at other times you can hardly see me at all. I am always behind you — unless you turn around. I'll never quite catch up to you. What am I?”

Do you know the answer? It's my footprints. I want you to think about your footprints this morning. Footprints are those signs you leave behind you wherever you go. They are the evidence that you have been somewhere, doing something. You probably don't think about them too much. Sometimes they are faint and shallow, but other times they are strong and well-defined, like when you walk in the sand at a beach. The interesting thing is that they are always there, but you hardly ever think about them. Nevertheless, they are the evidence that you are up and active, alive and moving in some direction.

If a Christian is up, alive and moving toward heaven, he can't help but leave footprints in the sands of time. These footprints are our good works, left in the wake of our faith in Christ. Do our “footprints” precede us into heaven? No. But if we have been made alive in Christ in Holy Baptism, trust in Christ and are walking toward heaven in this life, then the footprints of love and mercy and good works must surely follow.

Our text for today is not about what Christians “do” to get to heaven, but it is

rather about who Christians “are” in Christ. As we reflect on the words of our Lord this morning, let us consider what we Christians are called to be as the redeemed and sanctified people of Christ.

The whole 25th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew is part of Jesus' eschatological discourse, his discussion of the end times. It takes place during the week of his Passion following his entrance to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. In the previous chapter he has spoken about the various signs that will precede his second coming. In chapter 25 Jesus speaks of what his people are to be doing as they wait for his return. Three things are identified. In the first third of the chapter he tells the story of the Ten Virgins who are waiting for the bridegroom to come so they can go to the great wedding banquet. As we wait for the return of Christ we are to be vigilant, waiting with sufficient oil so that we may enter the banquet hall.

The second third of the chapter is Jesus' parable of the talents. While we wait for Jesus' return we are to be faithful stewards of the gifts he has given us — not burying them, but investing them so they may grow and increase the kingdom of our Lord.

In the final third of this chapter we have today's Gospel lesson of the last judgment. What are Christ's people to be doing while they wait for his return? They are to be doing deeds of love and mercy — feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick visiting those imprisoned. Do they do these things in order to get into God's heaven? At first glance, it might appear that way from our text. After all, the King points to those very deeds when he gives them their eternal inheritance. And it is the lack of those deeds that he criticizes in those on his left who are destined for eternal punishment.

But is this what the text is really saying, that we receive heaven as a reward for our good deeds? No, that would be contrary to the rest of Matthew's Gospel and the whole New Testament where we are clearly told that it is Jesus who had earned heaven for us. He did this by his own righteous life lived for us and by his innocent suffering and death on the cross where he exchanged his innocence for our guilt and where he received the punishment for sin that we deserved.

In fact, when we look closely at the text we learn that the gift given to the righteous is their "inheritance", not their "reward". An inheritance is never something we earn or deserve. An inheritance is our birthright, something we possess because we belong to the family. How did you and I get into the family of God? How do you get to belong to your earthly family? You were born into it. In the same way we are born into God's family through our adoption in Holy Baptism — the water of life that cleansed us from all sin and gave our new inheritance as members of the Family of Christ. St. Paul describes that inheritance we now have in his letter to the Colossians where he prays that the believers will "live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" and "giving thanks to the father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light." St. Peter tells his readers that God has "given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you..."

What a rich inheritance we have waiting for us! And on that last day, the day of Judgment, when we hear our Lord saying to us "Come, blessed of my father, take your inheritance", we know that it will not be the result of our works, but the undeserved gift that is ours by God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus.

Now, of course, believers will do good works. A healthy tree bears good fruit. A man walking on a beach will leave clearly defined footprints behind him. Where does that fruit fall? Where are the footprints of our Christian life to be found?

Out there in the world is where we leave our footprints of love and kindness — in our homes and schools, in our workplace and community — wherever we have the opportunity to aide and comfort, strengthen and uphold, feed and nurture, clothe and visit. Mother or father faithfully discharging their duty toward their children, children and youth honoring and obeying their parents, Christian students working together with their teachers in the task of learning, Christian employees faithfully serving their employers and employers tending to the needs of their workers, a Christian community preparing hampers for the poor, serving those with special needs, reaching out to the strangers among us with a friendly welcome, visiting the sick and grieving with those who grieve — foot prints everywhere, where the Christian life lived out faithfully in response to the Gospel of Christ.

When I was a little boy I used to go for long walks with my dad. For a while I would walk beside him, but soon I grew tired and began to lag behind. When I saw his footprints on the soft soil of our farm, I started to walk in the prints he left behind. It wasn't easy. His strides were long and mine were short. In order to keep in his footprints I would have to jump from one to the other and usually I would come down short of his print. I remember thinking that someday I would grow up and then I would be able to match those footprints he left behind.

