

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Laetare (Fourth Sunday in Lent)

March 11, 2018

Text: John 6:1–15

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

The children of Israel were hungry as they wandered in the Wilderness of Sin. The Lord God Almighty had delivered them from Egyptian bondage. But now, they're just hungry and grumpy. They are so out of sorts because of their hunger and thirst that they make this shocking statement, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Ex. 16:3). Their discontent has reached such a fevered pitch they state they wish they had died in the plagues of Egypt (i.e., "died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt"). Better to die in slavery with full stomachs than to live by faith in the freedom promised by the Lord of heaven and earth.

And yet, the Lord was patient with His grumpy, discontented people; He served them and loved them. "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you...that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not" (Ex. 16:4). Bread from heaven! Not the meat pots of slavery. Not the stale bread of bondage but the bread of angels in full abundance (Ps. 78:25)!

This bread, however, would be given with conditions. Gather as much of the heavenly bread – manna it would be called – as you can eat in a single day. No more, no less. On the day before the Sabbath, gather twice as much; that was the only exception. The test that the Lord spoke about referred to whether or not they would trust in the Lord to provide day by day as He promised. And the Scriptures says, "...whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack" (Ex. 16:18). Will God's reborn people trust Him to provide? That is the question God's people must always answer. Will I trust God to provide for me? For my loved ones? For everyone who is important in my life?

The Lord Jesus provides us with the litmus test to reveal whether or not our trust is placed in Him or in the things of this life:

¹⁹“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19–21).

Your treasure reveals where your heart is. Today’s sermon hymn provides a godly framework to understand where our treasure is to be placed:

Jesus, priceless treasure, Fount of purest pleasure,
 Truest friend to me,
 Ah, how long in anguish Shall my spirit languish,
 Yearning, Lord, for Thee?
 Thou art mine, O Lamb divine!
 I will suffer naught to hide Thee;
 Naught I ask beside Thee. (LSB 743:1)

Yearning for Jesus, truest friend to man. Finding in Him the purest pleasure. Seeking nothing else in heaven than Him. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be, says Jesus. The children of Israel yearned for meat and drink, and all the promised pleasures of this world. But not the Lord God, so as to walk with Him in His ways.

I’d like to say a few words to us men about what it means for us to yearn for Jesus as our highest treasure; what it means for us to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things. You women should listen in but I want to speak directly to us men. Much has been made over the past several decades about the relative lack of male leadership and participation in the western Church in general. Women attend church more frequently than men. Women are serving in leadership positions more than ever. Many men think Christianity is good for women and children but not so much for men.

To put it bluntly, many men do not find Christianity to be very masculine. I’m not the first preacher to notice this. The 19th century Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, said this about the idea that the Church isn’t for men, “There has got abroad a notion, somehow, that if you become a Christian you must sink your manliness and turn milksop.” To become a Christian is to become weak, indecisive, and cowardly. That’s what Spurgeon was reacting against.

Sadly, the Church hasn't helped in this regard. For example, many of the so-called "praise songs" of the past several decades sound more like love songs to Jesus rather than robust hymns of praise and worship. Let me give one example:

Draw me close to you
 Never let me go
 I lay it all down again
 To hear you say that I'm your friend
 You are my desire
 No one else will do
 Cause nothing else can take your place
 To feel the warmth of your embrace
 Help me find the way
 Bring me back to you

You're all I want
 You're all I've ever needed
 You're all I want
 Help me know you are near. (Kelly Carpenter, *Draw Me Close*)

It must be pointed out that this popular praise song doesn't mention Jesus or God. Nor does it discuss sin, grace, redemption, or any of the great virtues of Christian faith and piety. It doesn't exhort to any form of service or sacrifice. It's rather vague, generic, and emotive. You could sing this to your husband, wife, boyfriend, or girlfriend. It lacks strength, determination, and virtue. For many churches, these kinds of songs are the norm rather than the exception.

The book of psalms is the inspired hymnbook of the Church. The psalmists, including that great warrior king David, describe their desire for God in much stronger, more masculine ways. Listen to a portion of Psalm 42, composed by the sons of Korah:

¹As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.
²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?
³My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?"

