

## The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Hebrews 11:17-12:3,

Luke 12:49-56

Rev Joseph Highley

(transcribed from his sermon on Sunday August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022)

Good morning. It is good to be here in God's house. If you have the announcements, you can look on the back and there's a little outline for you. We will also have some slides on the screens.

When it comes to sermon writing or even paper writing, since we're about to hit that time of year, some of you it's been a few days since you've had to write papers, sometimes you just get writer's block. You stare at the blank page or the blank screen, and it's just empty. That ever happen to any of you? Happens to me all the time. I have to write a lot of different things. So what do you do when those moments happen? One recommendation is you just start writing. Well, how do you do that if you have writer's block? That's the whole block is that you can't just start writing. So, how do you start? What you can do is you can start to do the things, you know, you have to. You get your name and your date on the paper, and then you stare at the screen and now there's actually some words there.

Now it's not so depressing, maybe not quite so daunting. I'm sitting here this past week, I'm looking at this blank page, blank screen of a sermon, and I start that process. Sermon, August 14th, 2022. It's a good start text. Luke 12: 49 – 56 and Hebrews 11: 17 – 12:3.

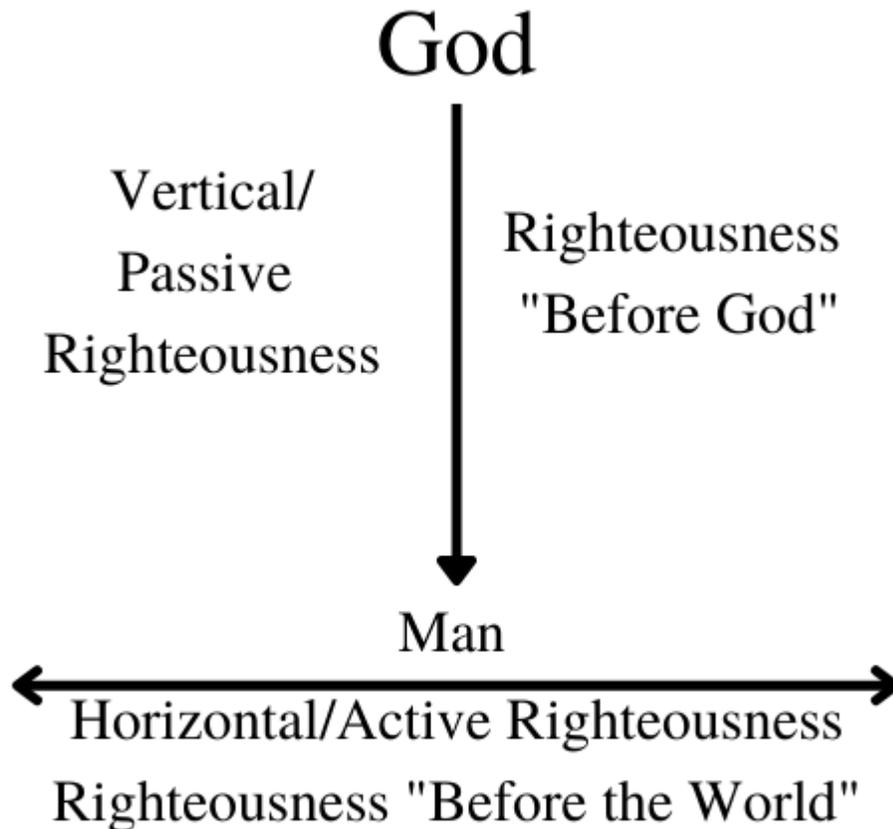
Now I'm really grooving. I am cooking with fire. Then I start off every sermon, “Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.” Because that's how I begin most sermons; Apostolic blessing. Got it. Boom. It's on there. Then I realized that's when I had some problems. Because then I look at this passage from Luke 12 and oh my, where is the grace and mercy in this passage? Jesus sure doesn't seem to be very meek and lowly here. Jesus doesn't seem to be very loving here. Is he? Grace and mercy? No, he says, I came to cast fire on earth. There goes the grace and mercy. What about peace? I can still start off with the peace. Can we keep the peace, Jesus? Please, Jesus, can we keep the peace in there? Verse 51. Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, no peace. Great. There goes my intro. Thank you, Jesus. Can't even get the first words on the page of grace, mercy, peace to you. Instead, it's no grace, no mercy, no peace be to us. Amen. Maybe we need a different word of prayer to begin this sermon.

