

**Sermon Notes for 9/18/16 (Pentecost 18)**

**Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN**

**Text: 1 Timothy 2:1-7**

**Theme: GOD’S ULTIMATE DESIRE**

**Hymn: LBW 549 (Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven)**

**The Point:** The ultimate desire of God is proven by His consistently working toward the salvation of people through His Son’s sacrifice.

**Introduction:** How can you know the ultimate wish or desire of a person? Well, you might be able to tell something today about a person’s loyalty if you see whether they are wearing purple or green & gold, right? Actually, our artifacts can say something about our ultimate desires. Another clue would be what that person says about his or her own motives and will. But of course you know that people can be quite deceptive in hiding their deepest thoughts and desires, so the speech is not always a reliable clue for sinful people. We have a significant problem in our country right now because both of the major party candidates have extremely high unfavorability ratings. Part of this is the perception on the part of many voters that these folks just don’t deal truthfully with us.

Our world cultivates a worldview that denies the truth big-time. While pollsters tell us that around 75 percent of Americans strongly agree that “there is only one true God, who is holy and perfect, and who created the world and rules it today,” an estimated 65 percent either strongly agree or somewhat agree with the assertion that “there is no such thing as absolute truth.” (*Christianity Today*, September 16, 1991, p. 48, from George Barna, *The Barna Report: What Americans Believe*, 1991) What? How did we get here? Satan has surely been putting blinders on people so that they are kept from hearing and believing God’s truth. And when they speak, they often communicate lies that keep people enslaved.

This happened in ancient Israel, as Amos tells us in today’s Old Testament reading. The people who were trampling on the needy and ruining the poor spoke of their ultimate desire, namely to please themselves. Listen: “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? [They wanted the religious festivals to end quickly so they could make more money.] We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, [their business practices were unfair, for they took advantage of their position to cheat the consumer] buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” [They could call the shots because of their prosperity and the poor would suffer.] These people spoke in denial of the truth.

We do not need to have that same issue with God when He speaks. His Word is His bond, for sure. He has never deceived us. What He says, we can rely on. And the Word that He speaks about this matter is clearly spelled out in today’s Epistle lesson: “This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” There is God’s ultimate desire, isn’t it? Here is a vital truth, that our Lord desires the salvation of every person. That salvation does not simply mean that we are rescued from a perilous situation, though that is certainly true. But this salvation Paul equates with coming to a knowledge of the truth. Knowing the truth in connection with Jesus Christ – that is what it means to be saved. John’s gospel put it this way: “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn. 17:3).

Even more convincing than the speech of a person are his or her actions. If you want to know the deepest motives and desires of a person, you need to examine the way that person lives. You will usually be able to tell pretty quickly, by observing a person’s daily occupations and interactions, just what is most important to that person. If everything in a man’s life revolves around his pleasure, with little regard for how his actions affect his job or other people, you can make a diagnosis, no matter what he says is

important. If a woman's family is the only thing that moves her decisions and actions, it doesn't take a lot of insight to see what her main motivation is.

A poll sheds light on the paradox of increased religiosity and, at the same time, decreased morality in our land. According to sociologist Robert Bellah, 80 percent of Americans agree that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious belief independent of any church or synagogue." The key to the paradox is the fact that those who claim to be Christians are arriving at faith on their own terms – terms that make no demands on behavior. As an example, a woman named Sheila, interviewed for Bellah's book *Habits of the Heart*, embodies this attitude. "I believe in God," she said. "I can't remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It's 'Sheila-ism.' Just my own little voice." (Charles Colson, *Against the Night*, p. 98) Just her own little voice. Satan loves it when he can get people relying on their own little voice. When their main motivation is doing their own thing or following their own ideas or keeping themselves happy or at least satisfied, he has won the battle.

So what is God's main motivation? What do His actions tell us about this? We see that in the coming of Jesus to this earth. When God wanted to let us see into His heart, He was not content just to send us a postcard or an email or a tweet or a snapchat that was quickly gone and forgotten. He sent His own dear Son, born into an obscure Jewish family in a backwater Jewish village, with no exalted résumé, no fancy hospital room, not even a set of grandparents around to celebrate with Joseph and Mary. He came as a servant, as He Himself put it: "The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve."

