

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, October 23, 2022
20th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 30/Year C
2023 Annual Stewardship Campaign
First Reading: Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22
Second Reading: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Gospel Reading: Luke 18:9-14
Sermon Title: “Hope Happens Here – Week 3”

Theme

Genuine repentance and pretentious piety stand in stark contrast in the gospel and all around us. All creation stands in need of God’s forgiveness. Keep the faith. God’s people shall be accounted righteous for Jesus’ sake. Our God is merciful to sinners. For this we worship and glorify God forever.

Texts:

First Reading: Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22

⁷Although our iniquities testify against us,
act, O LORD, for your name’s sake;
our apostasies indeed are many,
and we have sinned against you.

⁸O hope of Israel,
its savior in time of trouble,
why should you be like a stranger in the land,
like a traveler turning aside for the night?

⁹Why should you be like someone confused,
like a mighty warrior who cannot give help?
Yet you, O LORD, are in the midst of us,
and we are called by your name;
do not forsake us!

¹⁰Thus says the LORD concerning this people:
Truly they have loved to wander,
they have not restrained their feet;
therefore the LORD does not accept them,
now he will remember their iniquity
and punish their sins.

¹⁹Have you completely rejected Judah?
Does your heart loathe Zion?
Why have you struck us down
so that there is no healing for us?
We look for peace, but find no good;
for a time of healing, but there is terror instead.
²⁰We acknowledge our wickedness, O LORD,
the iniquity of our ancestors,
for we have sinned against you.
²¹Do not spurn us, for your name's sake;
do not dishonor your glorious throne;
remember and do not break your covenant with us.
²²Can any idols of the nations bring rain?
Or can the heavens give showers?
Is it not you, O LORD our God?
We set our hope on you,
for it is you who do all this.

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

⁶As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come.
⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

¹⁶At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! ¹⁷But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel: Luke 18:9-14

⁹[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Sermon

Welcome back to our 2023 Annual Stewardship Campaign, "Hope Happens Here." In last week's sermon, and in this and next week's sermons, I will re-introduce you to members of Zion who have found hope here at Zion to emphasize the important and vital ministry we do *corporately* here at Zion.

Ken Faust was a single father to three children and had been divorced for twenty-five years when Audrey Weaver, a single mother of five children, four of whom survived, moved into the same Allentown PA mobile home park. One of Ken's daughters suggested he help the new lady settle into her new home and so he did. At the end of that first day, Ken kissed Audrey on the cheek. They began to date and were married six months later.

There were no step-children for Ken and Audrey, he had *his* and she had *hers*, but the way they lived, the children were simply *theirs*.

Ken, who was a repairman for Sears, and Audrey who taught in a private school, decided to retire in Youngstown to be closer to Audrey's daughter, Kathy, and that is how the Fausts ended up just about three blocks from Zion Lutheran Church.

Audrey told me that Christmas was the most meaningful holiday to Ken and the Faust's first experience of Zion was coming to the Live Nativity. Though Ken was raised Lutheran, over the years he and Audrey settled into the Baptist tradition until they gave Zion a try. Ken and Audrey Faust visited Zion for the first time on March 17, 2019. Once was all it took and you folks at Zion just adopted them into the family.

Ken ushered during his membership here, and he told me on more than one occasion that he wished he could do more, but he had back issues that prevented it.

During the worst days of the pandemic, spring of 2020, the pain in his back got so great that he drove himself to the hospital. While diagnosing his pain, it was discovered that Ken had cancer. He never left the hospital alive, dying on June 7, 2020. Audrey was not prepared for Ken's passing. And honestly, who of us was? He was here and then he was gone.

Those were dark days for Audrey. She was devastated. She told me that Ken was the best husband anyone could have, and it was his goal in life to do as much for her as he could. Now that he was gone, Audrey confessed to me that she didn't want to go on, and didn't know how she could go on without Ken.

And that is when the so-called lunch bunch stepped in. The lunch bunch is a group of back pew sitters who, over time have gotten to know each other and enjoy each other's company and go out to lunch after Sunday service. Without missing a beat, they just swept Audrey up and basically forced her to get on with her life, and she is so thankful they did.

Audrey doesn't drive, so someone picks her up and brings her to worship and other events at church. Another of the group takes her grocery shopping and that always results in lunch. Audrey now puts her teaching skills and love for children to use serving in our Kidz Church program. She has told me innumerable times that it is because of this church, that her hope has been restored. She has discovered that "Hope Happens Here."

Two other bits about Audrey. As sometimes happens with adult children, Audrey had an estranged relationship with one of her sons. It bothered her a lot and she spoke to me about it often. I tried to contact the son myself, and then got a colleague pastor in South Carolina involved. Nothing worked, but I encouraged Audrey to be patient and persistent in prayer, as Jesus taught in last week's Gospel Reading. Well, I have good news! That relationship has been restored! "Hope Happens Here!"

And remember how I told you that after Ken died Audrey told me she didn't want to go on? Well, last weekend, the lunch bunch went to a Big Band concert, and the lead singer of the band noticed Audrey chair-dancing and came over to her and asked her to dance – in front of everyone! She was the belle of the ball!