So what shall it be? Well, I invite you to join me for a word of prayer.

Help. Amen.

That's the prayer. That's the word of prayer. That's how we begin this sermon. Help. Let's face it. We need it. That is the nature of faith to cling to Christ alone for all of our help and support. Jesus doesn't mince words here. We are lost. We are left in a world that is just burning around us.

There's not peace on earth. There's not unity. There's division among loved ones and much of the harm and damage is done by Jesus himself. Last week, we talked about faith, clinging to Christ in all things. We talked about there being two kinds of righteousness. There's a vertical passive righteousness, which is our righteousness before God, our creator. This is the righteousness that we just receive. We just receive it in faith. We contribute absolutely nothing to our standing before God. It is all just grace, all this love, life and forgiveness from God just poured down us that we receive. That's why it's passive.



Then we talked about the horizontal active righteousness, the righteousness before the whole world. This is a righteousness where we are actively loving and serving our neighbor. This is righteousness that flows out of our faith in Christ to our neighbor. The connecting point to all that is faith. Faith, which receives the vertical from God and then flows out to our neighbor. The concept is not just a concept or idea of faith. It's actually a faith in something. And that something is Jesus. He is the object of our faith. The one who will not let us down. He is the author and perfecter of our faith. So that was last week. We mostly focused on that vertical relationship that we cling to faith in Christ and we discussed the things that tried to attack our faith, the devil and our sinful flesh.

Now, what about the world? What about that horizontal plane? We finished reading Hebrews chapter 1, and gospel lesson this morning, which is a whole lot of law and just hard truth. And that's the simple reality we have to face that it's going to get bad out there. It is bad out there.



That's what we've got to do. Hang in there. That's our last week. That's the first point clinging in faith to Christ. Sometimes it kind of feels like that doesn't it? You're just hanging on for dear life because it's rough out there. We're in a storm in this life. Of course, as we talked about last week, Jesus, though our grip may falter, does not let us down. But it's bad out there and we shouldn't expect any different. After all it wasn't different for all those saints that went before us. While they performed all these great miracles that the writer of Hebrews lists, they also faced a whole lot too. Look at verse 35 of Hebrews 11. This is just cheery for our Sunday morning. Some were tortured refusing to accept release so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised.

Yikes. How can we have faith in a God like that? That would allow such things to happen to his saints? How indeed? That God gave the very worst it to his son, Jesus, who took on human flesh. He showed no mercy, no grace, no peace for his very own son, but gave him over into death. He did that for you. To bring you back to him, to return you back into the fold. You, who had rebelled against God in sin to return you back to him.

Just look at Hebrews chapter 12, verse two, Jesus endured all this willingly. It says, for the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross. For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross. Joy that could accomplish the Father's will and bring you back. And it was the Father's will that you would be reconciled with him. That was God's promise. And that is God's promise. God has promised you life. But, oh man, it doesn't always seem like it does it. Instead, we look around us and we see only death and destruction, sadness and anger, heartache, brokenness, illness. We look around and we see fathers turn against sons, sons against fathers, daughters against mothers, mothers against daughters. We see daughter-in-laws against mother-in-laws and mother-in-laws against daughter-in-laws. We see people in extreme anger over the mere mention of God. We see relationships fractured apart because one person has faith in Christ. We are

powerless to fix any of it. Powerless. There's nothing we can do. We can't just shape up, dust it off, polish it up, tinker it a little bit around and hope to have any fix of the problems in this world.

No grace, no mercy, no peace. No amount of human progress, invention, technology, science or anything else can solve this. The problem simply goes too deep. It goes to our very core, right into our hearts, our sin sick souls. There's only one that can save us from this. And that is Christ Jesus. And that's why we cling to him alone in faith. You are secure in this Christ. Christ will not let you down. This Christ, though all the world be in complete chaos, will not abandon you. Like the saints of old we don't get to take hold of the promise fully until we will rise again on the last day. But until then we cling to Christ and the promise that he's already given you.

We wait in faith because God is faithful to his promises. You are secure in Christ. This faith in Christ, it forms you. Hebrews chapter 12 verse one says it's like being surrounded by a whole great cloud of witnesses. Let's go to that picture there that we have of that. This was on the front of the bulletins.



