

Preaching Helps

**Ordinary Time: The Sundays after Pentecost
(July, August, and September 2026)**

Can We Dare to Say “I’m a Christian” in the United States?

My dad’s name was Harold. When I was a little kid, I thought “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” was about him! He loved to tell corny jokes and silly stories. Some of his stories were true and others, we weren’t quite sure. One of his favorites: The Sunday school teacher asked the class, “What is your favorite Bible verse?” One hand shot up: “Judas went out and hanged himself.” Another kid said, “Go, thou, and do likewise.” Well, both of those verses are in the Bible, but they’re not found together. Both are ripped out of context. You probably know it’s possible to use or misuse the Bible to support almost anything, usually by ripping verses out of context. So, is there anything we can count on in the Bible?

Religious leaders asked Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?” That is, of the 613 laws on our books, which is greatest? Jesus didn’t hesitate: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus was a faithful Jew, shaped by the Torah and the prophets. The first part of Jesus’ answer was part of Jewish worship: “*Shema* (Hear) O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6: 4-5).

With all your *might*: That’s what Deuteronomy says, “... with all your **might**.” Yet, Jesus said, “...with all your **mind**.” Did Jesus mistake “might” for “mind”? That explanation only works if we believe Jesus was speaking English! Years ago, I was working with this text, and I wondered about “might” and “mind.” Whenever I ran into puzzles like that, I called my colleague Wyn Wright who taught biblical languages at Union. What does the Hebrew say in Deuteronomy? I asked. “That word for ‘might,’ well, it means *much* or we might say *muchness*. Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your *muchness* or power or strength.” But in Matthew Jesus says heart, soul, and mind? Wyn turned to her Greek lexicon: “It’s definitely *mind*,” she said, “meaning thought, intention, purpose, understanding, intelligence.” You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your thought, all your understanding, your intelligence.”

William Sloan Coffin, former minister of Riverside Church, put it this way:

There is nothing anti-intellectual in the leap of faith...Faith is no substitute for thinking. On the contrary, it is what makes good thinking possible... faith ends up giving us that much more to think about... (Bill Coffin, *Credo*, 8)

So, Jesus invites us to love God with our minds! Keep thinking! Ask questions. Faith gives us much more to think about! I bought a bumper sticker this summer and put it on my car: A CLOSED MIND IS A WONDERFUL THING TO LOSE.

But Jesus wasn’t finished. After stating that the greatest commandment is to love God with heart, soul, and mind, Jesus says “And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” **A second is like it.** Not, “Number two is...” but “A second is like it.” Close to, almost the same as. Loving your neighbor is close to loving God. Loving God is like loving your neighbor. The two cannot be torn apart. One of the early teachers of the church pictured the connection as a large wheel: All of us are on the outer rim of the wheel. God is the hub at the center of the wheel. Our neighbors are the spokes going in toward the center. Can you see it? There’s no way to get closer to God without getting closer to our neighbors. As we get closer to our neighbors, we move closer to God.

What does it mean to love your neighbor? Surely it means don’t hate your neighbor. Don’t make fun of your neighbor. Don’t tell lies about your neighbor—like the terrible lies told about Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio.

But “love” can be a squishy word: “I love God. I love ice cream.” **The Bible makes “love” less squishy.** We hear it in that passage from Leviticus where God says “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev 19:18b) Then God gets specific: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you, you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Lev 19:34). Love of neighbor doesn’t wait until the New Testament! **Isaiah 58** is a good summary of several Old Testament prophets: “What is the fast that I choose?” God asks, then answers: “to let the oppressed go free; to share your bread with the hungry; to bring the homeless poor into your house; to clothe the naked.” **Not squishy.** Jesus echoed those words in **Matthew 25**: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.” **Not squishy.** That’s what love for our neighbor looks like.

But that verse from Matthew is too long to put on a coffee mug or bumper sticker. That passage is seldom quoted by White Christian nationalists. This issue of *Currents* focuses on White Christian nationalism: what is it and why should it matter to us? If it is Christian, then we would expect this movement to focus on loving God and loving our neighbors.

That's not my idea; this is Jesus' clear answer about what is most important. Jesus said it plainly: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

In recent years, Christianity has taken on a particular meaning in our country. *Christians founded the United States as a Christian nation, and it must remain a Christian nation. The separation of church and state is wrong. LGBTQ people, especially trans people, are against God's created order. Too many immigrants pouring over our border are diluting our way of life and our religion. Marriage is between one man and one woman. Abortion is always wrong. Public schools indoctrinate our children through dangerous library books. In universities, such as the University of Minnesota, most professors are anti-Christian.*

If this description of Christianity isn't what we believe, we may be reluctant to say, "I'm a Christian." It may be easier to say, "I'm a Lutheran" or "I'm Episcopalian." But what has happened to the great commandment? Where do we hear the call to love God with heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves? The greatest threat to Christianity is not Islam or atheism or people who say they're not religious. The far greater threat to Christianity is White Christian nationalism because it turns us away from the heart of the Gospel, from Jesus' clear call to love God with heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We need to help each other because being a Christian isn't easy. My friend Janet Walton who taught worship at Union Theological Seminary said that worship is a rehearsal. We practice "in here" how we're called to live "out there." We practice welcoming strangers. We practice forgiving one another. We practice saying, "I'm a Christian." We can't let the gospel die under the weight of White Christian nationalism. Let's help one another as we follow Jesus into the suffering and hatred brewing all around us in this fragile, beautiful world—and may we bear the love of God as best we can as if the world depends upon it, because it does.

Once again, I am grateful to the pastors who have written commentaries on the lectionary texts for the coming Sundays: **Erik Christensen**, newly elected bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the ELCA, is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Evanston. He came to Trinity from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago where he was Pastor to the Community and Director of Strategic Initiatives. Prior to that, he was pastor with St. Luke's Lutheran Church of Logan Square in Chicago. Erik is a frequent contributor to "Sundays and Seasons" and has written for *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* (2012) and *In These or Similar Words: Crafting Language for Worship* (2015). He lives in Chicago with his husband, Kerry, and their dog, Matilda. Congratulations, Erik, and many blessings to you as you embark on this new journey of faith. **Melanie Heuiser Hill** lives, writes, and occasionally preaches in the Minneapolis area. In addition to being an ELCA pastor, she is an author of children's

books: the novel *Giant Pumpkin Suite* and the picture book *Around the Table That Grandad Built*, both published by Candlewick Press. You can see more of what she's up to on her website: MelanieHeuiserHill.com. **Barbara Lundblad** is editor of "Preaching Helps." She loves to think, write, and preach about biblical texts whenever possible. She served as a parish pastor and campus pastor in New York City, then taught preaching at Union Theological Seminary in NYC. In 2014 she retired to Minneapolis with her wife, Nicole Johnson. They are delighted that their son, his wife, and 6½ year old grandson moved near them five years ago. **Emily Meyer** creates contemplative retreats, liturgical arts, sermons, costumes, choreography, and pageants. Along with contributing to "Green Blades Rising," "Sundays and Seasons," and "Preaching Helps," Emily serves on the Minneapolis Area Synod EcoFaith Team, chaired the 2026 EcoFaith Summit of the Upper Midwest Organizing Team, curates resources for the ELCA's Indian Boarding School Truth-Sharing and Truth Telling Initiative, and is called as a resource and innovations consultant as executive director of The Ministry Lab. Contact Executive Director Rev. Emily Meyer at ministrylab@uccmn.org or 651-279-1677 to make an appointment, consult, or share ideas.

John Rollefson is a retired ELCA pastor living on California's Central Coast. He served urban and campus congregations in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor and Los Angeles. **Jeff Sartain** has served as co-pastor at Edina Community Lutheran Church in Minnesota since 2018. He attended Luther Seminary and earned his DMin from United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. Jeff was ordained and served congregations in the United Church of Christ prior to being rostered with the ELCA. He and his husband live in St. Paul, Minnesota, and enjoy getaways to their cabin in northern Wisconsin. **Matt Schlake-Kruse** is an interim pastor in the ELCA's Central States Synod, serving in Ferguson, Missouri. He is primarily a train building partner with his four-year-old son and loves trying new cuisines with his spouse. Away from the church, he is a speed crossword solver.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost July 5, 2026

Zechariah 9:9–12

Psalms 145:8–14

Romans 7:15–25a

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

Engaging the Texts

Although the appointed gospel begins at Matthew 11:16, the earlier part of the chapter matters. Jesus has finished teaching the disciples and has moved on to teach and proclaim his message in their cities. He has also spoken to the crowds about John the Baptist: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?... Someone dressed in soft robes?” (Matt 11: 7b-8a). No. John is not what they expected. He is not housed in comfort or dressed in signs of conventional power. He is a prophet, more than a prophet, and he is in prison.

