



DIVE DEEPER

Sermon Series Guide
September 13 - 27, 2026

DIVE DEEPER



It's time to dumpster dive – yes you read that right. As a teenager, I will never forget the many times my best friend, who wore retainers, accidentally left them at restaurants. She had nicely folded them in a napkin to not offend anyone around her. When the meal was done, we would drive away – a bit of time would go by and then she would remember she left her retainers on the table. Of course, the server would just throw away the napkin and you guessed it – we would be dumpster diving for those retainers. The worst was at a Mexican Restaurant! We always found them – but that story makes me think about God- weird, I know.

I think about our dumpster-diving God. I mean no disrespect by calling God that. On the contrary, I have a soaring adoration for the infinite God who left a pristine, sinless heaven to search through the filth, rubbish, and treasure of this world. God wasn't afraid to get dirty, to forgive, to grant mercy, all humbly. It is time for us to really read these stories, place ourselves there and DIVE DEEPER – into ourselves – through the trash and treasures!

We live in a lake town. We are surrounded by water and understand the concept of diving. We are baptized people of God – through the waters of baptism we are renewed, forgiven, refreshed, claimed, loved, and get to start new every day. Throughout the summer we have been challenged to DIVE IN at First Lutheran Church! Dive into worship, dive into our faith, dive in by getting involved, dive in through generosity, dive in wherever the summer takes you.

This fall we are asking you to dive deeper, even as autumn herald's cooler temperatures, fall sports, and harvest. The season may bring excitement and dread, exhaustion, or relief for your family. In the face of different autumn experiences and emotions, one thing the church can do is offer blessings. We ask God to bless the ordinary things and people, and the ordinary becomes extraordinary! The depth and breadth of God's love exceeds our understanding and knowledge. It exceeds what we believe to be fair or just for our neighbor and for ourselves. When asking you to dive deeper, we recognize it pushes against everything the world teaches for God's grace is immense!

This fall we are dealt a bunch of hard Matthean parables. These parables speak loudly and bluntly to our more negative human tendencies (as Christians put it, our sin): We do not forgive as widely or deeply as the Lord's Prayer calls us to—seventy-seven times is a stretch. We are less than generous with our own forgiveness and judge God to be a little more abounding in steadfast love than strictly necessary. God's sense of fairness—everyone receives the usual daily wage - clashes with our sense of fairness: receiving exactly what you deserve. Further, these parables expose our penchant not to do what we say we will do, no matter the consequences. Jesus' stories as told by Matthew are raw and real. But if we truly listen to the ways they accuse us, the accusation can become a blessing. After all, we can't work on changing what we don't see as wrong.

This FALL we continue in the season of Pentecost and with the Sermon Series: **DIVE DEEPER.**

✠ Deeper Forgiveness ✠ Deeper Mercy ✠ Deeper Humility

First Lutheran Church, we've got this because God has this. We meet God at the intersection where faith and life meet. We DIVE DEEPER because we don't do it alone. We have one another as well as the Holy Spirit guiding and directing us. We can extend deeper forgiveness, deeper mercy, and deeper humility because as baptized children of God – we receive it in spades!

September 13, 2026 – 16 Sunday After Pentecost

Theme: Deeper Forgiveness

- **Scripture Readings:** Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35
- **Key Ideas:** We sin against one another, and Jesus' challenge that we forgive seventy-seven times reveals God's boundless mercy. When we hear the words of forgiveness in worship and sign ourselves with the cross, we are renewed in baptism to be signs of reconciliation in the world.
- **Daily Discipleship:** 14th Sunday After Pentecost
<https://resources.elca.org/bible-studies/year-a-time-after-pentecost-2/>