Surrounded by a whole great cloud of witnesses. Everyone that has gone before us in the faith is pushing us forward to lay aside everything that we burden ourselves with, to lay aside the sin that clings to us and to run forward to Christ alone, focusing on him alone. We can be inspired by the things those saints of old have done.

Look at just this one example. There's a man named Polycarp. We call him Saint Polycarp. What a name! Polycarp was a disciple of the apostle John. He lived in the second century. So the apostle John learned from Jesus. John lived into a very old age and he then trained this man, Polycarp, as his disciple. Polycarp is pretty connected to Jesus, one generation removed. When he was an old man, he went through one of the early persecutions in the church. When his captives came to capture him, they came with swords and battle gear and here he is just this old man sitting there. And the soldier said, why are we getting this guy? Well, it's our orders. We have to do it. So we have to take you down.

Polycarp said, can I have one hour to pray?

They said, sure. You can have one hour.

He said, someone bring these men my food and my drink and give them food and drink while I pray.

So then they brought him into the arena where the Roman proconsul tried to get him to deny Christ. He said, man, have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar and just repent. Repent of Christ and I will set you free.

Polycarp's response? 86 years, I have served him and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king and my savior.

So he said fine, we're going to threaten you to be torn apart by wild beasts.

Polycarp said fine, if that's what you want to do, tear me apart by wild beasts.

They said, okay, well fine, if you're not so concerned about that, we're going to burn you alive.

Polycarp's response, You threaten me with fire, which burns for an hour and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring whatever you want.

So they said, fine, we'll burn you alive. They collected wood in a huge pile and they had a stake in the middle and they were going to nail him in place to the wooden post.

Polycarp said, leave me as I am for he, that gives me strength to endure the fire will enable me not to struggle without the help of your nails.

They said, okay and they simply tied his hands behind his back.

Polycarp began praying and this was his prayer. Oh, Lord God almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of you, the God of angels, powers and every creature, and of all the righteous who live before you. I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs, sharing the cup of Christ and the resurrection of the eternal life, both of soul and body through the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received this day as an acceptable sacrifice as you, the true God have predestined, revealed to me and now fulfilled. I praise you for all these things. I bless you and glorify you along with the everlasting Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, to you, with him, through the Holy Ghost, be glory, both now and forever. Amen.

Then they lit the fires. And this is the first hand account of what was written about those who watched the fires. Then the fire was lit and the flame blazed ferociously. We, who were privileged to witness it, saw a great miracle and this is why we have been preserved to tell the story. The fire shaped itself like the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind and formed a circle around the body of the martyr. Inside it, he looked not like flesh that is burnt, but like bread that is baked or gold and silver glowing in a furnace. And we smelt a sweet scent like frankincense or some precious spices. Eventually when those wicked men saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to pierce him with a dagger. When he did this such a great quantity of blood flowed out that the fire was completely extinguished. The crowd were amazed at the difference between the unbelievers and the elect, of whom the great Polycarp was surely one, having been in our times, an apostolic and prophetic teacher and the Bishop of the church in Smyrna.

Now that, brothers and sisters, is an incredible story of faith in action. That is a faith that clings to Christ, even through the turmoil and pain of this world. That is faith that could only be created by the Holy Spirit whom Polycarp himself gives credit for.

But you know the craziest part of all that, and this is the part that I think just really gets me. You ready for this? That is the very same faith that you have. That faith is the very same faith that the Holy Spirit has created in you through Christ Jesus. You don't have some sort of lesser or inferior faith. You have the same faith created by the Holy Spirit. You are formed by that faith in the image of Christ. So while maybe you aren't asked to be burned at the stake, through faith you are called to be faithful to the places that God has called you, to be a self-sacrificing husband and wife, to be an obedient child, to be a loving and kind neighbor, to respond with kindness when someone gives you anger, to respond with charity when someone tries to take advantage of you, to remain faithful no matter the struggle of this world; that is the faith that Christ and the Holy Spirit is using to form you.

If we can go to the two kinds of righteousness chart again, we see the horizontal lines that are going out into the world. This is where you're called to live out your faith. The possibilities for you in this faith are endless. So many ways that you can live it out and be faithful. So go and

love and serve where God has placed you at in your life. Lean on your faith in Christ through all, and he will carry you secure.

While this world may hold suffering, while it may hold no peace or grace or mercy, you have all these things in Christ Jesus our Lord through faith. Cling to Christ. In his name, Amen. While we are not promised peace on earth may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in the one true faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.