That context sharpens the appointed reading. Jesus challenges the crowd’s inability to receive either John or himself. John comes fasting, and they say he has a demon. Jesus comes eating and drinking, and they call him a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. The problem is not that God has failed to speak clearly enough. The problem is that people keep refusing the forms in which God’s message arrives.

The lectionary also leaves out the woes to Chorazin and Bethsaida. It is important to note, however, that Jesus’ invitation to the weary comes in the shadow of real judgment. The cities have seen and heard, and still they have not turned. The tenderness of “Come to me” should not be severed from the hard truth that precedes it, as it so often is. Hearing Jesus’ consolation in the context of his searing judgment changes the tone, complicates it, and deepens its meaning. It guards against too-easy consolation and offers an opportunity for real gospel proclamation!

The other readings deepen this tension. Zechariah imagines a king who comes humbly, without the expected weapons and spectacle of empire. Psalm 145 praises the God who upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. Romans 7 gives voice to the divided self that does not do the good it wants to do. Together, the readings ask what divine power looks like when it comes not to crush the weary, but to lift them.

Pastoral Reflections

We are never prepared for an encounter with God. That is both terrifying and hopeful. It is terrifying because we know how often we miss the point. We interpret the signs

incorrectly. We follow the wrong leaders. We confuse power with truth, cruelty with strength, and our own expectations with the will of God.

That confusion is not merely ancient. Many preachers will step into pulpits in a season when public life has been shaped by leaders who perform dominance as though it were divinity. We have watched tenderness mocked as weakness, mercy dismissed as sentimentality, empathy labeled “toxic” and cruelty marketed as courage. We have seen how people are drawn toward figures who promise rescue while abandoning gentleness, humility, and truth. In such a moment, Jesus’ words are a confrontation.

“I am gentle and humble in heart” may be one of the most politically disruptive things Jesus says. It exposes the false gods of domination. Jesus does not come with the noxious swagger of someone who needs to be worshiped. He does not ask the weary to carry one more burden to prove their loyalty. He offers rest.

That is hopeful because salvation does not finally depend on our perfection. God’s purposes are not ultimately thwarted by our failure to understand them. Jesus tells the truth about human failings, but his final word to the weary is not condemnation. It is rest.

How do we reconcile Jesus’ judgment with his tender mercy? This movement from warning to rest is not the pattern of an abusive relationship, where harshness suddenly turns to tenderness. Nor is it the old parental line, “This hurts me more than it hurts you.” Rather, Jesus is telling the truth about human reality. We do get it wrong. We do cause pain. We resist the messengers God sends. We mistake our own cleverness for wisdom.

And yet we are not left alone with the consequences of our ignorance.

Living in God’s grace means we can feel the weight of our errors in the presence of a loving God. We can weep with both regret and tender love. We can be set right not by consequences alone, but by the easy yoke of Jesus, the gentle and humble one whose mercy holds even what is exposed in judgment.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” These words carry more than words alone can say. Sung, they seem to move from head to heart to soul. They become balm, breath, ache, and consolation. Preachers might offer themselves the consolation of listening to or singing the words before they write. Bernice Johnson Reagon’s arrangement, sung by the National Lutheran Choir, is available on YouTube. Or, for another lilting setting, find the old gospel hymn by Charles Price Jones, the African American preacher and hymn writer born in 1865.

Let those who have carried the weight of humanity’s failings, and also discovered the gift of grace, carry your spirit

before you write a word to the people in your care. The God who tells the truth about us is also the God who gives rest.

Jeff Sartain

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 12, 2026

Isaiah 55:10–13

Psalm 65: [1–8] 9–13

Romans 8:1–11

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Engaging the Texts

The parable of the sower can easily lead preachers and hearers into the very human habit of sorting and condemning: good soil and bad soil, receptive people and resistant people, fruitful lives and failed ones. It is a natural reading, but also a dangerous one. If we are not careful, the parable becomes a spiritual classification system rather than a proclamation of the gospel. It is easy to read the text that way, and yet the sower's scattering is strikingly extravagant. The seed is not reserved only for the most promising ground.

Romans 8 stands guard when the parable tempts us toward that too-simple reading. Paul announces, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Grace interrupts our categories. The Spirit does not arrive to help us identify which neighbors belong on the rocky ground, among the thorns, or on the path. The Spirit arrives to set captives free, to give life to mortal bodies, and to keep the church from mistaking judgment for gospel.

Psalm 65 offers the same counter-cultural reminder. There are not places God loves and places God does not love; people God waters and people God leaves dry. The psalm imagines creation as a whole world receiving God's abundance: pastures, hills, meadows, and valleys all singing and shouting together. Blessing is not parceled out in anxious little portions. It is showered over the whole earth. Creation does not sing because it has earned rain. It sings because God is faithful.

Isaiah 55 gives another counterweight to narrow readings of the parable. The appointed verses compare God's word to rain and snow that water the earth and accomplish God's purpose. But the larger chapter has already announced an extravagant economy of grace: wine and milk "without money and without price," nations known and unknown drawn into promise, and the reminder that God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

That wider context matters. The neatly categorized world we might read into the parable—blessing for some and not

for others, good soil here and failed soil there—is not allowed to stand unchallenged. God's word is not sent only where success seems likely. It falls, waters, softens, and brings forth life according to the abundance of God's own purpose.

Read together, these texts resist reducing fruitfulness to human achievement. God sends the word. God waters the earth. God gives the Spirit. God scatters the seed. The preacher's task is not to shame the soil, but to announce the generosity of the sower.

Pastoral Reflections

Years ago, in my first parish in New Richland, Minnesota, I imagined that the parsonage garden would be a picture of pastoral charm: neat rows, black soil, abundant produce. Instead, after a well-meaning parishioner rototilled a plot much larger than I expected, the old sod turned itself back toward the light. Soon I could not tell bean sprouts from crabgrass. The rows disappeared. By July, I had mostly given up.

The garden still produced. Not neatly, not impressively, not in a way that would win any small-town coffee-hour admiration. But there were tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, and beans hidden in the mess. Harvesting felt less like managing a garden and more like a scavenger hunt.

The problem was not only horticultural. It was communal. In a small farming town, a garden could carry more meaning than I understood. People asked questions. People offered advice. People noticed. When I finally joked one Sunday that my garden was a mess and I had mostly let the whole thing go to seed, no one laughed. They looked at their shoes. That was when I realized the garden had become a source of shame.

That memory helps me hear the parable of the sower with caution. It is tempting to preach this text as though Jesus were offering a moral taxonomy of human souls: good soil over here, bad soil over there. Try harder. Be less thorny. Develop deeper roots. Stop being so rocky. But many people already come to worship carrying the shame of feeling like unpromising ground. Life has already told them they are too tangled, too shallow, too scorched, too late, too much of a mess.

The good news in these readings is not that we have finally learned to become impressive soil. The good news is that God keeps speaking, raining, watering, sowing, and giving life. Isaiah promises that God's word does not return empty. The psalm imagines God softening the earth with showers. Paul proclaims that the Spirit gives life even to mortal bodies. Jesus tells of a sower who scatters seed with extravagant freedom.

That matters in a culture increasingly skilled at turning people into types: winners and losers, patriots and enemies, real people and suspect people, fruitful people and failed people,

“us” and “them.” In such a world, preachers should be careful not to let the parable become one more holy-looking tool for contempt. The heart of the gospel is not condemnation. The heart of the gospel is the life-giving Spirit of Jesus.

Not every fruitful field looks orderly. Not every faithful life can be arranged into neat rows. Sometimes grace grows where shame told us only weeds could live. Sometimes the harvest is hidden in the tangled places. The preacher’s task is not to shame the soil, but to announce the generosity of the sower and invite people to look again for the fruit God is already bringing forth.

Jeff Sartain

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost July 19, 2026

Isaiah 44:6–8

Psalms 86:11–17

Romans 8:12–25

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

Engaging the Texts

This week and next, we continue through the parables in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. Last week we had the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:1–9) and its interpretation (Matt 13:18–23). This week, we stick with seeds and sowing in the Parable of the Weeds and its interpretation.

What do we know about the parables in the Gospel of Matthew? Well, there are many and some are quite challenging. We know that the writer of Matthew had the work of Mark’s gospel and the hypothetical Q source (common material found in Matthew and Luke, but not in the Gospel of Mark). We know that the audience for Matthew’s gospel was largely Jewish. (Which may explain why Matthew uses the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” instead of “Kingdom/Dominion of God.”) We know that many Kingdom of Heaven parables on first reading seem to emphasize The Harvest/The End of Human History. And we know the writer of Matthew likes to use the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” to indicate the tribulation of those end times. (Five parables in Matthew end with weeping and gnashing of teeth!)