I hope Audrey's story touched your heart. And I hope you understand what I mean when I say that "Hope Happens Here!"

You know, hope is really all we have. Do you realize that?

Carol and I live frugal lives, but throughout our adult lives, we have been savers and have amassed what we hope will be enough to retire on someday. But in a blink of an eye, it seems, the value of our retirement account can go up or down by tens of thousands of dollars. And, there is no guarantee that we will live long enough to spend it either.

I'm a news junkie and it seems like we have gone through one natural disaster after another in this country where people's lives are completely disrupted in an instant by fire or flood or hurricane or tornado. We are watching the news nightly as Putin indiscriminately destroys the lives of innocent Ukrainians. In the blink of an eye people's lives can be changed forever if they are lucky, and or, if they are not lucky, their lives can be ended. Life can be precarious, and so I say again, hope is all we really have. The richest and the poorest will find out at their life's end – hope is all we really have.

And that is why it is so important that we are here. Ken and Audrey knew none of us before they showed up on March 19, 2019, and I dare say, some of you were among their best friends before Ken died, and are clearly Audrey's best friends since he died. One little story about a little old widow lady whose life was changed because "Hope Happens Here."

I hope that Zion is around doing ministry for at least another 200 years, but that really depends on our willingness to support the ministry that God is doing through us.

I am sure that you are aware that we are experiencing double-digit inflation. You are aware of it because you have seen the cost of everything you need to provide for your family go up in price.

Then it should come as no surprise to you that everything your church needs to sustain its ministry has gone up too. You would not believe how much lawn mowing and snow removal costs have gone up – mostly because it is a challenge to find seasonal employees willing to work.

The Give Table reports that tithes and offerings to the church have been flat for many years, but especially during these last pandemic years. By flat, I mean that

the same ten bucks someone may be putting in the offering plate for the last ten years won't prosper this ministry. You have to know that!

The computer that hosts our church management software is on its last leg, and last Council meeting the Council approved spending up to \$1000 to replace it. Do you know how many of our 625 members don't give \$1000 a year? Two-thirds of them!

For a couple of years, ministries like Sunday School, Bible Study, and Vacation Bible School, were cut from the budget because they didn't happen – that only makes sense, right? Then this last summer we hosted VBS for the first time since 2019 and guess what? We didn't have it in the budget! Same with Sunday School and several other ministries. Not everything the church does is about money, but the best way to teach the faith to our children, to make good on our baptismal promises, does take money.

Although your church has aggressively gone after grants like the Payroll Protection Program, Bureau of Worker's Comp, and Ohio Department of Job and Family Services grants and has been awarded some, your church has only one source of revenue, and that is its members and committed regular attending non-members. And so we come to you.

You that are on social security are getting the biggest increase you have received since 1981, 8.7%! Congratulations! I know for some of you that fixed income is all you have and that big increase doesn't account for increases in Medicare premiums, but I hope you share some of your increase with your church.

For those of us who are still working, increases are all over the map. I hope you all get a big increase too, you need it to keep up, but whatever you get, I hope you do the right thing and increase your giving proportionally.

In the Gospel Reading, Jesus told a parable that contrasted a Pharisee who thought a lot of himself and made a show of giving gobs of money, with sinners who were so aware of their sinfulness that they humbly gave generously as a thankful response to the forgiveness they received. At the risk of you thinking I am the Pharisee, allow me to be your example, as I promised to be in the vows of ordination. Whatever

Carol and I receive, we commit to giving our church *more than* 10% of our gross before taxes.

And while I would argue with Paul that I am the foremost of sinners, I still have hope that I too will receive a crown of righteousness at the end of my days, not because of anything I did or because I was a good steward of my money, but only because of the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. And because of all that God in Christ has done and I hope will do, I count it as an honor to give a portion back to Christ's church, Zion Lutheran Church. I hope you feel the same way.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

This week you were mailed your 2023 commitment card. Each year I ask you to discuss it as a family and together, decide what you can afford to do. You that have children are given a teachable moment. Discuss your level of commitment with your children. Pass on your family values to another generation. It just might be the most powerful lesson on faith, hope, and love that you will teach them. And then return your commitment card as soon as you can.

Each year some members refuse to fill out the card and return it. I've heard a dozen reasons why and I don't understand any of them. How would you feel if your employer said to you that the pay they are going to give you is a private matter between them and God?

All the Give Table is hoping to accomplish is to develop a realistic budget for you to approve in January. It is holy work that they are doing, and when we don't participate we frustrate that effort. Help the Give Table be good stewards of our tithes and offerings.

Look around. Where else do you find hope? Hope for all the things that really matter. You won't find it at your school, your employer, your buddies, or your bank. But I promise you this, you will find it here. Hope Happens Here!

Prayer

Gracious God you are so good to us, raining down blessing upon blessing. Give us glad and generous hearts, so that we are cheerful to give a portion to your Son's church, Zion Lutheran Church, so that it can continue to be a beacon of hope in a world where hope is difficult to find. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen