

Jeremiah 28:5-9, Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42 (Pentecost 4)

### ***INTRO***

Well, good morning everyone, and thank you once again for tuning in to today's message for the 4th Sunday of Pentecost, and already the last Sunday of June! We're in a weird space in which it feels like time is often moving at a snail's pace, and yet at the same time we're getting ready to turn the calendar over to another month yet again.

Today's OT reading is Jeremiah 28:5-9 — this is when Israel is being sent into exile to Babylon, and the false prophet Hananiah prophesies that the exile will only be a blip in the screen of Israel's history — that the people will be back in Judah within two years. Jeremiah, the true prophet of God says, "Well that would be nice, but it just isn't true" — he knows that Israel's exile will be prolonged. Then our Psalm is Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18. The NT lesson is Romans 6:12-23, in which Paul is talking about being either slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness. Paul says that there's no such thing as human free will — we are enslaved & controlled by sin, or we've been freed from sin to serve God & to live holy, righteous lives — there's no in-between.

And then our gospel lesson today is a really short one — only three verses: Matthew 10:40-42. This is part of a larger passage in which Jesus is sending out his disciples to do his good work in the world around them — to pray for people & to heal them, to cast out demons, and to announce the good news of the gospel — that the kingdom of God is at hand in and through Jesus. And while he's preparing them to do this he encourages them with these words that even though many people will reject them & their message, some will receive them — and this is important for us to dwell on as we reflect on the ways in which Jesus has sent us out as well into the world to bear witness to him. And then, once you've read these lessons, feel free to continue with this recording.

### ***DENIAL***

Well, I don't know how each of you are coping — we've had such a strange & unusual year, and it doesn't look like it's going to end anytime soon. As summer wears on, we're starting to see more & more people get out, get back to work, but also sometimes we're seeing people behave as if this virus didn't even exist. I saw a report the other day of a heat wave hitting the UK & of people in the south of

England hitting the beaches to enjoy the sun — maybe you saw this too — pictures of tens of thousands of people nose to nose on the sand & in the water. Local officials were lambasting people for their recklessness, calling it a “major incident.” You can just about hear Nova Scotia premier Stephen McNeil urging everyone to “stay the blazes home.”

We’re pretty fortunate here in Stettler that we have lots of space & not a large population, so that when we do want to get outside we can space out pretty good, but we probably all know people who’ve had their doubts about this whole Covid thing — in denial even as to whether it exists or not, or at least acting as though they don’t believe it does. We probably all know various examples of conspiracy theories that people subscribe to — I read recently about an uptick in a movement of people called “Flat-Earthers”, who don’t believe that the Earth is round, and the movement is gaining popularity.

We sometimes deny things — and not just things about the world around us, but things about ourselves too. Sometimes we play the victim card more than we ought, denying that our circumstances might sometimes be the consequences of our own actions & decisions. Sometimes we deny that we have addictions, believing that we’re still in control of ourselves & of our appetites when in reality we aren’t. When we come into conflict with each other, we might deny that we are in the wrong. And sometimes we deny what we’re truly feeling or going through. When we go through hardship or loss, we feel that we’ve got to put on a brave face and say, “Everything’s fine.” Or having lost a loved one we might tell ourselves that we’ve got to rejoice that our lost loved one is in Heaven when in reality we honestly just hurt and ache at their absence.

You might know the sketch of the Black Knight in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The Black Knight challenges King Arthur to a duel, but gets limb after limb chopped off by King Arthur until all that’s left of him is a torso on the ground, still challenging King Arthur to fight saying, “It’s only a flesh wound” & believing that he’s invincible. It’s a ridiculous scene, but quite poignant as we can be like the Black Knight — living in denial about our circumstances & abilities. Are there things in life that you’ve been in denial about before? Now?