God’s dominion is often described in parables. The parables help to *describe* God’s dominion, not define it. Any definition would surely limit the kingdom of heaven—and parables are about expanding our theology, not limiting it. Could it be that God’s dominion is something best *wondered* about, not worried about? The invitation inherent in parables is to enter into the story and wrestle a bit, allowing ourselves to be challenged by these simple stories that are anything but simple. Parables are meant to crack things open, enlarge our

theology, and challenge our assumptions. They are stories that can grow with our faith.

There is some debate about the Parable of the Weeds origins. Was this a story Jesus told? Did he also provide the interpretation? Or was this story composed later by the writer of Matthew and the early Christian community? Could this parable have been handed down in the early Christian community and included in the Gospel of Matthew by the writer—and then the early Christian community decided it had better include an interpretation? And if this parable came about through the early Christian community, what were they trying to work out—what is this story really about? It is good to enter a parable with wonder, to look for additional and surprising meanings, to challenge ourselves and each other with these stories.

Pastoral Reflections

It is too easy to read The Parable of the Weeds and simply think about who is the wheat and who is the weeds. We are far too quick to simplify the story into an “us and them” comparison. (And, of course, we generally see ourselves as being the good wheat.) How can we let this parable complicate our usual understanding of it and speak to us anew?

Perhaps the other lectionary readings assigned this Sunday can help our experience with this parable. The readings from Psalm 86, Romans 8, and Isaiah 44, all speak of God’s character and encourage us to think about what *our* role might be in God’s Dominion, *given God’s character*.

In Psalm 86 we sing that our God is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. In Romans we join a celebration of Christian existence rooted in God’s past actions (what better way to understand who God is?). God’s past actions assure us that God is about deliverance and love, grace and mercy, and life, not death. As believers, we hope for the goodness we want to see even when mired in weeds, knowing God is ever faithful, steadfast, and loving.

In Isaiah, we are reminded directly that God is God and we are God’s witnesses. We are most emphatically *not* God. And because the whole history of God—before, during, and after Jesus—shows us who God is (see above!). We are called to *witness* to God’s steadfast love and mercy, not appoint ourselves judge over others. In current vernacular we might say this parable suggests we “stay in our own lane” and speak of what we know is true about God instead of judging others.

Our role as witnesses is what the Parable of the Weeds suggests, as well. This parable takes seriously that good and evil exist together. We know from our own lives, from the news of the day, and from scripture that this is the case. We are not, of course, called to ignore violence, injustice, and wrongdoing—but the parable challenges us to work and grow in complicated situations without appointing ourselves as

weeders. Our identification of weeds is sometimes off. Our righteous weeding too often does more harm than good.

Here's the grace: it is not our job to eradicate evil. It is our job to live faithfully, confident that God is always at work and the good that exists alongside evil *will* triumph. Evil is temporary, God's goodness endures.

This parable could be a warning for "insiders" (the wheat.) Judgment is God's business, not ours. Our business is to witness. To proclaim God's goodness in all circumstances—especially when things are complicated. To shout out to others that goodness triumphs over evil—sometimes in the "now" and sometimes in the "not yet." Such is the Kingdom of Heaven. We live in it *and* we hope for it.

Melanie Heuiser Hill

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost July 26, 2026

1 Kings 3:5–12

Psalms 119:129–136

Romans 8:26–39

Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

Engaging the Texts

In this Sunday's gospel we have a slew of parables split up by the interpretation of last week's Parable of the Weeds. This week's parables are about the Kingdom of Heaven, as well, but they're quite different from the preceding seed-sowing parables. First, they are very short. Second, interpretations aren't offered. Third, this week's parables are all similes.

We know that the writer of Matthew used Mark's gospel and the hypothetical Q source (common material found in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark) in writing his gospel. The first two parables in today's reading can also be found in Luke. The last three are particular to Matthew's gospel.

Today's reading of the parables feels like rapid fire: The Kingdom of Heaven is like...is like...is like.... These parables are all similes—comparisons of one thing to another using the words "like" or "as."

The text shows the Kingdom of Heaven as being like so many different things—a mustard seed, yeast, treasure hidden and found, a merchant searching for a pearl, a dragnet bringing in a huge catch of fish. Each of the stories is quite short, but the way they are presented one after the other suggests maybe they might be interpreted better when taken together.

Jesus tended to use everyday things that anyone would be able to understand in order to shed light on divine characteristics and concepts that are difficult to fully grasp—such as grace, mercy, and steadfast love. It would seem that the Kingdom of Heaven is something so unknowable and unexplainable that it has to be tackled with *several* similes

all in a row. It's like...but also like...and curiously, it's even like....

The Kingdom/Dominion of God/Heaven has its own theology developed over the centuries. It is a "now and not yet" description of God's always present and always evolving reign. Scripture paints a picture of God's presence and action in the past. We see glimmers and snapshots of God's goodness and intent in life now. *And* we trust that God is working in, with, and despite us for ultimate goodness in the future. The Kingdom of Heaven—God's reign—has come, is among us today, *and* has yet to reach its fulfillment. Somehow all at once!

A more concrete explanation eludes us. Similes will have to do—and they, in fact, serve us well as nuanced descriptions of what cannot be defined. They prod our theological imaginations. They challenge surface theology that is not life-giving. Jesus told parables to invite us in—into the story, into the questions and wonder of it all, and into the Kingdom of Heaven itself.

Pastoral Reflections

These pithy parables have several things in common.

- 1) They all have something to say about some aspect of the Kingdom of Heaven.
- 2) They are all similes.
- 3) They are all very short in length yet describe something too big for us to grasp.
- 4) They each have a theme of exceptional extravagance running through them.

The smallest of seeds grows to become the greatest of shrubs in two verses. Tiny yeast cells leaven huge amounts of flour when the bread baker mixes it in (or *hides it* in the flour, as the Greek suggests.) We have two parables about small humble things becoming large and extravagant. What does that tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven? That it starts small, and grows fast? Can we dig deeper? Do the actions of the birds of the air tell us something about The Kingdom? Does the overabundance of bread mean anything to followers of Jesus?

It is interesting to know that yeast was used as a symbol of corruption at the time of this parable. Is that why the woman was hiding the yeast—and if so, who is she hiding it from? There's something a little unexpected and maybe even scandalous here. Is the growth of God's Dominion something that's hidden from some (the public, the religious authorities?), but not others (the disciples? Or vice versa?) Does it mean more if we understand the scale of the bread dough being mixed? Three measures of flour is roughly equivalent to 10 gallons of flour. One gallon of flour weighs five pounds. That's ten five-pound bags of flour. (Not a home

baker!) But is that huge amount big enough if this is God's reign being described?

It's easy to use more words to ask questions about a parable than the parable itself uses. Such a simple but almost sneaky construct, these simile parables are! It's good for those who preach to encourage imagination and stir the pot so good questions swirl. We do well to let the stories work on us instead of trying to explain all the life and truth and wonder out of them.

But wait, there's more! The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure...also a beautiful pearl.... Or are we being told how the treasure and pearl are valued so much that a person will give up everything for the one thing? What does that tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven?

How is the Kingdom of Heaven like a net thrown into the sea that brings back fish of every kind? A lovely image of the diverse nature of God's people, isn't it? Or is the Kingdom like the sorting of fish that takes place by the fishermen... but weren't we warned about judging last week? Judgment is God's deal, not ours.

There aren't definitive answers to these questions—that's not what parables are about. Parables are meant to enlarge our theological imaginations, and we are encouraged to mull them over. These are stories that challenge our often too narrow assumptions. They invite us to do theological work together. How can we use and enjoy the parables as they were intended?

This could be an opportunity for a different sort of sermon—one that has some congregational participation, perhaps. What other similes might work for the Kingdom of Heaven? What is the "yes" to each of these similes and the "no"? Because the Kingdom of Heaven is only *like* this array of similes given. What does each parable tell us individually? What more do we learn when we consider them together?

Melanie Heuwer Hill

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost August 2, 2026

Isaiah 55:1–5

Psalms 145:8–9, 14–21

Romans 9:1–5

Matthew 14:13–21

Engaging the Gospel for These Times

This story is found in some form in all four gospels. If you've worshipped often or if you went to Sunday school you probably heard this story many times. But there are contrasts here we might have missed in Sunday school:

Jesus withdrew to
be alone

But a great crowd found
him

A deserted place

"Send them away"

Only five loaves and
two fish

Can you see and hear these oppositions?

