

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
January 10, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Being pastor I have a distinct privilege to stand up here every Sunday and speak. It's an honor which I don't take lightly. It's a challenge that often leaves me befuddled on what to say or doubt my ability to say it. Normally, as any good Lutheran pastor is called to do, I do my best to preach on one of our given texts of the day and with the help of the Holy Spirit proclaim the gospel message – that is the good news about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ and the love of God revealed in and through Him for us and for all people. While I will speak briefly to our texts, I want to take some time to share a post I put out on Bethany's Facebook page this past week. I know many of you may have read it; however, I also am aware many of you aren't into the Facebook scene and thus did not see it. That post states:

In lieu of a devotion this week, I want to simply start off 2016 with a huge "Thank you" to all you faithful people of God. God has blessed me to be surrounded by wonderful leaders, wonderful people, and a community faithful to God in a variety of different ways. I am truly thankful for all the work each of you do that furthers the work of God here at Bethany and in the world. I am truly thankful for your generous support and faithful stewardship of your gifts to further God's mission. I am truly thankful to all of you for attending worship. I am truly thankful for the grace you show me when I mess up. So, as we start a New Year, I start by saying, "Thank you!" May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus!

Thank you! Having a mindset of thankfulness is a key characteristic of being people of God. At times, we all forget and fail to live that out in our lives. We take for granted

people in our lives who mean so much to us and simply stop to tell them thank you – for their support, friendship, companionship, love, and presence in our lives. We take for granted all we have is from God and rather than giving thanks to God we pat ourselves on the back for accumulating all the stuff we have. We take for granted the simplest of things and simply fail to give thanks – simple things like someone putting on a pot of coffee after fellowship or someone taking in the visitor parking sign from the lot, someone taking out the recycling rather than simply walking by and thinking, “that’s not my job.” Someone picking up the trash, someone pushing in the chairs, someone taking the time to sharpen the pencils in the pews, or how the books on the table get rotated each month, the clothes get put away in the Hope Chest, the food gets taken to the Pantry, the bills get paid, offerings counted, paraments on the altar changed out, and the list could go on and on of all the “little” things done around here. They may seem like little things but they are so important to what we are called to do here together. And truth be told – most of the items listed are not assigned to any one person but are each of our responsibilities. Being a part of Bethany or any faith community for that matter isn’t simply about showing up, writing a check or being baptized and thinking that is it – one and done. No being part of a faith community is about claiming who we are. It’s about being transformed. It’s about our calling to be faithful stewards of what God has entrusted us with. It’s about supporting one another. And yes, it’s about stepping up, getting involved, taking initiative, and at times simply doing menial tasks

ourselves rather than thinking someone else is going to do it. Ultimately, all of these things have a way of drawing us closer to God. You might be sitting there and saying, really Pastor – putting coffee on after worship when no one signed up to provide fellowship is bringing me closer to God. Or, seeing the sign left out in the parking lot and bringing it inside has a way of bringing me closer to God. Or, seeing the sidewalks weren't shoveled and stopping to take a few minutes and do it is bringing me closer to God. Yes, I believe so. First of all, although we may not outwardly be saying it or even cognitively thinking it, when doing these tasks we are in fact responding to our calling as people of God in responding to God's grace through service and giving thanks to our Creator. We are saying, in our busy lives where it would be just as easy to go home, turn on the TV, and watch the game or go out shopping for something we really don't need, that the church the Holy Spirit has called us to be a part of is important to us. Our relationship to God and to this community of faith is so important we will even empty the trash, clean up a mess left by someone else, push a chair in when someone else failed to do so, wash some dishes in the sink, or sharpen pencils in the pews. These small acts of service have a way of reminding us of who we are, and what we are called to do. They have a distinct way of reorienting our lives to God, to each other, and to the church. One could even say, these small tasks might be spiritual practices in which we acknowledge all we have, whose we are, and rather than groaning someone else didn't do this we stop and simply give thanks we have the ability to do it. And when we see

another brother or sister doing something we often take for granted what would it do to our faith community if we responded more often with a simple gesture of, “Thank you!” How might those two simple words transform our relationship with one another? How might it transform our hearts from all the crap we hold onto and the world throws at us into hearts, which are grateful and joyful? So, thank you people of God for all you do and for who you are – precious sons and daughters of the living God.

Which, brings us back around to our texts this morning. Our thankfulness begins and ends in who we are. And perhaps, nowhere else in the Bible, is that stated more clearly, passionately, or lovingly than in our text from Isaiah and the words God speaks to Jesus after His Baptism – similar words also spoken to us by God in our own Baptisms as we are claimed, marked, and sealed with the cross of Christ for all eternity. Hear again these words, “But now thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” Or, “You are my Son (or daughter), the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” We live in a world which tries to attach many labels and identities upon us – many which we let stick and take ownership of that do nothing but bring us down. Many of those identities we see as the only means to success, the only means to happiness and security, the only means to life. Many of those labels and identities we

seek after lead us to spending an exuberant amount of energy, time, and resources that pull us away from, turn us from, and cause us to lose sight of the one identity which truly matters and of which we can never lose. Many of those labels and identities we try to attach to others without truly knowing that person or basing that identity off a rumor, or a story shared by someone else that may not be true or accurate. Yet, the identity that never fails, never leaves us, and is permanently affixed to us no matter what happens in life or how many times we mess up and may find ourselves feeling unworthy of God's love is truly the only one that matters - that identity is as a beloved, precious, child of God. This is the identity the prophet Isaiah reminds Israel of when they are living in exile at the hands of Babylon where they were viewed by others and perhaps even had come to view themselves with the label of a "despised, despicable, and forgotten" community. Into this, the prophet comes with a message from God, which reorients them back to the fact and promise they are still God's people who are precious, loved, and cared for by God. This is the very same promise and message God delivers to Jesus in His baptism. This promise and identity will go with Jesus as He is sent out and almost immediately tempted by Satan, who will do his best to get Jesus to forget who He is and where He came from. This is the promise we return to each and every day. This is the promise we sing of now and if you so desire, return to the waters of baptism, sign yourself with the cross of Christ and remember the words of God which speak, "You are mine."