TEXT: 2 Corinthians 6:2  THEME: NOW IS THE DAY OF SALVATION

I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Did the words of our first lesson today shock you? Though he was king of God’s people, Manasseh committed every evil imaginable. His wickedness knew no bounds. Yet in 2 Chronicles, chapter 33, we read that Manasseh finally heard God’s call to repentance once the shackles were clamped on and a hook put through his nose. He humbled himself and cried out to God—and God forgave him. That God could forgive Manasseh boggles the mind. So, too, does the change in Manasseh’s life. He produced the fruits of repentance that God had patiently sought for 750 years from his people. Manasseh tore down the pagan altars and got rid of the idols. He worshiped the true God and urged the nation of Judah to do the same.

Did the words of our Gospel lesson today shock you? Imagine the patience of the owner of the vineyard as he sent his servants to those who labored in the vineyard. The laborers beat, stoned, and murdered the servants, and the landowner still sent more. Finally he sent his Son, and they killed him too. You know that the landowner is God the Father, the Son is Jesus our Savior, and the laborers are the nation of Israel. Now the kingdom has been given to the Gentiles, to us. But God’s kingdom doesn’t belong to an ethnic group; it belongs to an ethical group—those who produce its fruit. The nation to whom it is given is the body of believers. Whether they are prostitutes, or members of the Sanhedrin, or Gentiles who are of the faith of Abraham, the kingdom belongs to us by faith.

Yet there are those who have been in that kingdom, who have produced its fruits of faith, who have worshiped our Triune God, and loved our Savior from sin, but who have now fallen away. They have stopped coming to worship God with us. They do not receive Holy Communion. They do not join us for Bible study. They do not encourage us or receive encouragement from us on a weekly basis. They are too busy, too self-centered, too bored, too ashamed, too frightened to be bothered with the things of the kingdom of God. God speaks to them—and to us—in our second lesson for today when he says, “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.”

We know from our Scripture lessons today that our God is patient with us. But we also know from those lessons that there comes a time when God will not put up with people rejecting him any longer. And who can blame him? I don’t do well at coping with rejection. Do you? I can still remember insults and mockery from grade school playgrounds 50 to 55 years ago.

It would be completely reasonable to assume that God stops caring about people who have stopped caring about him. It would be completely reasonable to suppose that God would just dismiss with a divine shrug those who fall away: “You want to experience life without me? All right then—go to hell. See if I care.” Reasonable, but not true.

Here is how God truly thinks: ‘For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered
flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all
the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness” (Ezekiel
34:11-12). Shepherds take the well-being of their sheep personally. Jesus, the Good
Shepherd, died and rose again for the good sheep and the bad ones, and he does not want
to lose a single one. Not even one!

For that reason, our Trinity retention elder, Mark Hayes, and Pastor Pankow have put
together a Retention Committee to reach out to Trinity members who no longer worship
regularly with us. And here is some good news. When we dare to speak out and reach out
to people who seem to be sliding away, we don’t have to put pressure on them to clean
themselves up first. Undoubtedly they will be caught in some sins private or public, but
that’s not where the change process starts. It doesn’t start in the individual.

It starts with simply telling some good news about God, about who he is and what he has
done. “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and
remembers your sins no more” (Isaiah 43:25). Did you catch that? “For my own
sake,” God said. That is, “I take the initiative. Your forgiveness comes from me, from the
gracious goodness in my heart.”

You cannot reignite faith in someone else with threats, rules, laws, pressure, fear, or bribes.
It is God who restarts a spiritually dead heart, using the message of the priceless gift of the
forgiveness of sins, a gift he alone can give. A gift he gives through the Means of Grace—
the Gospel in the Word and Sacraments.

Scripture is full of stories of human foolishness and frailties, of human wickedness and
rebellion. Scripture is also full of stories of lives changed by the gospel of God’s
forgiveness. So, let’s get out there, share the gospel, and let it change some lives.

Yet, there are so many people. So much sin. So many lost. So many fallen away. I must
confess that my own outreach and restoration efforts sometimes bog down because I feel
overwhelmed. Do you ever feel that way?

So let’s bring it down to just one. Look around you. Pick one person close to you who
seems to have lost his or her faith. Care about that one. Maybe it’s your brother. “The
Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ ‘I don’t know,’ he replied. ‘Am I my
brother’s keeper?’”

That phrase, uttered to cover up the first murder, has become a slogan to rationalize
indifference to someone else’s struggles. Cain thought the answer was an obvious one—
No. God thinks the opposite. In fact, it’s one of his chief reasons for inventing families and
congregations—so that nobody slips between the cracks, unnoticed, uncared for,
unlamented. That’s what compassion means—that we are willing to feel someone else’s
pain, help carry someone else’s burden, care about someone else’s eternal destiny. That’s
what Jesus did for us when he lived a perfect life in our place, died our death on the cross,
and rose from the dead so that we could spend eternity with him. May the Holy Spirit work
Christ’s compassion for others in each of us. And let us act on that compassion now, for
now is the day of salvation. Tomorrow may be too late. Amen.