Alone

Deserted

Send them away

Only a little

Became an abundant place

"You give them something
to eat"

More than 5000 ate,
with 12 baskets left over

Crowd

Filled

Feed them

Much left over

But there is one more opposition. Here's how the story began: "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there..." What did Jesus hear? We must look at what came before this story. **This is the story of a very different banquet.** Herod, the Roman-appointed tetrarch of Galilee, was giving himself a birthday dinner. This was not a deserted place, but Herod's lavish palace. There was no crowd, but a guest list of important officials. His wife, Herodias, was also there though she shouldn't have been because Herod had stolen her from his brother. John the Baptist had condemned this unlawful liaison which is why John was now sitting in prison. At the banquet, Herodias' daughter danced for the invited guests. She danced so well that Herod promised her anything she requested. "Anything," he said, "anything at all." So, she asked her mother and her mother said, "Ask him for the head of John the Baptist on a platter." Herod was grieved at her request—grieved because he feared the crowd who revered John as a prophet, grieved because his guests had heard the oath he had made. How could he disappoint his guests? Perhaps some Roman authorities were among them. Surely they would think him weak, vacillating, unfit to govern. He gave the command, and soon the head of John the Baptist was brought on a platter and given to the dancer. It was a very different banquet. Not 12 baskets of food left over, but a horrifying leftover: John the Baptist's head served on a platter.

Matthew wants these stories to bump against each other. He wants us to see the stark contrasts between two very different banquets. Herod's banquet is shaped by the rubrics of empire. Though Herod was a Jew, Rome had replaced the Torah for him, and he would not disappoint the Emperor. On Herod's small stage, the empire defined priorities and shaped behavior. To protect imperial arrangements, feeding hungry people was not on the agenda. "Send them away." Herod would have agreed with the disciples.

Is it possible to maintain an empire and feed people who are hungry? From the glory days of Rome down to our own time, the leftovers of empire have almost always been destruction and death. Think of Gaza, now a pile of rubble.

Think of the money spent on the U.S. war against Iran: \$1 billion a day, probably much more. And millions of men, women, and children are still hungry. Into such a world, Jesus comes. Repeatedly, Jesus comes with an alternative vision. Not Caesar's kingdom, but God's kingdom. "The kingdom of heaven has come near you," Jesus said. Over and over, he taught about it, told parables about it, and lived it wherever he went. He taught us to pray about it: "Thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven."

Not long after Herod's banquet, Jesus brought his kingdom-vision to thousands who interrupted his solitary time of prayer. Despite his own need, he had compassion for them, cured the sick, and spent the day teaching about the kingdom of heaven. As the hour grew late, the disciples said, "This is a deserted place...send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Everything rational shouts, "Good idea! Send them away." But Jesus said, "They need not go away; **you give them something to eat.**" Preposterous! They could see the crowd was large even if they didn't count the women and children.

"You give them something to eat," said Jesus. "But, Jesus, we can't." You must understand. Hunger is a very complex global problem. If we donate money to poor countries, corrupt governments often divert donations for their personal use. That's why we had to get rid of USAid. The needs are too immense—"I don't know where to start. I don't have time or wisdom to figure out what to do. Even if I did, I'm only one person. **I have only five loaves and two fish.**"

Jesus knows we are perplexed, but our excuses are no better than those of his disciples! Jesus knew long ago what economists and hunger advocates are telling us now: we have everything we need to end world hunger. It would cost \$13 billion per year. That's not even 3% of our defense budget. We'll spend far more than \$13 billion in the war against Iran. You and I are not working alone when we make a commitment to end world hunger. Fifty-two years ago, Art Simon founded a Christian citizens' lobbying group called BREAD FOR THE WORLD. Over the years thousands of people have become educated about hunger, have written letters, met with congressional leaders, and influenced U.S. food policies at home and abroad. While our churches have donated food and money to local food pantries, Art Simon knew that one bill passed by congress can allocate billions with the stroke of the president's pen. Years ago, he made his case for political advocacy—even if we work at the local food pantry.

Each of us helps to decide how our nation should use its power and wealth in a hungry world. If we choose not to get involved, we are helping to make the kind of decisions that lock people into hunger. Put another way, saying nothing to political leaders is saying something to them. We usually get the kind of leadership we ask for, and if we ask for none on hunger, that is what we can expect. (Art Simon)

"Each of us helps to decide how our nation should use its power and wealth in a hungry world." **Each of us.** You may already be doing a great deal to end hunger. You may feel completely guilty and demoralized by everything I've said. What Jesus wants us to know is we can do something. Indeed, we must do something, even in the heart of the empire. Encourage people in your congregation to do something after they leave worship today:

- Read this story from Matthew's gospel every day this week and find a way to respond to Jesus' calling, "You give them something to eat."
- Go online to bread.org. Learn what you can do at the click of a mouse!
- Do one thing this week to help feed someone who is hungry, someone near at hand or far away.
- Pray for our country and our leaders. Pray that we can discern the difference between Empire and Global Community.
- Find a partner to help you, someone sitting next to you now or someone from work, someone who can keep you going when you feel like giving up.

"But we have only five loaves and two fish." That's what the disciples said to Jesus. What they meant was "We have just enough to feed ourselves." Jesus called them beyond themselves. He called them to believe that the kingdom of heaven had come near.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost August 9, 2026

1 Kings 19:9–18

Psalm 85:8–13

Romans 10:5–15

Matthew 14:22–33

Music suggestions:

Sound of Silence (cover) – Disturbed, *Immortalized*, 2015

Sound of Silence (original) – Simon & Garfunkel, *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.*, 1964

Sit Down You're Rockin' the Boat – Guys & Dolls; music and lyrics by Frank Loesser; book by Jo Swerling; based on characters created by Damon Runyon.

Engaging the Texts

Jesus has been empowering people in the miracle of sharing food; he's been providing healing clinics; he's offered and received hospitality for/from the least, the lost, and the lonely¹. (See last week's Matt 14:13–21.)

In the face of empire's created scarcity, Jesus lives a life of abundance.² Generally, and in growing numbers, people are thrilled. Jesus is gaining followers by the day. Jesus' approval rating is skyrocketing. So much so, that word has reached Herod. Herod doesn't care for the Word. Empire never likes those who suggest that things could be different, particularly when "different" includes providing food, health care, rest, and belonging (see Rom 10) to any and all.

Herod's dislike of the Word is almost certainly compounded by his own guilt and shame: pursuant to a sketchy episode of entertainment that involved his brother's wife's/his wife's daughter, he killed Jesus' cousin. Between his marriage, enticing young girls to dance to entertain business and political leaders, and killing a beloved prophetic leader who dared to oppose him, Herod is facing some scandal (See Matt 14:1–12).

Rather than confess or admit any guilt, Herod keeps silent.

It's a bad kind of silence.

Upon hearing of his cousin's death, Jesus "withdraws" to an island retreat. Jesus seeks out sanctuary and a healing kind of silence. Yet, his mission continues. His grief does not erase

the needs of others. There is always more brokenness to mend.

Returning from the respite of silent retreat, Jesus demonstrates the miracle of mutual aid³: sharing food among his crowd of followers—an experience replicated across the globe in communities of resistance lived out in mutual care.⁴ Silenced women shine here.

"Immediately"—when all are fed—Jesus dismisses the crowd to return to the solace of the mountains: again, Jesus goes into solitary, healing silence—while his disciples head out into troubled waters (Matt 14:24).

This time, Jesus returns to walk on water—the iconic "test" of the Messiah—and invites Peter to do likewise.

Peter steps out in faith, succeeds for a time, gets distracted by the "strong wind," and begins to sink. But he doesn't sink. Jesus intervenes. "Immediately."

When they're all back in the boat, the distracting wind ceases and it's obvious that the Divine is in their midst. So, they journey on to another shore to share the Good News of healing and mutuality and belonging with a new people in a new place. And Jesus' approval rating continues to rise.

Four key elements are threaded throughout our Old Testament and Gospel readings:

- Swirling amid the tempestuous waters and roaring winds of today's readings is a consideration of "silence." Herod is silent: refusing to confess, repent, or acknowledge his guilt. His sycophants are silent in the face of trafficking and murder—like all who capitulate, collude, or comply to appease empire. Elijah and Jesus retreat to the wilderness to (temporarily) rest, grieve, pray, and commune with God and creation in silence. Divine "sheer silence" ushers us from what has been to what is next: inviting us to embrace mystery, to wonder and imagine our "path" (Ps 85:13) into Jesus' way of abundance and belonging. Creation and women are consistently silenced yet are almost always the sources through which male characters find their respite and produce their miracles. Feminist and womanist theologians point out that the miracle of feeding the 5000 is the sharing of food brought to the gathering by the uncounted and unnamed mothers who would never have left home without sufficient food for their children.⁵

3. For a working definition of "mutual aid," please see "What Is Mutual Aid?" Solidarity Economy Association Ltd.; <https://www.mutualaid.coop/what-is-mutual-aid/>; accessed 05.29.26.

4. See also Parker Palmer's example, shared by Dean Lloyd in, "From Scarcity to Abundance," Washington National Cathedral; October 19, 2008; <https://cathedral.org/sermons/dean-lloyd-from-scarcity-to-abundance-2/>; accessed 05.29.26.