Jesus has called us to follow him — to follow in his steps. As sinners we know very well how difficult it is for us to do that. He was merciful and kind. We are short-tempered and irritable. He fed the hungry and gave living water to those who were thirsty. We are self-centered and suspicious

of others. And yet our Savior continues to forgive our sins and day by day the Holy Spirit is growing us into the measure of Christ. One day we will be able to match our Lord's own steps but, to tell the truth, we probably won't even be aware of it when it happens. For on that day we will ask him: "When did we do that, Lord?" "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did

we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" And he will tell us that we've been doing it all along — as we lived out our calling as his own dear children, empowered by His Word and Sacrament. His Calling ... Our Praise Giving God Glory every day. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Closing Devotion – Rev. Jan Pastucha

Text: Joshua 24:15

But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.

I love NASCAR racing. If Pres. Kieschnick is still here I want to let him know that if he has any connections and can score me some tickets to Daytona, or to a race in Charlotte, or Bristol...it would be much appreciated.

A year and a half ago I gave a devotion to some church leaders at an LCC planning conference. They too learned of my passion for NASCAR and I proudly displayed my loyalties by wearing a jacket of my favorite NASACAR driver. Well...that passion has rubbed off onto the rest of my family and to prove it I have brought with me today not only my jacket, but my 12 year old daughters, my 10 year old daughters and yes, even my wife's jackets.

My family has been assimilated, taken in, absorbed and integrated into my passion most likely because they see how much I enjoy the sport and they know it makes me happy, so they support me this way. We have favorite drivers, jackets, hats. We have each picked a few drivers to watch and have placed bets by buying the winner a slurpee when the Daytona 500 hits in February.

Now you may say NASCAR racing is not a sport...and you are right...in our house we joke and **say it is a way of life**. Again, you may say what is so exciting about watching cars turn left for 3 hours. Well you try that for 3-4 hours in bumper to bumper traffic with 42 other cars at speeds ranging from 140km to 320km on any given track.

My favorite driver is Jimmie Johnson. He is a two time championship winner. NASCAR is a multi-million dollar sport, and Sponsors pay big bucks to have a billboard painted on a car traveling 140-320 km an hour for 3-4 hours (why they don't pay me these millions for walking around wearing their sponsorship...I don't know...Instead they make me pay! Go figure??) Jimmie Johnson's sponsor is LOWE'S

LOWE'S also has its name on one of the speedways in Charlotte NC. In the last 8 races there Jimmie Johnson has won 5 and in the other 3 he placed 2nd, 3rd and 2nd – so rightly so they call it "Jimmie's House." He says this is "My House!"

So What is Your House?

Is it the College? Is it the Seminary? Is it the District? Is it the Synod? Is it the Mission field? Is it the office, the shop, the factory, your semi truck, your home where you raise your kids?

We'd really like to think so – but all of this has been given to God's people as His gift to

the church – These are places God places us to serve Him. In God’s house (the church) He equips, strengthens and leads us to places of where we work, play, study, and rest. In God’s house His Word strengthens you and I so that we would know His love and hear of His grace and mercy, to live lives in service to him now.

So when you leave here today – you will go back to your house – and what will you and your household do? You will say like Joshua *As for me and my household we will service the Lord.*

You know what you have to do; you may even think you know how. Anyway you look at it – you will serve the Lord! By joyfully going to your callings as God’s dearly loved children, knowing He has placed you where you need to be so that in your vocations and callings glory to Him is given. It may be preparing students for ministry, by proclaiming to and educating students, by strengthening and supporting pastors, it may be as God’s servant leading this church body and churches; it may be in pushing buttons, sitting behind a desk, working on construction. Wherever God has placed you know He uses you. As you work faithfully at your vocations you also serve the Lord who is good, who by His Son died for the church, bringing us into the kingdom. We see him in everything as St. Paul says *Whether you eat or drink, whatever you do, do all to the glory of God 1Cor. 10:31.*

God is working in and through us whether we are working with a word processor, a farm combine, a plasma cutter or a wrench. Why? Because we are his workmanship. *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God not because of works lest any man should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them Eph. 2:8-10.*

The Master Workman has produced a new creation; His beautiful workmanship fashioned through Jesus Christ is *you!* You are not a mass produced product, but a singular creation brought to life by the blood of Jesus Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit. You are not a nameless and bland object, but a new person named by God and carrying His name from Holy Baptism onward.

Our vocation is a reflection of who and whose we are though Jesus Christ. Our daily work is God’s work in us *for we are His workmanship*, created for good works. Our daily works is part of our walk with God. It is our prayer, praise and giving thanks to God for now we always see God as the end result. With the gifts, talents knowledge and abilities God has given us it is our privilege to offer praise to give Him glory in all that we do.

Celebrate that, revel in it, cheer in it, rejoice in it – it is good to serve the Lord. Amen.