



**Sunday, November 17, 2024**

**Mark 13:1-8**

**“Does God Take Sides?”**

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“Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he.’ And they will lead many people astray.”

How can we recognize who is Christ and who isn't? What is from God and what isn't? Our vocation as disciples depends on us being able to answer this. Which side is from God and which isn't? Does God even take sides?

God does not take sides where worldly affairs are concerned. If this surprises you, consider it through one of the most basic practices of Christianity – prayer.

Can we pray for victory in the high school state championship game? Can we pray for a judicial court decision to go our way? Can we pray for the outcome of an election? Can we pray for a family member who is seriously ill to recover?

Of course we would like to think we could. How often have you heard, “Thank you for all your prayers, I know it was the power of prayer that allowed my husband to recover.” But what about those who were prayer for and didn't recover? The great Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard wisely wrote that “Christianity demands the crucifixion of the intellect.”

If we believe we can pray for certain results, we are overthinking it. Praying for an outcome threatens to turn God into a tool of selfish individualism. If we pray for one team to win, does that mean God cares nothing for the other team? If we pray for an outcome of a judicial process, does that mean God abandoned the losing party? If we pray for a family member to be healed, what about all those who aren't – has God abandoned them, or did they not have a strong enough army of prayer warriors? If one candidate wins and the other loses, does that mean the first is saint and other a sinner?

But, you say, we are always encouraged to pray. Yes! We are. But not for God to direct things in a certain way. Unless God has been speaking directly to you, we really don't have any idea what God's will is. That's why we say in the Lord's Prayer, “THY will – not mine – be done.”

If instead we reflect on the deeper purpose of Christian prayer and what intercession really is, it will show us how to identify the real Christ.

Christian prayer, especially in the Lutheran understanding, is not contemplation but action. To intercede means to stand between two poles of an issue and to become involved in the conflict. Between the poor and a system that favors the rich. Between illness and health. Between hunger and world that has the resources to feed every living person. Between a nightmare scenario of war and the desire for peace.

We are not positioning ourselves to change the outcome, but rather to become involved in God's work. In praying for the needs of the world, or the needs of those around us, we are

releasing God's power by placing ourselves in a relationship of cooperation with God. We become agents of God's kingdom.

And what is God's work? We find it in the person of Christ. Healing. Reconciling. Repairing division. Proclaiming forgiveness. Commanding love. We can only make sense of Jesus in light of the movement which dominates the Gospels, the movement from death to life. The blind see. The dead are raised. We find Christ as well in all those who have been cast out – the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, those in prison.

To pray, then, is to position ourselves with Christ in his healing work of reconciliation. Here at Grace we have well-designed programs that provide food and clothing to a selection of the needy in our community. But in our daily and weekly prayer, as we call to mind the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, those in prison – as we pray for the needs of the world and the well being of creation -- what are we doing about it?

Here is a minor example. My spiritual director had to cancel our last meeting because of a serious respiratory illness. When we finally met on zoom more than a month later, I could see she was still badly afflicted. As we concluded our time, I said, "I will pray for you." But then I realized that wasn't enough. Some kind of action was needed. So I wrote her a note about how much she has meant to me in my spiritual journey. It was a small thing, but who knows whether this little thing might give her support and encouragement as she is trying to find strength to get through each day.

Perhaps there are people on our prayer list you are praying for. Instead of a silent prayer, pick up the phone and see how they are doing. The effort of personal contact could mean the world to them. Talk to me if you need phone numbers.

This is who Jesus Christ is. There are no sides. The only side is life.

Two days after Jesus warned his disciples in today's Gospel against impostors, we find in him at the parallel place in John 12 beside himself with despair over his own people's refusal to recognize who he is. The raising of Lazarus resulted not only in a death warrant for Jesus but for Lazarus as well. The Jewish authorities decided to put down the perceived threat against Rome by getting rid of both Lazarus and Jesus. As Jesus enters Jerusalem, the great crowd that greeted his arrival only fanned the flames of their desire to kill him.

When Jesus then begins to speak of the death he must die, the adoring crowd starts to turn against him. They shout, "the Messiah that we are expecting will not die but will remain forever." Then Jesus cries out: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness."

God's great work of reconciliation is to correct the imbalance that has overtaken human society, which lifts a few up while keeping most of the others down. God desires to bring his creation back into tune. If you haven't noticed, the world is badly out of tune.

Position yourself through prayer to become involved in this great work of reconciliation. We call it bringing in the kingdom of God. We are repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in. For those who follow the true Christ, there is no other calling.