September 20, 2026 – 17 Sunday After Pentecost

Theme: Deeper Mercy

- **Scripture Reading:** Jonah 3:10—4:11; Matthew 20:1-16
- **Key Ideas:** Matthew narrates one of Jesus' controversial parables in which Jesus says that the reign of God is like that of a landowner who pays his workers the same wage no matter what time of day they began to work. When God changes God's mind about punishing Nineveh for their evil ways, Jonah is angry. Yet God is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. In baptism we receive the grace of God that is freely given to all. As Martin Luther wrote, in the presence of God's mercy we are all beggars.
- **Daily Discipleship:** 11th Sunday after Pentecost
<https://resources.elca.org/bible-studies/year-a-time-after-pentecost-2/>

September 27, 2026 – 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Theme: Deeper Humility

- **Scripture Reading:** Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Matthew 21:23-32
- **Key Ideas:** Jesus' parable about two sons who don't do what they say reveals surprises in the reign of God. In the reading from Ezekiel, the people claim the ways of the Lord are unfair, while God offers repentance and new life. Nourished by the broken bread and shared cup, we offer our lives for the sake of our needy world.
- **Daily Discipleship:** 12th Sunday after Pentecost
<https://resources.elca.org/bible-studies/year-a-time-after-pentecost-2/>

➔ **The Daily Discipleship resources are free Bible Study resources from the ELCA website. You can print them from home. However, if printing presents a problem, we would be delighted to print a copy for you or your Bible Study group.**

<https://resources.elca.org/bible-studies/year-a-time-after-pentecost-2/>

Daily Discipleship

Sunday, September 13 (A) - Matthew 18:21-35 –

DIVE DEEPER – Deeper Forgiveness

The Challenge of Discipleship: *Forgiveness*

Focus question: *What place does forgiveness have in your life and why?*

word of life

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Matthew 18:21 (NRSV)

Read Matthew 18:21–35.

The context of this passage is a series of teachings by Jesus to the disciples. Jesus has just taught about relationships within the church, particularly when there has been wrongdoing. Peter jumps in with an important question, “How often should I forgive?”

We can relate to Peter. Invariably he jumps to the heart of the matter—right or wrong.

Specifically, Peter wants to know, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter does not address situations outside the church. He wants to know within the church family. “When is enough—enough?” Peter suggests seven is more than sufficient. Seven is the number of perfection, the number of days of creation as described in Genesis 1.

1. *What response might Peter have expected from Jesus?*

In his response, Jesus turns things upside down by choosing to focus on grace rather than obligation. The question is changed from “How many times do I *have* to forgive?” to “Now that I am forgiven, how many times am I *free* to forgive?” And that makes all the difference. In other words, “Peter, don’t even try to keep track of the number of times you forgive. You simply will run out of fingers and toes to count.”

Specifically, Jesus says, “Not seven times but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Seventy-seven is seven (the number associated with perfection) placed along side seven (perfection). Some scholars believe the words are intended to be seven times seventy—an even larger number. Any way you look at it, the act of forgiveness is connected to perfection and the divine. We forgive only by the grace of God.

2. *How do you imagine Peter responded to the answer of Jesus?*

Forgiveness is not a mathematical equation with numbers to track. Rather, forgiving is giving the gift of forgiveness *as we have been given and received* the gift of forgiveness in Jesus.

3. *How important did forgiveness become for Peter? Consider Peter’s actions during the trial of Jesus (Matthew 26:69-75) and Peter’s encounter with the risen Christ (John 21).*
4. *What can we learn about forgiveness from Peter’s life?*

Left to our sinful selves, it is easy to count wounds, betrayals, and injustices done to us. Soon, bitterness can consume us and destroy our spirit. Jesus shows another path. He forgives Peter and us, setting all of us free to forgive. In case of any uncertainty, Jesus tells a parable about the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-34). Once more, the point is clear; forgiven disciples of Jesus are invited, commanded, and empowered to be forgiving people.

5. *Why is Jesus so emphatic about forgiving other people?*
6. *Why does Jesus spend so much time focusing on the topic of forgiveness?*

word among us

This is a difficult text to be read in congregations in the USA during the week of September 11 with all the memories of that horrific day – even so many years later. Does Jesus intend Christians to forgive the terrorists? How far-reaching is forgiveness?