5. I deeply regret my inability to cite the article in which I first read this interpretation, but find reference to this interpretation in Christiana de Groot, "Not Counting Women and Children": Reformed Journal, September 01, 2015, <https://reformedjournal.com/2015/09/01/not-counting-women-children/>; accessed 05.29.26. De Groot cites Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women*

1. Rachel Held Evans, *From the Lectionary: 5000 Companions*, Rachel Held Evans Blog, July 31, 2014; <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lectionary-feeding-five-thousand>; accessed 05.29.26.

2. Cherice Bock, *Scarcity vs. Abundance: Moving Beyond Dualism to "Enough"*, Christian Feminism Today, 2015; <https://cewc.com/scarcity-vs-abundance-moving-beyond-dualism-enough/>; accessed 05.29.26.

- We need—and are allowed to find—sanctuary where we can name and process grief. Even and especially when empire is at its strongest and we, individually and collectively, feel most vulnerable; even amid empire's chaos and destruction, intentionally grieving—in retreat, solitude, prayer, silence, in relationship with creation—is a deep need and a divine right.⁶
- Some “retreat” is more self-serving than self-care. Elijah retreats to the desert in fear. Peter leaves the boat to prove his faithfulness. But stepping away from community to save ourselves (Elijah) or prove our individual faith, goodness, or worthiness (Peter) makes us vulnerable. A crumbling empire stirs up turbulent seas and relentless winds of change: everything feels lost, structures shatter, what felt permanent and immutable is shaken to the ground. Living from Divine abundance, sharing healing and belonging, feels nearly impossible. We will sink when we head out alone—no matter how faithful our intent. Both Elijah and Peter discover that the place they need to be is “back in the boat”: with community.
- Similarly, attempts to change our own sense of safety and comfort by removing ourselves or turning a blind eye to reality deny the mission and message with which we have been entrusted. Elijah returns from the wilderness. Peter is hauled from the water. Jesus and the disciples travel to Gennesaret—not to get away from the grief of John's murder, nor to remove themselves from the crowd suffering under empirical oppression, but to continue the work. No matter where we go, what people we encounter, or what we accomplish, the Good News—of mutuality shared in abundance amid resistance—will always need to be shared (Matt 14:34ff).

Emily Meyer

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost August 16, 2026

Isaiah 56:1, 6–8

Psalms 67

Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32

Matthew 15:[10–20] 21–28

Engaging the Gospel for Preaching

Matthew 15 is a mirror for Christ's Body, the church, particularly the white church,⁷ which has—generationally—repeated Jesus' responses: his silent negation, careless dismissal, trope-infused shaming, untrue excuse, and demeaning refusal—as women around the globe have continued the unnamed Canaanite woman's cries for mercy, healing, justice, and belonging.

Too often, predominantly white congregations deny or dismiss these voices, deciding against anti-racism training for various reasons. The Rev. Dr. Yolanda Denson-Byers urges us to reconsider:

Racism is a sin against God and an affront to the diversity of God's creation. Regardless of the color of our skin, as people of faith, we all ought to lament when a grievous injustice occurs in our society... Our sin grieves the very heart of God, and it ought to grieve us too.⁸

In this encounter, Jesus embodies colonizer harm, racist sin, and imprisonment to broken systems.⁹ AND: Jesus embodies the vulnerability necessary for his own healing and the transformation of his ministry.

Jesus is in a “do as I say, not as I do” situation: he just

7. I call on and call out the “white church” because, according to the Pew Research Center, mainline denominations in the U.S. rank as follows with regard to white membership:

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America = 95%

United Methodist Church = 87%

The Episcopal Church = 86%

United Church of Christ = 84%

Presbyterian Church (USA) = 83%

As a white, female clergy person working among the UCC, PCUSA, ELCA, EC, and UMC, I invite us as a church to own this reality, do our anti-racism work and supremacy culture awareness trainings, move toward healing within and beyond our congregations, and allow ourselves—as Jesus' risen Body—to be transformed into more loving, kind, and gracious expressions of the beautiful diversity of all God's beloved children.

8. Yolanda Denson-Byers, “*See Me, Believe Me: An Updated Guide to Deepen Allyship with Congregational Leaders of Color,*” (Augsburg Fortress, 2026), 49, 51.

9. Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, “*The Woman Who Changed Jesus;*” *Womanists Wading in the Word*; 08.20.17; <https://www.wilgafney.com/2017/08/20/the-woman-who-changed-jesus/> accessed 05.31.26.

and Children, (Orbis, 1994).

6. See also Mitzi J. Smith, “Commentary on Matthew 14:22–33” “Working Preacher,” August 09, 2020.

declared that, “what proceeds from the heart” and “comes out of the mouth” is “what defiles”—then ignored, silenced, shamed, and dismissed an Indigenous woman¹⁰. Jesus’ full humanity reveals our need to “wrestle with ancestral legacies of bias”.¹¹

[O]ne of the greatest ministries a predominantly white congregation could undertake is to find ways to engage other white folks in anti-racist education and activism...¹²

When Jesus’ “one-woman welcoming committee”¹³ cries out for mercy, Jesus is silent, then dismissive, then combative. Why do we do this to people who seek healing?

‘[When] a person of color shares a painful story with you... take a deep breath, suspend your disbelief, lean into your discomfort, and just listen... [S]it with it a moment. Tell this person, “I see you, I believe you.” ...Then ask, “How can I help?”¹⁴ and trust the answer.’¹⁵

Why is it so difficult to believe people speaking their own truth and sharing their own realities?

This is Jesus’ pivotal lesson in allyship. The Canaanite woman can be our teacher, too. Her cries for mercy and healing urge the white church to hear and follow Jesus into vulnerability, learning, healing,¹⁶ and transformation for “all peoples” (Isa 56:1) and “all nations” (Ps 67).

Racism makes white folks sin-sick... When white folks battle the scourge of racism, they are fighting to create a better and safer world for all God’s children, including their own.¹⁷

The Canaanite woman knows she is right: she is a mother desperate on behalf of her daughter. She will not accept Jesus’ public silence, shame, or dismissal. She refuses to believe

she is worth less than those Jesus has already healed. So she shouts. She pleads. She debases herself calling Jesus Lord/Master—then, as now, titles for slaveholders.¹⁸ She will not accept silence or No.

We laud this woman for her courage and persistence—yet she deflects the same tropes used today to dismiss, dishearten, shame, and demonize Indigenous women, black women, women of color, immigrant women, and queer people. We demonize mothers who shout in the streets seeking healing for their children, our shared planet, and all humanity.

[T]here is an angry Black person trope that people are all too comfortable citing...It is [infuriating]... to be assigned to this category when what I am actually displaying is righteous indignation or frustration about something happening in the church or community.¹⁹

Uncomfortable with her shouting, the disciples encourage Jesus to send her away. Their silence and complicity mirror our own. They are more concerned with their own comfort than they are with the woman’s pain and anxiety about her daughter. They are more concerned with Jesus’ public image and their own reception in this new territory than they are with holding Jesus accountable to his own teaching! Rather than “see and believe” her, they want her loud voice silenced and her persistent presence banished. As disciples and congregational allies we are called to name this type of “othering” when we see it.

The importance of this allyship cannot be overstated... mentors, colleagues, and different people... have stood up for me at times when I was being treated unjustly, and that made me realize “this space” is safe only because God has blessed me with people to come alongside of me.²⁰

A glimpse of blessing.

Ultimately, our Canaanite teacher’s persistence pays off: Jesus models vulnerability and repents. When he finally “sees and believes” the woman, her anxiety and her daughter are healed and Jesus, too, is transformed.

In that moment, something happened to and in Jesus...

She left that place with her daughter...restored to wholeness, and Jesus left that place walking towards a whole new understanding of his ministry...Jesus has made room at the table for everyone, Jew and Gentile

10. For more on the geography, border crossings, and indigenous/colonizer aspects of Matthew 15, see John T. Squires, *It’s all in the geography. Jesus, the Canaanite woman, and border restrictions* (Matt 15; Pentecost 12A); An Informed Faith; 08.15.23; <https://johnsquires.com/2023/08/15/its-all-in-the-geography-jesus-the-canaanite-woman-and-border-restrictions-matt-15-pentecost-12a/>; accessed 06.01.26.

11. Gafney, *The Woman Who Changed Jesus*.

12. Denson-Byers, “See Me, Believe Me,” 2.

13. Mitzi J. Smith, “Commentary on Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28.”

14. See Matthew 20:29ff.

15. Denson-Byers, “See Me, Believe Me,” 18.

16. Amy Julia Becker of the Disability Ministry Network, identifies “a fluidity in the language between the idea of salvation and healing,” and writes, “Sin harms... We need forgiveness for sin. But we also need to be healed from the harm of sin.” *The Healing Work of Salvation*; 12.15.20; <https://amyjuliabecker.com/the-healing-work-of-salvation/>; accessed 05.31.26.

17. Denson-Byers, “See Me, Believe Me,” 74-75.

18. Gafney, *The Woman Who Changed Jesus*.

19. Denson-Byers, “See Me, Believe Me,” 61.

20. Denson-Byers, “See Me, Believe Me,” 26.

alike, because...of this woman.²¹

The Canaanite woman transforms—and expands—Jesus’ ministry.²²

We are left to wonder: when will the white church begin to see and believe women of color? When will we respond to diverse experiences of harm so that we can all be healed? When will we be vulnerable enough to be transformed?

When will we be ready to share salvation and blessing with all people?

Emily Meyer

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost August 23, 2026

Isaiah 51:1–6

Psalms 138

Romans 12:1–8

Matthew 16:13–30

Engaging the Texts

As our tour bus drove into Caesarea Philippi, a gargantuan bluff of russet and coppery stone loomed ahead. Hundreds of niches had been etched high into the rock—homes for what were, in Jesus’ time, statues and altars of deities and figures important to the Gentiles who lived there. The geography of the place gives the power of Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” deeper meaning. Jesus was not insecure about his identity—his place was to reveal the universality and power of God’s mission for an ever-expanding world of believers. This once-familiar story came to life anew.

As summer reaches an end, it might feel easy to coast into preaching, leaning on some powerful, identifiable Bible stories. Yet, cracking through the crust of the familiar pericopes this week means looking beyond the themes of “rock” connecting Matthew and Isaiah; Romans 12 holds preaching potential beyond differing functions of the parts of the body. Fortunately, preachers have a wealth of powerful imagery for how each reading speaks to the gathered community we call the “church.”

If your tradition allows such flexibility, shake things up by reading the lessons out of order. Begin with the Gospel, where Jesus promises the church’s fortitude (with God’s backing) against the depths of death. Next, hear the prophet Isaiah’s proclamation of hope for exiles: a promise to the contemporary church-in-decline, exiled from the cultural prominence we wrongly imagined was its foundation. Conclude the lessons

with Paul’s practical wisdom for Gentile Christ-followers discipling within Roman Jewish communities. This shift offers preachers a chance to connect the meaning of *ecclesia* (used only in Matthew) with the relational poetic pairs of gifts and graces in Romans 12:6–8, a welcome addition to institutional interpretations of church.

Passages outside the assigned portions for the First Lesson and Gospel reading give preachers helpful contextual angles to explore. The RCL omits a third “Listen to me” saying from Isaiah (51:7–8). The trouble in this couplet includes fearing the reproach of others, concluding with the comparable promise—God’s “salvation to all generations.”

In the story immediately preceding Peter’s proclamation of Jesus as Messiah (Matt 16:5–12), Jesus reacts to his disciples’ hard-headedness at a misunderstood metaphor, using that familiar rejoinder, “You of little faith.” The characters’ quick move from folly to foundational testimony underscores how much God is the true source behind the work of Peter’s (and everyone’s) ability to proclaim Jesus’ Messiahship.

Pastoral Reflections

All pastoral ministry in this age is transitional ministry. Some are called to be interim pastors, bridge leaders, or consultants. Everyone leading, serving, and proclaiming the Gospel faces unprecedented situations and circumstances concerning the church’s future. Engaging these challenges requires community conversation. This week’s pericopes urge us to remember that institutional transformation through **communal discernment** is part of the Holy Spirit’s work among the body.

Discerning the will of God (Rom 12:2), as Paul encourages his readers, is no easy task. Especially when the theological concept of discernment is primarily focused on listening for personal calls to professional ministry, serving the institution we call church.

We are also called in shared mission through communal vocation. The plural “y’all” embedded within the epistle’s instruction cries out to be heard and proclaimed, revealing the promise that Jesus frees us from the lie that it’s up to one leader, one congregation, or one donor to save the institution, preserve the local worshipping community, or keep church doors open. As congregations adapt to living in this age, often making difficult decisions about the future, consider how those in your context are bolstered by the scriptural promise that discernment is always a communal activity.

Whether we recall the familiar Sunday school song or the Augsburg Confession (Article VII), the church **is** the people, belonging and discerning God’s will as “members of one another” (Rom 12:5). Peter’s confessional moment can belie the truth that Matthew 16, one of two “*ecclesia*” passages, is a community-centered text. The functions of binding and

21. Gafney, *The Woman Who Changed Jesus*.

22. Gafney, *The Woman Who Changed Jesus*.

loosing are collective at their core, and remain a part of human faith communities today as they discern together which parts of the law are essential and which are adiaphora.

When a community's survival feels at stake, whether due to Roman occupation or twenty-first century culture shifts, losing sight of God's agency is natural. Jesus promises that God is and will be the source of our revelations. Our confessions of faith are not some reasoned argument, nor a creation of our best intentions. "You are the Son of the Living God" orients us toward God and liberates us to reimagine the purpose of church—to be God's means "in flesh and blood" of community-forming and community-healing. Both Peter's confession and Jesus' blessing assert that whatever winds of change and pangs of suffering impact our communities, we gather together to worship a "living" God, a God of unwavering foundations who became flesh and blood for the sake of the body.

Matthew Schlake-Kruse

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 30, 2026

Jeremiah 15:15–21

Psalms 26:1–8

Romans 12:9–21

Matthew 16:21–28

Engaging the Texts

The human response to persecution and suffering unites this week's rich and complex texts. The specific genres of each lesson illuminate the variety of ways God's faithful people respond to isolation, retribution, fear, vulnerability, and the loss of control (even if one never actually had control in the first place).

Jeremiah's visceral plea to God illumines the paradigm of Hebrew lament: utter frankness and counter-cultural honesty demanding that God start acting like the divine. Jeremiah remembers with painful longing the day when God's words and teachings were a delectable source of joy. Speaking critical oracles toward unjust rulers and peace mongers has eroded his trust. His experience reveals how good vibes and glory are not rewards for being the divine mouthpiece. God's promise of steadfast deliverance will sustain the pressures of being a prophet, both in biblical times and our contemporary world.

Paul's response to the persecution of his audience in Romans 12 relies on wisdom and ethical teaching. The challenge of love—responding to God's scandalous grace through the cross and empty tomb—intensifies with each section of teachings and commandments. The power

dynamics and context of Paul's teachings are not universal; some individuals under persecution in the present may not be able to safely enact these ideals. Bring sensitivity to those in your community holding scars from trauma as you discern how to engage the proscriptive "vengeance is mine" text in verses 19–21.

Take note of the close overlap between the epistle lesson and wider themes in the Sermon on the Mount. Clear connections abound with the Matthean Jesus' teachings about love of enemies, feeding the hungry, and blessing the persecuted. One could imagine John Dominic Crossan's interpretation of Jesus teaching the Lord's Prayer, whereby the disciples pray, "Lead us not into temptation..." toward vengeance and violence against Rome, as an overtone with contemporary relevance for preaching.

Matthew 16's focus on Peter continues from last week. Peter vacillates, as all humans do, between trust and disbelief. After hearing Jesus predict his suffering, death, and resurrection—a likely fate for Jesus' closest friends as well—Peter's reaction of resistance is unsurprising. The mere thought of the Roman Empire crucifying Jesus does not compute with Peter's expectations for Jesus the powerful, mighty Messiah figure.

More importantly, Jesus follows up his passion prediction with the familiar excursus on saving and losing one's life. While the power of resurrection leads us to think about life in terms of physical mortality, Jesus' use of the word *psyche* for "life" invites a broader range of interpretation. Jesus' invitation to follow the way of the cross involves one's whole self—body, mind, and **soul**. Consider how Jesus uses "life" to elaborate about the state of being alive and the quality of one's living with resistance, scandalous love, and hope amid suffering and persecution.

Among the great cloud of preachers I've known, a voice keeps echoing through my head as I consider what to preach this week. It is faithful, and often preferable, to preach one section of a text well.

Pastoral Reflections

In my weekly text study, someone will inevitably interrupt an aside with the question "What is God doing here?" **That is the good news.**

There is great appeal in utilizing Jesus' commandments in this gospel reading as a moral call to action. Many fine sermons expound upon denial of self, taking up one's cross, and following Jesus as the center of the preaching event. These focal points are lovely ways to flesh out the meaning of discipleship, but using a Lutheran dialectic, these sermonic angles feel like law to this preacher's ears.

"What is God doing here?" Jesus will be going to the cross. And since we (like Matthew) know the end of the story,

the cross is much more than a finite ending, or tool of capital punishment. The cross is where God shows power made perfect in weakness.

Exploring the image and symbolism of the cross from the pulpit feels appropriate, especially in our current climate, where the use of the cross extends to Christian nationalism and religious oligarchy. On a Sunday when the texts center on persecution and pain, Feminist, Womanist, and other liberation theologians offer preachers helpful critiques to divorce the violence of Roman crucifixion from God's saving work.

