

Sermon – Luke 8:26-39
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Grace Lutheran Church
7 Pentecost – Year C
28 July 2019

“All of This and Eternal Life, Too”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Eleven days ago, I drove our rental car through the desert, heading for a place I'd wanted to visit before I even really knew it was an actual place. We were headed to Joshua Tree National Park, a beautiful, rough piece of creation where the Colorado and the Mojave Deserts meet. The park and its unique trees entered my consciousness through *The Joshua Tree*, the album by the Irish rock band, U2. In 1987, I listened to the album so often that I wore out several copies of the cassette tape on my Walkman while delivering newspapers. The album evokes the spiritual searching of a nation, in musical imagery that is no less powerful today. And while I find other tracks on the record more enjoyable or poignant, the second song has always stood out to me, as Bono sings with yearning, “I still haven't found what I'm looking for.” Eleven days ago, 43-year-old me found something that thirteen-year-old me had longed looked for, the landscape that inspired one of my favorite works of art. And standing there in the midst of Joshua Trees, their weird, grizzled limbs grasping toward heaven, I thought about what I'm looking for now: Peace. Joy. Health for those I love. Solutions to problems in our world that make life better for all people, regardless of what they look like or where they've come from. A life of meaning, in which I know where I'm going. Simple things, at least at first glance. But so often hard to find. When white settlers moved through the Mojave and saw these trees for the first time, they named them after Joshua, who led the people of God through the desert, toward the Promised Land. They remembered how Joshua had cast his

- grasping, grizzled hands heavenward in prayer, trusting that God would lead them faithfully in the desert. Like Joshua and the trees named for him, we move through the desert, looking, searching, praying. Will we find what we're looking for? When?
2. Seeing Jesus at prayer, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. And while we might read these words in straightforward and solemn tones, I wonder if the disciples' request wasn't impulsive, surprising even to themselves. They had an idea of Jesus' identity as the Son of God – surely, they saw in him the possibility for new avenues to God's audience chamber, new opportunities to learn how to be in communion with the same God who once led their ancestors across the desert. *Show us how to do this, Jesus!* Jesus obliges. As he does, he doesn't mention sacrifice or pilgrimage, location or posture. And he's none too flowery. Approach God as you would a parent, he teaches; you can even call him, "Dad." Remember that God is holy. Ask for what God wants to give, for what God is going to give: the Kingdom. Pray for what you need, not for what you want. Forgive us, and remind us that we should do the same. Help us in times of trouble. *The end.* That's all. Jesus has more advice, too: Be persistent. If the doorway to God seems locked, keep pounding on it. God will answer. Ask; seek; knock. The door will open. And finally, God will give good gifts, not bad.
 3. As we wander through life's deserts and barren places, Jesus invites us to throw our hands and our hearts, our dreams and our desires, heavenward. God, Jesus promises, is listening. God, Jesus promises, will answer. And yet still so often, we haven't found what we're looking for. Why? Well, there are several things at play. First, we might just be looking for the wrong things, things that look attractive but end up being no better than snakes and scorpions. Second, God's ways are not our ways; God is the hallowed One, not you; not me. We just don't always know what God is up to, and part of faith is learning to be okay with that. Finally, the world we live in is a broken place.

Not all illnesses will be cured. Not all relationships will be mended. Not all geopolitical messes will be cleaned up. Not all evil will be erased from human hearts. Not until the end of all things and the new beginning, anyway.

4. So what do we do when we still haven't found what we're looking for? Throw your hands and hearts to God in prayer! You will be changed by learning to seek God, and to seek godly things in life. And God's listening, that's a promise. As for the rest, the great big jumble of good and bad and everything in between? In a recent sermon, Pastor Gorden Estenson (also known as my favorite father-in-law) shared a story from his time as a military chaplain serving in the Middle East. He had become frustrated with how certain things were being handled, and it finally got to the point that he went to see the chaplain in charge. The man, a Roman Catholic priest, listened politely. When Gorden had finished, the priest waited for a moment, smiled and said: "Gordy, Gordy, Gordy. All of this and heaven, too." Of course things will not always be as we'd like; we will experience pain and loss. Things for which we fervently pray will sometimes not come to pass. But the promise is present, sure and certain. All of this – the good and the bad, the joys and the sorrows, the living and the dying – all of this, and eternal life, too. So what do we do when we're searching and lost? We pray.

5. We pray, because the One to whom we pray is the God to whom Jesus prayed; is the God that Jesus *is*, for that matter. And this Jesus is the Son of God who knew exactly what he was looking for and went to go get it. He is the One who left heaven to enter the desert with us, we who had long since wandered off, to find us and bring us home. He is the One who, after telling his friends to keep knocking on that locked door until God opened it, finally just went and ripped the deathly thing off its hinges, who rolled the stone of sin and suffering away. He is the one who knocks at the narrow door of our grave chambers and demands that we come back out, into life, now and forever. In

the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, into which you have been baptized, God has found what was lost: You. And me.

6. So what do we do? Pray! We won't always get what we're looking for. But the door has been kicked in and resurrection life has come rushing out. The things most needed – forgiveness and life - have been freely given. In this confidence, throw your hearts and your hands heavenward, and then get to work, trusting that God is at work, too. Trusting even that improbable reality that you might be God's answer to someone else's prayer. Pray, and get to work. Pray, as we send high school youth and chaperones to work alongside the people of Appalachia. Pray, as we bid farewell for now to Lyle and Jane. Pray, as we name loved ones who have died. Like trees in the desert, plant deep roots of faithfulness that drink from the lifegiving waters of baptism. Build yourselves up in Christ, as Paul wrote to the Colossians. Reach toward heaven with hands and hearts, no matter how grizzled they seem. And pray. You may not find what you're looking for, and no doubt some things you'd never want to find will find you. So it goes and we don't, we can't, always know why. But remember: All of this and eternal life, too. For Jesus knew what he was looking for, and he gave himself away to find it. To find you. To give you life that is abundant now and into eternity. Yes, keep praying. Ask; seek; knock. All of this and heaven, too. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.