1. *Does Jesus expect people to forgive the terrorists or others who commit horrific crimes?*
2. *Where does the Christian draw the line concerning forgiveness?*

On the one hand, it would be easy to dismiss this passage by restricting the implications to church members alone. After all, Peter qualified his question to Jesus. He didn't mention terrorists, malicious non-Christians, and others. Maybe forgiveness is just to be extended to other Christians.

On the other hand, we know that isn't true. The images of Jesus hanging on the cross, forgiving those who killed him as well as the thief on the cross are etched in our memories. Jesus forgives Jews and Gentiles, male and female, young and old. Jesus forgives *them*—and us.

3. *What have you learned in your own life about forgiveness?*

Jesus doesn't just forgive us and draw a line. Instead, Jesus extends forgiveness to us again and again. He forgives us seventy-seven times and then, forgives us more. That number *seventy-seven* prods us. It is perfection times perfection. How can we forgive, but by the grace of God?

4. *What role has forgiveness played in your own faith journey?*

Forgiveness is not easy, especially when it comes to the deep wounds of life. It might be done quickly when someone steps on our toes or bumps into us in the hallway; but when we face significant hurt, all good reason stops. We freeze in the trenches of resentment, bitterness and revenge. The only thing is—we lose. *Our* energy is zapped. Hatred and resentment eat away at joy and life-giving activities. Thus, we become victimized again. There is no room or energy to follow Jesus Christ in mission and ministry.

5. *What makes forgiving so difficult?*

Forgiveness does not happen with a snap of the fingers. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to forgive. Forgetting is not proof that forgiveness has or hasn't occurred. We can learn from the past wounds, so they are not repeated. Yet, in forgiving, our life is changed. We are not the same. Our relationship with those we forgive, and with those who have forgiven us, is different.

One of the most challenging things for disciples of Jesus Christ is not just to receive forgiveness for ourselves, but also to extend forgiveness to others. By the grace of God, disciples of Jesus are forgiving *and* forgiven.

6. *Who do you need to forgive? (Take a moment for silent prayer.)*

Prayer

Forgiving Christ, teach us to forgive. Amen

Dig Deeper

Luke 23:32-34

last word

This week, make a list of people who are in need of your forgiveness. Ask God to help you forgive them.

Daily Discipleship

Sunday, September 20 (A) - Matthew 20:1-16

DIVE DEEPER – Deeper Mercy

The Challenge of Discipleship: *Grace*

Focus Question: *What surprises you about God's grace?*

word of life

"[The landowner said], 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'" Matthew 20:15 (NRSV)

Read Matthew 20:1-16

1. *What are the surprises in this parable?*

The whole issue here is fairness. The owner and the workers had an agreement (Greek word *symphoneo*). The first workers were to be paid what was fair—a day's wage (a *denarius*). The owner promises to pay the others hired "whatever is right" (20:4). To the surprise of all, they are also paid a *denarius*.

Is this fair? The first hired don't think so. The owner responds to their complaint: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (A more literal translation would be, "Or is your eye evil because I am good?" 20:15)

2. *Was the landowner fair?*
3. *Was he required to be fair?*

The generosity of the landowner goes against what is seen to be fair. Similarly, God insists on acting out of grace. Fair or not, God gives all things freely. The words beginning and ending this parable challenge disciples of every age. In God's kingdom, "the last will be first, and the first ... last." (19:30, 20:16)

4. *Is God "fair" in God's generosity? Why or why not?*
5. *If God was fair and gave each person what he or she deserved, what would that mean for you?*

The Greek word for "friend" used in the parable (20:13) is only used three times in the New Testament – all in the Gospel of Matthew. In the parable of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14), the king uses this word to address the man without the proper wedding garment. The other occurrence is found in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus addresses Judas as he betrays him (Matthew 26:50). In all three, the word suggests a relationship in which the hearer has very nearly offended or scorned the speaker. (Translating the word, "Look, pal," might more aptly convey the tone of the word.)

As the first laborers grumble about the unfairness of their employer, the landowner reminds them, "Look, pal, I agreed to pay you a *denarius*, and that's what you were paid." The challenge for the workers who endured the day's labor is the owner's seemingly unfair generosity.

6. *How is the reaction of the laborers typical or atypical?*
7. *With which group of laborers do you most identify? Why?*

Jesus begins this parable, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner. . ." Take a moment to ponder the kingdom of heaven.

8. *How is the kingdom of heaven like the landowner?*
9. *Complete this sentence: "For the kingdom of heaven is like. . ."*

word among us

The following is a true story. A campus pastor was teaching a college course on the life and teachings of Jesus. As the date for the final exam approached, the class spent several hours reviewing the material. Some students requested extra individualized time with the pastor. Other students met in peer study groups, cramming for the test. One student, realizing she had to be gone the day of the exam, arranged for a make-up exam, only to be told that the make-up test would be much more difficult.

The day of the exam arrived; students sleepily filed into the room, obviously tired from a night of little sleep and lots of study. The campus pastor walked in, looking very serious. “Before we begin, I would like to read a passage from the Gospel of Matthew.” The parable of the laborers in the vineyard was read. The pastor closed the Bible and said, “This reading says that it’s all a gift – it’s all grace. So you’ve all made an A on your exam, and you’re free to go.”

The students sat, stunned, for a moment; and then something unexpected began to happen. A murmur arose from the class – a murmur of discontent. “You mean we studied all this time for nothing, and those who didn’t study or even show up today get an A too? You’ve got to be kidding! It’s just not fair!”

1. *How would you have reacted?*
2. *What was the campus pastor trying to teach the students?*
3. *When have you experienced a grace moment?*

Our whole working lives are based on an agreement that offers fair wage—we do something in order to *get* something. In the world of work there is no such thing as a free lunch.

4. *At work, are people treated more with grace or justice? Explain.,*
5. *Tell this parable with modern-day images.*

It’s no wonder we struggle with God’s grace, with mercy. Without counting the cost, God continues to give unmerited love. There is something inherently unfair in the whole idea of grace. Is it fair that, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”? Is it fair that the gift is for all of us, active members, attending every workday at the church, every worship service, and also for those of us who may be inactive members, seekers, or “back-sliders”? Remarkably—for us, for all of us, “God so loved the world....”

6. *How do you explain grace to another person?*
7. *How have you been able to receive the gift of God’s grace in your life?*

It’s just not fair, this grace upon grace. It’s just not fair, and thank God it’s not!

8. *What in this parable do you find challenging as a disciple of Jesus?*
9. *How might you extend grace in the coming week?*

Prayer

Gracious God, grant us your grace. Amen

Dig Deeper

Ephesians 1:15-23

last word

This week, give
God’s grace away
—on purpose.



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Written by John and Robin McCullough-Bade

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Daily Discipleship

Sunday, September 27 (A) – Matthew 21:23-32

DIVE DEEPER – Deeper Humility

The Challenge of Discipleship: *Responsible Living*

Focus Question: *What makes you change your mind?*

word of life

“Which of the two did the will of his father?” Matthew 21:31 (NRSV)

Read Matthew 21:23-32

Power and authority are key issues in the context of this week’s reading. Between this week’s lesson and last week’s parable of the laborers in the vineyard, Matthew describes a gathering storm of controversy over Jesus’ authority. Jesus foretells his death and resurrection (20:17-19), only to have the mother of the disciples James and John ask for her sons to be in a position of authority in Jesus’ kingdom. (Matthew 20:20-28) Jesus enters in triumph into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and promptly overturns the tables of the money-changers in the temple. (Matthew 21:1-7)

The multitudes are following Jesus; after all, he reaches out to the outcasts and sinners. The religious leaders are threatened and question his authority. They confront Jesus in the temple. Their weapons are barbed questions; Jesus responds with the parable of the two sons. (Matthew 21:28-32)

1. *What word of challenge and judgment is in this parable?*
2. *Count the number of times the word “authority” is used in this passage. What is at stake over the issue of authority?*

Once again, the setting of the parable is the vineyard – the place where the landowner offered free, unmerited grace in the previous parable. (Matthew 20:1-16) Now the hearer is challenged with the implications of this grace. Such grace leads to changed minds and hearts – repentance. This change is seen in the first son, who at first refuses the invitation and call to work in the vineyard, but later experiences a change of heart and goes to work. He experiences a change of mind that leads to a change of life. In contrast is the second son, who initially says, “Yes,” to his father’s invitation but then fails to respond.

3. *What is the relationship between faith, repentance, and response?*
4. *With which son do you relate? Why?*
5. *Imagine a conversation between the two sons at the end of the day. What would it be like?*
6. *Imagine a conversation between the mother and father of these two sons. What would it be like?*

Grace is amazing – and challenging. It is amazing in its breadth – the outcast, the sinner, the least expected are all included. And it challenges the usual, expected, acceptable order. It offers the freedom to change and be changed. And it calls forth trust and belief.

The first son experiences the grace to turn back from his first word and offer the “yes” of faith. The second son knows the right words to say but fails to put the words into practice. The tax collectors and the prostitutes seem at first glance to say “no” to God; but their hearts are open to God’s message and messenger. In contrast, the religious leaders and scribes appear to be obedient – to say “yes” to God; but they have failed to be open to God’s life-changing grace.

7. *How does grace lead to changed lives – to repentance?*
8. *What word of grace is in this parable?*

word among us

Imagine picking up the morning paper or turning on your computer to discover that you had died the day before! That happened years ago as a newspaper erroneously reported the death of a famous man. The error gave the man the interesting opportunity to read what people would say about him after he had died.

So he began to read. He read past the bold caption that said, “Dynamite king dies,” to the text itself. He was taken aback to find that he was described as “a merchant of death,” for he was the inventor of dynamite and had amassed a great fortune from it.

The description in the newspaper sparked a change. Did he really want to be remembered this way? In that moment, he experienced a healing power greater than the destructive force of dynamite. He changed his life direction and devoted his energy and money to works of peace and human betterment. Today, he is best remembered as the founder of the Nobel Peace Prize – Alfred Nobel – all because he had the grace-filled experience to see himself as others saw him and the freedom to set his life in a different direction.

1. *What are examples in your own life when you changed your mind and commitment in order to follow Christ?*
2. *How might God’s grace lead us to responsible living?*
3. *What does “responsible living” mean?*

Grace leads to a change of heart – to repentance, which is an awesome and sometimes terrifying gift. Repentance forces us to look at ourselves honestly and humbly and acknowledge our failings, our times of saying, “yes” and then not doing anything, or our times of saying “no” when we should have said, “yes.”

4. *Give an example in your own life when you said no, but later changed your mind.*
5. *Which person would you rather work beside: the one who says no, but comes through or the one who says yes, but doesn’t show up?*
6. *How can we develop the quality of our “yes” meaning “yes”?*

But repentance is also a grace-filled gift because it leads us back to the grace of God, where we are reminded that we are not ultimately bound by our past actions and by what we have done, but by what God in Christ has done for us. The question becomes, “What do we do with such unbridled grace – grace that both judges and forgives, grace that includes both those inside the religiously acceptable circle as well as those who are seemingly on the outside?” This is the challenge for the Christian disciple.

7. *Why is God’s grace so challenging to receive?*
8. *How is your life different because of God’s grace?*

Prayer

Loving God, receive our repentant spirit and make us new. Amen

Dig Deeper

Psalm 51:10-17

last word

This week, ponder your “yes” and “no”.

Do your decisions
consistently serve Christ?



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