Considering how the faithful should respond to God's liberating love amid these pericopes, I find myself drawn to more creative explorations of the cross and its meaning, such as those of Dorothee Soelle. "To choose life means to embrace the cross. It means to put up with the cross, the difficulties, the lack of success, the fear of standing alone. Tradition has never promised us a rose garden. To embrace the cross today means to grow into resistance. And the cross will turn green and blossom. We survive the cross. We grow in suffering. We are the tree of life."

The cross as God's solidarity with humankind, and humanity's solidarity with and resistance on behalf of the weak, persecuted, and oppressed takes on a prophetic tone. Jesus the Crucified-and-Risen Messiah transforms our human response to broken bodies and hurting hearts. God reshapes our resistance for the sake of neighbor and world.

Matthew Schlake-Kruse

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 6, 2026

Ezekiel 33:7–11

Psalm 119:33–40

Romans 13:8–14

Matthew 18:15–20

Engaging the Texts

A quick read of the texts assigned for this Sunday might suggest an orientation toward conflict. Ezekiel is directed to instruct the "wicked" to turn from their ways. Paul's letter to the Romans could be read as a detailed list of those qualities that define the wicked: drunkenness, licentiousness, and jealousy. Read in this way, Jesus' teaching in Matthew's gospel on how to confront those who sin against us could sound like a brief primer on conflict resolution or a rubric for boundary-setting: "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt 18:18). However, to read these texts through such a

legalistic lens would be to miss out on the pathos driving each of them.

The sentinel appointed to speak the word of judgment to the house of Israel in Ezekiel is given that task in connection with God's pleading cry that the people would turn away from their sin. The doubled "turn back, turn back" at v. 11 gives voice to the aching heart of a loving parent desperate to protect their child from self-inflicted harm. Given that, the sentinel is commissioned to act not as the voice of procedural justice, but in service to God's desire that God's people be saved and not destroyed.

A parallel logic informs our reading of Matthew 18:15–20. These verses follow immediately after the parable of the lost sheep (18:10–14) which ends with, "So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost." (v. 14), and precedes Jesus' instruction on forgiveness (18:21–35) which includes the well-known, "not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (v. 22). In that context, the interpretive key to Jesus' instructions is found at v. 17: "if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector." The irony should be obvious to those reading this gospel in its entirety. Already at this point Jesus has been challenged and criticized for eating with tax-collectors and sinners (Matt. 9:9–13; 11:19). Famously, this gospel ends with the Great Commission, Jesus' charge to "go and make disciples of all nations," clarifying that God's steadfast lovingkindness extends to all people.

Therefore, the question these texts are grappling with is: what do we owe one another? (Rom 13:8) This passage from Paul's letter to the Romans suggests that the one debt we cannot ever discharge is the debt of love, which is the fulfillment of the law. So then, when we speak to our neighbor, or confront the one who has sinned against us, we address them with all the love God has shown to them *and to us*, calling them to turn away from patterns of life that harm them and others, pursuing them with all the urgency of a shepherd going after a lost sheep.

Pastoral Reflections

The voice that grips me in these texts is God's urgent plea to "turn back, turn back" (Ezek 33:11). Perhaps it's the doubling that reminds me of the echoing refrain of the beloved nineteenth century hymn, *Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling* (ELW 608): "Come home, come home! You who are weary, come home." That hymn is frequently paired with the parable of the prodigal son found at Luke 15:11–32, where the wayward child is met on the road home by a parent who has been watching and waiting for their return ("See, on the portals he's waiting and watching, watching for you and for me."), but it would be a good pairing with this Sunday's texts as well. Both gospel texts—the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32)

and Jesus' instructions for engaging with the one who sins (Matt 18:15–20)—are found next to a shared parable about lost sheep (Matt 18:10–14; Luke 15:3–7).

With this connection made, I begin to see the two brothers from the parable of the prodigal hiding in plain sight in the Matthean pericope as well. Jesus begins by saying, “If your sibling (*adelphos*) sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one” (v.15). The end goal for Jesus is that you should regain your sibling. Can we help but recall the tense exchange between the elder brother and his father in Luke's parable? The legalistic elder brother tries to distance himself from his sibling (“But when *this son of yours* came back...” [15:30]), but the parent wants them to stay in relationship (“*this brother of yours* was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” [15:32]).

While at face value these texts may seem preoccupied with accountability and punishment, the core concern of each is that we not give up on one another. The sentinel of Ezekiel 33 has a role to play in calling the people to repent, and woe to the one who fails in that duty. The disciple with a grievance against another sibling in the household of God, the church, is redirected back to that one, over and over, with the goal of restoring their relationship. What we owe one another is what we have first received from our God who loves us, “therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:10).

Erik Christensen

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 13, 2026

Genesis 50:15–21

Psalms 103:[1–7] 8–13

Romans 14:1–12

Matthew 18:21–35

Engaging the Texts

The gospel for this day picks up immediately following last Sunday's pericope. Having heard Jesus' instructions for how to engage with the one who has wronged you, Peter then asks, “How often should I forgive?” (v.21) Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times,” sometimes rendered “seventy times seven.” The significance of the number is not whether it is best understood to be 77 or 490 (70x7), but the callback to one of the earliest chapters of Genesis, in which Lamech, one of the descendants of Cain, makes a murderous promise to revisit any violence done to him “seventy-sevenfold” (Gen 4:24). The Hebrew here (*shiv'im veshiv'ah*) appears in the Greek Septuagint as *hebdomekonta-*

kis hepta, which also appears on Jesus' lips at Matt 18:22. In both cases the point is not to determine a quantifiable limit, but precisely the opposite: to signify a limitless response. The difference is that Lamech threatens that any wrong done to him should be met with limitless violence, while Jesus asserts that the pardon extended to the one who sins is without limit.

The story of Lamech from the beginning of Genesis is implicit in the texts for this day, but the story of Joseph found in Gen 50:15–21 comes from its final chapter. From Cain and Abel through the scattering at Babel, the fracturing of family in the ancestral narratives, and the brothers who strip Joseph of his robe and sell him into slavery for twenty pieces of silver, Genesis is the long story of human community tearing itself apart. So, when Joseph's brothers come before him, fearful that he may hold a grudge against them, we are primed to expect retributive violence. Instead, Joseph poses the question that frames all the texts assigned to this day, “Am I in the place of God?”

The challenge preachers will have to resolve this day is how to map that question onto the parable of the unforgiving servant Jesus tells at Matt 18:21–35. The history of interpretation for this passage has often equated God with the king who forgives one of his slaves a debt of ten thousand talents. Given that a single talent represented more than a decade's wages, that sum (like the use of “seventy-seven times”) is meant to signify a debt too large to ever be repaid. Having been forgiven, that same slave then refuses to show similar mercy to a fellow slave who owed a more manageable debt. The king responds by condemning the one who had received forgiveness to be tortured now instead. As the public proclamation of this text comes to an end, the minister will presumably prompt the assembly with, “The gospel of the Lord.” The preacher will then have to explain how this is true.

Pastoral Reflections

The character of Lamech who appears at Gen 4:24 is hardly a household name, even among the biblically literate, so to spend much time introducing him while preaching this day's texts may seem like a waste of time. Still, I'm not sure we can understand the full resonance of what Jesus is saying in Matthew's gospel without at least unpacking his brief appearance further. Later interpreters refer to Lamech's threats of vengeance as the “song of the sword,” connecting his words to the reference to bronze and iron tools two verses earlier.

The “song of the sword” evokes a logic of power that runs throughout the book of Genesis, then the whole of scripture, especially as God's people Israel come to be occupied by one violent empire after another. It is the logic of playground bullies, fascists, and dictators, and any who believe that “might makes right.” It is the justification for escalatory violence between people as well as nations. It is also what

makes the conclusion to Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant so unpalatable.

If we are to understand that Jesus' response to Peter's question, "how often should I forgive?" ("seventy-seven times") is meant to invert Lamach's use of the number as a measure for vengeance; if Jesus is saying that God's mercy is equal to or greater than the world's violence, then how are we to make sense of the king's response to the slave who showed no mercy? How are we to justify the king's sentence of torture without end?

From our vantage point in the twenty-first century, perhaps it is simple enough to allegorize the king in Jesus' parable whose mercy is followed by his wrath; to equate debts with sin, and torture with the existential suffering brought on by unredeemed human nature. Would it have been so simple for the laborers Jesus was speaking to, who knew what it was like to be saddled with debt so great there was no hope of repayment in full? For that matter, how might this parable be heard by those in the assembly as credit card, student loan, and mortgage delinquency rates continue to rise?

Even Joseph presents a mixed record on this count. While he ends the cycle of fraternal violence that has run throughout the book of Genesis, just three chapters earlier he leverages Pharaoh's wealth during a time of famine to structure a deal that landed the Egyptians in slavery and intergenerational debt (Gen 47:13–26).