And that service was constantly and unceasingly aimed at one thing – our salvation. Jesus was not here on this earth to become a master carpenter. He did not intend merely to found a religious teaching school. He followed the Father's will to the utmost, even when it demanded that He be pinned to a cross. That was the only way for our salvation to be won. Our sin had created a huge barrier between us and God, and the only hope for us was that God Himself would attack and destroy that barrier. After Jesus had suffered the most excruciating torments and had hung at the cross, He belted out those courageous and victorious words: "It is finished." God's purposes were complete, and that truth changes everything.

Abraham Lincoln, like George Washington, was a man who focused on the truth. Once, when a stubborn disputer seemed unconvinced, Lincoln said, "How many legs has a cow?" "Four, of course," came the disgusted reply. "That's right," agreed Lincoln. "Now suppose you call the cow's tail a leg; how many legs would the cow have?" "Why, five, of course," was the confident reply. "Now, that's where you're wrong," said Lincoln. "Calling a cow's tail a leg doesn't make it a leg." (*Bits and Pieces*, July, 1991) Truth is truth, regardless of how many people believe it (or don't believe it). The key question for each of us is whether we recognize and yield to God's truth.

Today Maggie will be confirmed. This is a really respectful and compliant young lady. I have heard her parents testify to that. She cares for children (even her own younger brothers) and willingly spent many hours cleaning up an elderly uncle's home when he was sick. But you know what? This young lady will not be saved because she has lived a reasonably clean and helpful life. She has come to know the Good News, which is that, despite her own sins and failures (we won't ask her to give us the listing today), Jesus Christ has died for her and opened heaven's door to her and to all who trust in Him.

In just a few moments, we will ask Maggie some pretty critical questions, questions that get at the issue of what is most important in her life (and yours as well). One of those questions goes like this: "Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession of faith and in Christ's Church, and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?" This is a question that I was asked at the time of my confirmation – and no doubt many of you were asked it as well. How is it going? Well, if we are honest (and it is not a good idea to be anything else in God's house), we have to admit we have not always been faithful in our confession.

Our confession has been muddled. We have often ignored God's desire in preference to our own. We have given in to the world's ways of thinking and acting. Sin has bested us all too often. We need to come to our Lord over and over again to seek His pardon and forgiveness for our worldliness. And you know what? He forgives, over and over and over again, regardless of how far we have wandered.

The parable that Jesus told in today's Gospel gives a rather strange picture, doesn't it? Here is this dishonest manager, who uses his position to pad his nest and then gets commended for his actions. One commentator on these verses says this: "This parable goes against all of our common understanding of fairness and good business sense. Recognizing that this story comes in Luke right after the story of the prodigal son, may help us understand it better, because this is a prodigal manager. He cancels debts that are owed. He forgives extravagantly. When we recognize that we too are on the receiving end of this kind of strange bookkeeping, we can be grateful for the creative accounting techniques of the Kingdom!" (from *God Pause*, 9/15/16)

God's creative accounting techniques make all the difference in our lives. To cling to His promise of forgiveness in the face of our screw-ups – that is continuing steadfast in this confession of faith. And even when we have tried to avoid suffering for Jesus' sake, He continues to love and to embrace and to renew us day after day so that we have new strength and energy to speak and to think and to act and to decide in ways that conform to His will for us and His desire to save all people.

This Lord of ours invites and empowers us to join in His family business. That business is leading people to a saving knowledge of God through Jesus His Son. And you have the opportunity to do that. It may be children or grandchildren who hang on your every word and who want to know what matters most to you. It may be co-workers who have spotted something different about your attitude and want to know what it is that makes the difference. It may be neighbors who come to you with their life's troubles, looking for guidance and direction. Keep in mind God's ultimate desire, that all people would be saved, and be part of His company of messengers who bring a word of hope to those who are in need.

**Conclusion:** The ultimate desire of God is proven by His consistently working toward the salvation of people through His Son's sacrifice. God wants all people to be saved, that is, to come to the knowledge of the truth. Jesus is the living proof of that reality. So trust in Him, live in Him, pray to Him for His Spirit, and live in a way that enlarges His family as you support and spread His truth wherever you go, and whomever you meet. For the sake of Jesus, our living Lord and Redeemer, AMEN!