

*IK Synod Sermon and Prayers  
Easter 6C - May 25, 2025  
Pastor Jerry O'Neal, IK Synod Stewardship Director*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Let us pray: Bountiful God, you gather your people into your realm, and you promise us food from your tree of life. Nourish us with your word, that empowered by your Spirit we may love one another and the world you have made, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

**SCRIPTURE**

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the 16th chapter (vv. 9-15).

During the night, Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We therefore set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the Sabbath day, we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

Word of God, Word of life. *Thanks be to God.*

The holy Gospel according to John, the 14th chapter (vv. 23-29).

*Glory to you, O Lord.*

Jesus answered [Judas (not Iscariot)], “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words, and the word that you hear is not mine but is from the Father who sent me.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.”

The Gospel of the Lord.  
*Praise to you, O Christ.*

## SERMON

Please pray with me: Come, Holy Spirit. Fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in us the fire of your love. May these words be not my words, but your words, spoken to nourish your people and build up the Body of Christ. AMEN.

Greetings, dear friends. I am Pastor Jerry O’Neal, the Stewardship Director for the Indiana-Kentucky Synod of the ELCA. I bring you greetings from our bishop, Tim Graham, my fellow synod staff, and your siblings in Christ, gathering in more than 170 congregations and ministries throughout Indiana and Kentucky.

This Sunday is my last one as your Stewardship Director. Our bishop has decided to use the funds from this role for social justice and advocacy work, a decision I support wholeheartedly. Our new Director for Evangelical Mission, Melissa Schroeder, will be responsible for stewardship moving forward, and I offer her my congratulations, prayers, and support.

I give thanks to God for the privilege of serving as your Stewardship Director for all these years. I fondly recall our day-long StewardFest events in the years before COVID, the stewardship snippets and sermons during the pandemic, the workshops at Synod Assemblies, and the many times I visited with your congregations and leaders. I give thanks to God for all of these opportunities, and I pray that I have helped you become more faithful stewards in your contexts.

As I have studied and taught stewardship for years, I have come to understand some important concepts. A *steward* is a servant who manages the property and resources of another person. Psalm 24, verse 1 states that God is the owner of everything, which means that we are stewards of all that God provides, including our time, material goods, financial resources, relationships, and even creation itself. Given this understanding, Glenn Taibl defines stewardship as the management of all of life with Christ Jesus at the center.

Our texts today make an important claim about stewardship: the Holy Spirit gives us important gifts to help us in this work. The first of these gifts is *faith*. In our first reading from Acts, the author Luke notes that “the Lord opened [Lydia’s] heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.” The Spirit used Paul’s preaching to bring Lydia to faith.

We do not come to faith by ourselves. In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther famously wrote, “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel.” The Spirit called to Lydia through the gospel; my colleague, Pastor Robert Abner, noted that our Methodist friends might quote their founder, John Wesley, and say that Lydia’s heart was “strangely warmed.”

How has God brought *you* to faith? Which saints shared the good news of the gospel with you? How has God *strengthened* your faith through the years? I think of the many saints who have shared the good news with me, including my parents, who brought me to church; Anne, my Sunday school teacher; Bill, the bishop who

confirmed me in the Episcopal Church as a teenager; and numerous bishops, pastors, priests, deacons, and lay people who shared God's love and wisdom with me.

We need this faith because being a steward is risky. Claiming that God owns everything and acting on that belief means that we will use our time and resources in ways that run counter to the culture around us. The world says we should amass as much treasure as possible; Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and wealth." The world says we should idolize youth and avoid death at all costs; God shows us that death is not the end—resurrection is.

In particular, this Spirit-given faith allows us to be incredibly generous. The congregation I serve, Holy Trinity in Muncie, Indiana, demonstrated this type of generosity. During the pandemic, we engaged in a three-year capital campaign to make much-needed improvements to our building. Despite only averaging around 50 people in worship, we completed a \$1 million renovation with no debt. That is faith-filled generosity in action!

Now, living as a steward doesn't just require faith; it requires *guidance*, the second gift that the Holy Spirit gives us. In our gospel reading, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will teach us everything and remind us of all that he said to us. We receive the Spirit's guidance through the teachings of the Holy Scriptures and the "care and consolation" of our siblings in faith.

The Spirit also guides us in prayer. Many of us experienced the Spirit's guidance in prayer at the Synod Assembly last summer. The Spirit's presence was palpable as we engaged in the bishop's election process. I give thanks to God for Bishop Tim and his ministry: he is clearly called to be the shepherd of our synod in this time. I experienced the Spirit's presence myself during the election process when I learned that I was not called to the bishop's role; rather than being disappointed, I felt a surprising sense of joy and relief that I get to continue serving the people of God at Holy Trinity in Muncie.

This leads us to the third gift that the Spirit gives us, the gift of *peace*. Jesus says, "Peace I give you; my own peace I leave with you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." The world around us seems to be generating fear at an ever-rapid rate. News stories depict violence and hatred at every turn. The markets and economies of the world seem to be gyrating like an uncontrolled Slinky. All of this causes fear in our hearts.

Fear makes us turn in on ourselves and hoard what we have; after all, we'll need the resources for a rainy day. While a certain amount of savings is reasonable, God calls us as stewards to risky generosity, to give away what isn't really ours to do God's work in the world. When we do that, when we step out in the faith that God gives us and follow the Spirit's guidance, we find a "peace that passes all understanding," as Paul reminds us in Philippians (4:7).

Friends, my role as Stewardship Director may be ending, but our work as God's stewards continues. I will continue to be active in our synod in various ways; I hope to see many of you at our Synod Assembly next month. May God continue to bless you as you live in the faith, guidance, and peace that the Spirit provides. Thanks be to God. *Amen.*

## **PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION**

God of resurrection and new life, we come before you in prayer for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

Unite your people with communities of faith throughout the world. Further cooperation between people of different faith traditions and bless our non-Christian neighbors, that we learn and grow in deeper relationship. Hear us, O God.

*Your mercy is great.*

Bless the earth with fresh water, clean air, and rich soil. Nurture growing crops and encourage communities developing sustainable farming practices. Help us to live in balance and harmony with your good creation. Hear us, O God.

*Your mercy is great.*

Reconcile nations and communities suffering from violence and conflict. Protect refugees, asylum-seekers, and all who flee their homes seeking safety and security. Make all nations safe for both migrants and residents. Hear us, O God.

*Your mercy is great.*

Sustain all who are in need, especially individuals and families struggling with trauma or addiction. Support caregivers, especially nurses, doctors, counselors, and social workers. Come alongside all who are ill or struggling. Bless our siblings at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Somerset, KY, as they recover following the recent tornado there. Hear us, O God.

*Your mercy is great.*

This Memorial Day weekend, we remember all who have died in military service. Soothe loved ones who mourn, and strengthen support systems for veterans and their families. Bring peace among nations, that war and conflict around the world might cease. Hear us, O God.

*Your mercy is great.*

We give you thanks for all your saints raised to new life in Christ. Gather us, with them, into the peace only you can give. Hear us, O God.

*Your mercy is great.*

We commend these and all our prayers to you, O God, trusting that you are always with us; in the name of Jesus Christ, our risen Savior.

*Amen.*

The peace of Christ be with you always.