### ***DENIAL OF DEPRAVITY***

In our OT lesson Israel is being taken into exile to Babylon for its idolatry & rebellion against God. And the false prophet Hananiah is feeding the people with just the message that they want to hear. They’re

in denial about their circumstances, believing that they'll be back home in Judah in just a couple of short years. But Jeremiah knows better — he knows that the exile is a very real thing, and that God has been warning the people for years that unless they turn themselves around exile is going to be coming over the horizon towards them.

There's consequences for our rebellion & idolatry — consequences for our sin. Paul says in our NT lesson, "For the wages of sin is death", and it doesn't help to pretend otherwise. In fact, Paul has such a pessimistic view of human nature that he says that before encountering Jesus we were slaves to sin, bound and held under it's control, unable to help ourselves, or fix ourselves, or to do good.

Luther, who always had such funny ways of saying things said, "We're all donkeys being ridden by something" — there's a sense in which we aren't really in control of our own will. Like Bob Dylan singing, "You've gotta serve somebody" — we either are slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness.

This week was the 490th anniversary of the signing & the presentation of the Augsburg Confession during the Reformation (June 25th, 1530). I know you were all celebrating this important anniversary on Thursday, well done!. The Augsburg Confession is one of the most important theological documents of the Lutheran church, it was written by the Reformers to summarize the Lutheran understanding of Scripture and of the Gospel. And the document echoes Paul's pessimism about human nature, saying,

*"...since the fall of Adam all [people] who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all [people] are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mother's wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit." —Augsburg Confession, Article II "Original Sin", 29.*

What it's saying is that sin infects each & every one of us — to our own destruction. C.S. Lewis said the same thing when he wrote that our desires & appetites are misplaced:

*"We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." —C.S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory, 26.*

Well, we'd better not take up the offer of a holiday at the sea at the moment, at least not just yet, C.S. Lewis, because it's Covid time... but his point is valid. We are offered joy in Jesus, but our hearts are turned in on themselves, seeking joy in anything but.

### ***THE REWARD OF FAITH***

Now granted, that all sounds pretty depressing, but it's our predicament and the Bible warns us against living in denial of it. Thankfully, the story doesn't end there, because something happens — something unexpected, profound, & life altering. Jesus enters the story of our denial and depravity & leads us to faith in him, delivering us from slavery to sin and to a slavery to righteousness instead — “from death to life.”

We have an apple tree in our yard that's growing little apples for the first time — little marbles that are swelling to ping-pong ball size, and hopefully soon to good, big apples. Now I might stand at that tree every day urging it to grow apples either subconsciously or by imploring it out loud, but my standing there telling it to grow apples isn't going to make any difference. You don't have to tell an apple tree to produce apples, it just does — that's part of its nature.

When we come to faith in Jesus, Paul tells us that we become slaves of righteousness & start producing fruit — spiritual fruit — naturally. We just can't help ourselves — it's a part of our new nature. Now, that doesn't mean that our ongoing struggle with sin just floats away, not at all — but the ability to bear spiritual fruit is a gift worked in us through the Holy Spirit.

And when Jesus sends his disciples out into the world to serve others & tell them about him he reminds us that people will respond. They will respond to the fruit that they see, and the message that they hear. Not always, but every once in a while our lives & witness lead others to Jesus. And maybe it's just a step in the right direction, but regardless we are links in a chain of events leading folks to faith.

We might live in denial that the world is round, or that Covid is really a thing, or more significantly, we may live in denial that we've hurt people, or that we are jealous, or critical, or selfish. We may be in denial about our pet idolatries. But we need not be in denial about our need for help, for a rescue, or of the promises that Jesus offers to us — that there is a reward for those who receive Jesus'

messengers & his message. And that that reward is a new life, freedom from our enslavements, and eternity with Jesus.

Yes, "...the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." And even when we can't get together to worship & see each other's faces, church is a community that helps us & holds us & leads us home to that promise of God's. Anne Lamott writes,

*"And that is why I have stayed so close to mine [her church]—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home." —Anne Lamott, Travelling Mercies, 55.*