

7th Sunday after Pentecost (L15A) – July 12, 2026

Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Pastor Chris Repp

Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

How do we find ourselves in this mess? What happened to make things the way they are now? Whose fault is it? And how do we find our way to a better future? I'm being deliberately vague here, because I'm wanting you to fill in the blanks. I'm hoping that you might have started to do that in the brief moments I gave you to think. And I'm guessing you had something specific in mind when I mentioned the "mess" we're in, and there is surely more than one right answer. I have my own sense of what that mess is, and you might share that sense. Or maybe you have a very different take, connected to your own experiences, with your stage of life, or with how satisfied you have been with your life until now – whether you're "on track" in your life goals and the opportunities in front of you, or whether you're happy or not in retirement as you look back on where you have been. But maybe you know that not everything is about you either. Maybe the "mess" for you is more connected with friends, neighbors, and loved ones you know are struggling, whose future is less than rosy, or whose life is full of regret and disappointment. Or maybe that's you. Wherever you're coming from today, you have a sense that the world as it is is not the world as it ought to be. And maybe you even have a sense that there is something broken about us and about our world. Hold onto that sense for the next few minutes – hold onto it throughout the rest of the service – and see if our readings today and the words and actions of the liturgy don't have some good news for you in light of whatever you're thinking the "mess we are in" is.

Over the past five weeks we have been quietly making our way through Paul's letter to the Romans in our second reading. I say quietly because I have not used any of those Romans texts as the main focus of my sermons, though I don't think I've failed to at least mention something in them that connected with our Gospel readings. Paul's letter to the Christian community at Rome is widely thought to be his most thorough theological statement, showing how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are the center of God's creating and redeeming work in the world. In this letter he shows that in Jesus the focus of God's attention has moved from a single nation to all the peoples of the world. In the first three chapters, which we didn't read, Paul sets up "the mess that we're in," which he calls sin – our universal disconnect from God and one another, our failure to live as God created us to live. This mess is common to both God's chosen people, the Jewish nation, and to all the rest of the human race, whom Jews call Gentiles. All of us, Paul says, have all wound up in the same condition – alienated from God. The Jewish people had God's law, given to them through Moses, and they failed to live up to that law. The Gentiles, he says – the rest of us – had God's law written on our hearts. In other words, we all knew what was right, and we did not do it. So we now find ourselves in a reality in which "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," to quote Paul directly.

Now, our instinct is to feel bad about this and to resolve to do better, to try again to keep the law. We think that if we could do that, it would solve all our problems. We could save ourselves from this mess we're in. Putting the best construction on things, this, I think, is the motivation behind the desire of some of our folks to assert that we are or ought to be a Christian nation, and that we should post the Ten Commandments in classrooms and court rooms. The idea is that we could be the chosen people that Israel failed to be, God's special nation. It's an appeal both to our national pride, our persistent confidence that we are the best country on the planet, and to our can-do attitude that we are able to do anything we put our minds to. Ironically,

however, it ignores our own theology as articulated by Paul in this letter to the Romans. (Maybe it would help at this point to remember that Rome was the capital of the Roman Empire at a time when it was indisputably the greatest state in the known world. They too thought of themselves as chosen and blessed by the gods.) Even if we could follow the law perfectly, which of course we can't, but even if we could, that would not undo the damage that sin has done in the world, and it would not make us or the world as God intends it to be. And that's because love and trust simply cannot be legislated. You cannot order someone to love you, and you cannot order someone to trust you. I mean, you can give the order, but you know that it won't work. The law can restrain sin and evil to some extent, and it can show us our sin and our culpability in the sin of the world, but it cannot clean up our mess. It cannot solve the problems of sin, death, and evil in our world. And it cannot create love or trust that God intends to be our way of life. Not even if the order comes directly from God.

Love can only be created by love, and so that's what God does for us. God loves us by becoming one of us in Jesus, by joining us in this impossible mess that we're in, and by taking upon God's own self the consequences of our sin, and the death and evil that accompany and issue from sin. That was from chapter 5 that we had a few weeks ago. Death is the only solution for sin. But death by itself does not get us to the life God created us for because death is the end of life too. And so in Jesus God "deals with sin" as Paul says here in our second reading, by dying our death to sin for us. In baptism we are joined to that death to sin, and so also are joined to new life in his resurrection. That was chapter 6. But we continue to live in a world where sin has power, even if we are convinced that it is fighting a losing battle, and we find that we cannot, by our own will or effort or desire, do the good we would like to do even on our best days. That was chapter 7. And that is where the Holy Spirit comes in, which is what chapter 8 is all about. And we get three weeks of chapter 8, so stay tuned. But for today the Spirit does two things for us. First, the Spirit assures us of our identity as God's own children because of our baptismal connection to Jesus. We are God's own, and we get to live the life God intends us to live, a life characterized by love of God and neighbor that trusts in God's promises. Second, that same Spirit "gives life to our mortal bodies," as Paul writes. Even now, on this side of the grave, we are animated by the love of God in us to do the good that eludes us when left to our own devices. Sure, it remains a battle day to day with our old selves, but it is a battle that we are assured God has already won in Jesus's cross and empty tomb.

That is the good news that Jesus calls his disciples to scatter recklessly like seed in the hands of a generous sower in our Gospel reading. The different soils are meant as encouragement for that task. Different people will receive that good news differently, and it will not always have the results we hope for. But we don't have to worry about that. God's love is persistent. And while Jesus doesn't say so explicitly in this parable, there is hope that God the original gardener will break up the rocky ground and weed the thorns from human hearts that are not yet good soil. Our task, our privilege and our joy, is to live by faith, animated by the power of the Holy Spirit given to us in baptism, to be conduits of God's love to the world around us.

May it be so. May that seed of the gospel take deep root in us and yield a hundredfold. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.