Imperial power is, by its nature, violent and extractive. This was true in the ancient Near East and it remains true today. Today's texts reflect on the escalatory nature of violence and wrestle with the meaning and limits of forgiveness. After the sermon has been preached, it will not be long before the assembly prays the words that Jesus taught us, asking God to forgive us our sins, our debts, our transgressions—all of the above. What is the shape of the community that structures its relationships to one another accordingly?

Erik Christensen

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 20, 2026

Jonah 3:10–4:11

Psalms 145:1–8

Philippians 1:21–30

Matthew 20:1–16

Engaging the Texts

Jonah 3 and 4: If you choose to preach on Jonah, you'll need to remind people what happened in the first two chapters. For comments on Jonah 3–4 go to www.currentsjournal.org,

then to the archives for January 2024 (Vol. 51, No. 1). Click on the "Preaching Helps" icon and you'll find the article "He Never Prayed for Nineveh: Jonah in a Year of Conflicts." The book of Jonah ends with God's question: "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" Perhaps God is asking that question now about the babies and toddlers in Iran.

Matthew 20:1–16. The meaning of this parable seems clear: it's about the goodness and generosity of God. The vineyard owner says, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" Then, that familiar phrase: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." The kingdom of heaven isn't run like a business, and God is more generous than we would ever be.

Sometimes, this parable has been interpreted to mean that Christians (the last) have replaced Jews (the first) as God's chosen people. But anyone who believes that has forgotten that ALL the workers got paid—the last and the first—and no one is replaced. Thus, there is no room for supercessionism, the dangerous teaching that Christians have replaced Jews as God's chosen people.

These interpretations depend on reading the text as an allegory in which the vineyard owner represents God. The workers become villains: how could they refuse God's generosity? Wouldn't you be mad if you'd been in the early shift and got the same pay as those who worked only an hour? There's also no indication that the latecomers thanked the owner for paying them a full day's wage. They just took their money and went away. We go away, too, assured that God is generous and the workers are ungrateful.

But what if the vineyard owner isn't God? What if the vineyard owner is a vineyard owner? What if the laborers are simply themselves and don't stand for Christians or Jews or anybody else? Many New Testament scholars now encourage us to read the gospels in the shadow of the Roman Empire and its systems of injustice. Jesus drew today's parable from the real world of first-century Palestine. It was a world of opposites: landowners and laborers, haves and have-nots, elites and expendables.²³ William Herzog II is one of the scholars urging us to consider the context of Palestine in Jesus' time. As large estates gobbled up small farms, more day laborers were looking for work. This parable takes place at harvest time when workers are most needed. It is obvious that unemployment is a huge problem if so many laborers are waiting all day to be hired even when so many are needed for the harvest! Have we seen the workers if this parable becomes an allegory?

23. William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

Day laborers had a very hard time in Minneapolis in the winter of 2025-26. Even in freezing temperatures they were accustomed to waiting for hours in the parking lot of Home Depot. Because of “Metro Surge” ICE agents patrolled the parking lots of Home Depots; agents also rounded up workers who staffed restaurants on Central Avenue and Lake Street. Thomas Friedman, who grew up in the Twin Cities, wrote about these laborers in *The New York Times*:

To keep their doors open, my friends hired drivers to pick up their workers from their homes at 4 each morning, when fewer ICE agents were on the streets. They provided roughly 100 rides through each day and night. Employees did not want to drive their own cars because ICE was tracking license plates. The paid drivers were trained to circle an employee’s neighborhood once to ensure ICE was not present, then quickly pick up the employee and drive to the restaurant. Inside the restaurant were air mattresses next to the kitchen, for the many employees who preferred to sleep at the restaurant rather than risk moving around in public... (Thomas Friedman, *New York Times*, March 15, 2026).

Many people who hadn’t seen the laborers before saw them for the first time as their neighbors were arrested: Mexican men who shingled roofs, Somali women who fed people in the care center, Guatemalan workers who washed dishes after we finished eating.

What if Jesus wants us to see the laborers? What if Jesus wants us to be disgusted when we hear the landowner say, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” Does the land really belong to him? Then he can go on gobbling up small farms when peasants can’t pay their debts. He can set up systems that divide laborers from each other.

As master preaching teacher Fred Craddock said years ago, “Every text has a surplus of meaning.” After years of hearing this parable with God at the center, perhaps it’s time to help listeners see the laborers not just in the parable but in our communities. Thomas Friedman invites us to see the workers we may have missed:

“This is our family,” my friends said of their employees. They told me one of their longest-serving cooks said to them the other day: “I came here for a better life. I had my children here. I worked two jobs to put them through school, but now all I want to do is take my garbage to the curb without being afraid” (Friedman, March 15, 2026).

Barbara K. Lundblad

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 27, 2026

Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

Psalms 25:1–9

Philippians 2:1–13

Matthew 21:23–32

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions. —Psalm 25:7a

Change You Can Believe In

Vineyards appear in today’s readings as they did last week and will continue to do during this season of the grape harvest. Yet another proverb from Israel’s wisdom tradition makes its appearance in today’s reading from Ezekiel but, interestingly, only for it to be superseded by new learning. “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Ezekiel 18:2b) is one of those old saws that we nod assent to, recognizing that their forbears were assumed to influence their offspring even in times unfamiliar with the science of genetics. Or as YHWH declares as explanation to the first commandment, “I the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me,” but also, “showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Deut 5:10). What goes around comes around, and I have a hand in it, God seems to be saying.

But here in Ezekiel God declares, “As I live, says the Lord, this proverb [cited above] shall no more be used in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine; it is only the person who sins that shall die ...” (vv 3-4). “Yet you say,” the text goes on in an echo of last week’s whining of both Jonah and the vineyard workers, “the way of the Lord is unfair.” And YHWH goes on to hold every individual accountable for iniquities committed with no blaming of others — parents,

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genes, or bad environment. “Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!” (v. 31b) is now YHWH’s message. Forget the excuses even when clad in proverbial wisdom “Turn, then, and live” (v 32b) is God’s message of the need for repentance or “life change,” as Eugene Peterson prefers.

Perhaps this changing emphasis in God’s unconventional wisdom can be thought of as Ezekiel’s version of his near contemporary Jeremiah’s “new covenant” which YHWH promised “will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors” but instead “I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts” (Jer 31:33b). While certainly signaling no endorsement of the radically individualistic type of faith that marks so much of today’s American Christianity, yet this “change” within Israel’s prophetic tradition does represent a significant deepening of the profoundly personal dimension of Israel’s historically corporate faith.

In the gospel we encounter Jesus telling a story of a man who had two sons, though it is quite a different story from the one Luke tells which we have come to call “The Prodigal Son.” Jesus spins today’s parable in response to the chief priests and elders who had been nagging him in the temple to come clean about whose authority it was by which he claimed to be speaking and acting. He cleverly deflects their questions by asking one of his own regarding John’s authority which got them arguing with each other. And so, he avoids (or perhaps answers) their question by telling a story, a peculiar parable about another vineyard owner who had authority issues of his own regarding his two sons. Simply told, the father goes to his two sons in turn and asks them to go and work in the vineyard. The first says “I will not,” but later “changed his mind and went.” The second son dutifully answered “I go, sir;’ but he did not go.” Jesus then asked his interrogators, “Which of the two did the will of his father?” (vv 28-31).

An interesting even existential question, I’ve always thought, since I’m an oldest son with two brothers who grew up on a small dairy farm where we were regularly asked by our father to get up and help with the milking. My memory is that I would usually complain but eventually show up where my sleepy siblings wouldn’t. Jesus’ parable seems to favor the reluctant one who nonetheless “changed his mind” and obeyed, whereas the verbally compliant one who initially agreed but changed his mind disobediently is the one judged to have not done his father’s will. “Actions speak more loudly than words,” might be the apt proverb to invoke as a moral to the story. But somehow the initial unwillingness of the first son still nags, doesn’t it?

Our summer-long slog through Romans finally ended a week ago and today we find ourselves hearing what I like to think of as Paul’s version of J.S. Bach’s “Incarnatus Est” from the “Credo” section of his B Minor Mass. Here, many think, Paul is incorporating the words of a very ancient baptismal hymn of the church. I once heard a noted biblical scholar provocatively suggest this could have been the poetic pieces of catechesis that Ananias of Damascus used in instructing Saul\Paul in the rudiments of Christian teaching following his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9). Find a way to utilize this so-called “kenosis hymn” of Paul’s in the liturgy of the day. This is the answer to our riddling Old Testament and Gospel texts probing how God manages to change our recalcitrance to obedience, creating a “same mind” from our rabid individualism and corporate lethargy as church. ELW’s No. 729, “The Church of Christ, in Ev’ry Age” sings memorably of how the church “beset by change, but Spirit-led must claim and test its heritage,” and, in a courageous application of traditional language applied to the church itself, “must keep on rising from the dead.”

John Rollefson