

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

October 17, 2021

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: **Amen.**

Scripture Readings

Malachi 3:6-12

“For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.

Hebrews 4:1-13

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, “As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’”

although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” And again in this passage he said, “They shall not enter my rest.”

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Mark 10:23-31

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to

them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

Hymn: *LSB 159, Offertory (Psalm 116:12-13, 17-19)*

What shall I ren-der to the Lord for all His ben-e-fits to
me? I will of - fer the sac-ri-fice of thanks-giv - ing and will
call on the name of the Lord. I will take the cup of sal-
va - tion and will call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my
vows to the Lord now in the pres-ence of all His peo-ple, in the
courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of you, O Je - ru - sa - lem.

Sermon

A message from God. That's what we have today. Of course, that's what we have every time we open up a Bible and read what's written there. We're looking this year at each of those 66 books, and every one of them is a message from God. But today, that's even the title of the book: the name Malachi means "my messenger," and that's how the book starts. "The Word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi," the Word of God by a messenger from God.

This Word from God is the last word of the Old Testament. It's the last book in the way the Old Testament is ordered, and it's probably the last book of the Old Testament to be written. In other words, this book is the last time a prophet speaks until John the Baptist hits the scene over four hundred years later. And it's full of a lot of warnings. There's always the Gospel for those faithful few, of course. "For those who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings," Malachi says - if that sounds familiar, Charles Wesley used that verse in "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." Those who fear the Lord are His treasured possession and their names are written in a book of remembrance before Him; they are loved by Him like a father loves his son.

No matter how doom-and-gloom the old prophets are, there's always that reminder of God's grace. But it's not the focus here for Malachi. He has a lot to say about a society who continues going

through the motions of worship, who continue offering lip service to God, but never shows any evidence that they believe in what they say and do. They bring their offerings, but they bring only the leftovers, the table scraps that they throw to God instead of what they'd been commanded to bring: the perfect and unblemished, not the rejects; the firstfruits, not the leftovers; the best we have to offer, not an afterthought.

Malachi chastises the people who bring such offerings, as well as the unfaithful priests who allow it and bring them into the Temple. That's the context for today's passage about robbing God. Now, the first thing to say is to eliminate a false understanding and an unhelpful way this passage is used. I've seen far too many sermons or articles, especially from non-Lutherans, about this subject. They'll say that it just proves the importance of tithing, of making sure you never drop below that special 10% mark in what you give to the church. They say it's a part of God's Law that's still very much binding on Christians today and must be obeyed. I've seen sermons from Baptists or Pentecostals that promise tithing as the key to financial freedom and security, the key to unlocking the heavenly blessings that God has for you.

I want to reject all of that in the strongest terms. We can't buy blessings from God with money. Isn't that what the whole issue was with indulgences that sparked the Reformation in the first place? We aren't a physical nation like ancient Israel, we don't have a Levitical priesthood, and Galatians makes it clear (among other passages) that we are free from the Law. Imposing a strict tithe on Christians today is a kind of legalism that the Gospel message itself opposes. We are not under the Law; Christ has fulfilled the Law on our behalf, and the only commandment he gives is that we love each other in the way he has loved us.

So if you're ever expecting a stewardship sermon on making sure you give the right amount, or that you need to give more than you already do, you're not going to get that from me. The New Testament, like in 2 Corinthians for example, does certainly encourage and praise generosity towards both the Church and other people in need. Generous giving is held up by the apostles as a Christian virtue. But it's not a command, because that's not how Christianity operates: not by command or guilt, but by encouragement; not by force or coercion, but by persuasion and love. "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver," Paul writes. The Christian answer to giving, whether to Church or charity, is not a legalistic Old Testament tithe, but what can be given freely and happily, whether less or more than that 10% rule.

Nevertheless, this is a text that's about stewardship -- stewardship in the true Biblical sense, not in the "oh no, there's that word about money and giving again." And what does this true stewardship begin with? Repentance. "Return to me," says the Lord of hosts. "Return to me, and I will return to you." Return to the Lord and He will always receive you. Repent and return to God and He will not turn you away. True stewardship is impossible without faith.

Real stewardship is not about giving God His due, making sure you're being prudent in your financial management. Stewardship doesn't mean "I made a good household budget, it includes the church, and I'm sticking to it." Stewardship is a way to view the world, not a set of particular actions we have to take. Stewardship is understanding that, in the end, nothing ever really belonged to us at all. Stewardship is summarized by the words Job says after he's lost everything at the beginning of that story: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised."

There's two parts to that stewardship: first, recognizing that everything already belongs to God, and second, praising God no matter what happens. When I say that stewardship is a way to view the world, I mean it's not about giving to God a portion of what's yours. I mean it's recognizing that it all belongs to God anyway. The question was never how much will you give, but whether you will recognize that it's all His for you to use accordingly. Jesus' words about a camel and the eye of a

needle in today's Gospel point us to this too: "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

It's not about doing a bit better with money management, or allocating your time, talent, and treasure. It's about the human perspective vs. the God perspective. It's about new birth, new eyes to see the new kingdom of Christ. The Israelites that Malachi is talking about were checking off the box of their religious obligation, and doing it half-heartedly and inadequately at that. Because whenever we view faith in that way, it's always going to be half-hearted and inadequate. A box to check off, a hoop to jump through; an obligation, a duty.

Sometimes when I call people who haven't been at church for a while, they tell me that: "I'm sorry, I know I need to get back to church." It sounds like a duty they've been neglecting. When that happens, I'm not calling to guilt you into coming back to church; I really am checking to see how you're doing and what's going on in your life. It's not about showing up to church just enough to make sure the pastor doesn't call you. That'd be like Malachi's audience. It's about returning to the Lord with your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

I haven't heard this at this congregation, but up in Minnesota a couple of times I heard members refer to their offering as "paying their dues," as if the congregation was a club and they were a part of it because they were due paying members. You don't belong to God because you pay your dues, because you check off that box of attendance, because you go through the motions and offer lip service to God. That's what Malachi's contemporaries were doing. That's how they were robbing God -- they were not loving the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and they were not loving their neighbors as themselves.

Stewardship is a matter of the heart, not the hands. Malachi describes God as refining ore and metal, purifying and refining His people like gold and silver. And it's only then that their offerings are righteous and pleasing to God. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." You know those words from Psalm 51, and that's what it is all about.

God said through Malachi, "For I the Lord do not change; therefore you are not consumed." He does not change in His forgiveness. He is faithful even when we are not. He is faithful to His promise and His people, and His unchanging graciousness is defined by Jesus whose coming Malachi heralded. He will purify His people, and only then will they bring righteous offerings. Romans 15 shows us that the true priestly service of Christians is proclaiming the Gospel, and the true offering we give to God is ourselves, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Our righteous offerings have little to do with what goes into an offering plate; it is about the Gospel, faith, prayer, recognizing that all that we are is from God.

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! The Lord does not change, but He changes us. We are not consumed; He changes and purifies us to see the world clearly, to see the world through Christ. And the best and most important offering does not come from our wallets, but from our hearts, our minds, our mouths. Think about this as we sing the words of Psalm 116 in the offertory: "What shall I render to the Lord? I will take the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord." That is Christian stewardship, and may we never rob God of ourselves and faithfully receiving His good gifts to us in Christ.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven,

hallowed be Thy name,

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done on earth

as it is in heaven;

give us this day our daily bread;

**and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

**For Thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

P: O God, Your divine wisdom sets in order all things in heaven and on earth. Put away from us all things hurtful and give us those things that are beneficial for us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C: Amen.

All: I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: Thanks be to God!

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: Amen.