⁴These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival (Psalm 42:1–4).

Did you notice that the psalmist was being taunted, sneered at for his faith in God? In other words, he lived his life of faith and obedience to God in the open. And when things became difficult, he heard the sneering taunt, “Where is your God?”. There was adversity, a struggle that had to met with courage, strength, and determination. He would be the leader in the processions to God’s house. He would be a man leading his family and community in godly worship.

True men long for God and God’s holy things. For the psalmist, that meant the temple in Jerusalem with all its blood sacrifices and high festivals. There, he could worship God with glad shouts and songs of praise along with the multitude of God’s people. There he could eat holy food in praise to God. In other words, this man’s treasure was God and God’s holy things: sacrifices, sacred meal, worship, praise, processions, all joined in the fellowship of God’s holy people. Take note of how today’s hymn emphasizes the more manly, courageous virtues of the Christian faith:

Satan, I defy thee; Death, I now decry thee;
 Fear, I bid thee cease.
 World, thou shalt not harm me Nor thy threats alarm me
 While I sing of peace.
 God’s great pow’r Guards ev’ry hour;
 Earth and all its depths adore Him,
 Silent bow before Him.

Hence, all earthly treasure! Jesus is my pleasure,
 Jesus is my choice.
 Hence, all empty glory! Naught to me thy story
 Told with tempting voice.
 Pain or loss, Or shame or cross,
 Shall not from my Savior move me
 Since He deigns to love me (LSB 743:3, 4)

Those are lyrics evoking a robust faith in Christ Jesus. Death, Satan, and fear are defied in the name of the Lord. Songs of peace and worship will be sung as God great power guards and protects. Regardless of pain, loss, or shame, every man, woman, and child is called to join in all creation to bow in love and adoration before the

Savior who deigns to love us. Jesus is our highest treasure. But we need godly men who will lead us in such praise of God.

The Lord Jesus Himself is the true and perfect man who teaches us true humanity, true manhood. He came not to be served but to serve and give His life as ransom for the salvation of His beloved people. That's the essence of true manhood. Love revealed in sacrificial service on behalf of family, church, and state. This is what the Christian Church is to teach, encourage, and exemplify, especially our men.

To pursue such a life, under God's grace and with the on-going strength of the Holy Spirit, is to follow the path of Christ Jesus Himself. Does not the apostle Paul describe Jesus as THE bridegroom who lives, suffers, dies, and rises again for the salvation and glorification of His beloved bride, the Church? He serves her, loves her, dies for her, lives for her.

The Christian Church is the only place where true manhood and true womanhood are exemplified, where men are taught from their youth to love, serve, and protect everyone committed to their care especially their moms, sisters, wives, and children. Where women are taught to live under and receive such sacrificial love and care from their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons.

St. John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople during the late 4th and early 5th centuries, had this to say about how the church should be training her sons: "Let us train boys from earliest childhood to be patient when they suffer wrongs themselves, but, if they see another being wronged, to sally forth courageously and aid the sufferer in fitting measure" (cited from *Man Up!* by Jeffrey Hemmer, p. 281). This is to teach them the way of Jesus who patiently suffered wrongs perpetrated against Him but defended the weak and lowly with courage and strength. On the cross, Jesus suffered all the wrongs of this world in order to defend His people from the oppression of Satan, death, the world, evil and every form of despotism and thuggery. The Church must again take up the mantle of training boys and men to be men, Christian men who love, serve, provide and sacrifice for family, church, and state. And by so doing, reveal that Jesus is their highest treasure.

The question for us, men, women, and children alike – the holy bride of Christ – is whether or not we will submit to and receive His sacrificial love and care. Jesus tested Philip and His disciples to see if they will fear, love, and trust in Him to provide both physical and spiritual food. He feed them with barley loaves and fish. But He Himself

promises to be our bread of heaven. He desires to serve us with Himself; His life sacrificed and lived for our good. Within the grasp of His love and forgiveness, we are called to love and follow Him. May God the Father grant us such hearts, minds, bodies and souls. And may He grant us such godly men to lead us in the vigorous praise of His Son, our highest treasure.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.