

+ Joe Patrick Jennings +  
**Twelfth Week After Pentecost 2021**

*<sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”*

In the Name of Jesus.

Well...it must have been a reading like this one that this poor pastor was rattling on about when Joe Jennings showed up fer church one Sunday. Thinking back to seeing his fine head of hair—like my own—sitting right there in front of the organist; adoring this Gospel lesson from our Lord’s own lips this week, I feel like doing the same thing I saw this funny man doing—I think I it was Reformation Sunday. Joe taught me to hear the Gospel all over again, and to sit there with my mouth hanging wide open like a fish!

When people hear that Pastor Peterson and I are religious types, we then are blessed by our Father in heaven to have God and faith and heaven and good works and everything else explained to us in minute detail by everyone we meet—correcting our mistaken Lutheran nonsense, of course. ‘Too much Gospel and forgiveness from you two! Not enough about OUR buy-in, sincerity, commitment! What Jesus does is all nice and everything. But I need something MORE! Tell ME, about ME!’

Maybe that explains Joe’s gaping mouth and wide open ears and heart and his unwearyingly hungry ears and heart and mouth and soul: ‘Tell me how THIS passage of

the Gospel guarantees me that Heaven only now takes notice of the Man Christ Jesus, and not at all about me, and my goodness or my badness, my boasted sincerity, or my honesty!’

Joe squeezed and wrung out more drops than I thought were IN there—from the Sacrament of the Altar. Which is—he was glad to learn from the Small Catechism of Doctor Martin Luther—‘The true Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given to us Christians to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of our sins.’

Joe: ‘You Lutherans just hear the Lord call these things His Body and His Blood and our forgiveness; and y’all just leave it at that! God doesn’t need our explanations and improvements!’

‘Yes, Joe. WE, Lutherans; you too.’

Joe even insisted on filling a bowl with water and diving into the Baptismal font. That was a weird one. Lutherans—Joe taught me this!—Lutherans just read the Word and leave it alone, no improvements and explanations needed. So, anyone whom we meet who has been baptized in the Name of Jesus, in any church, by anyone, is baptized, once and for eternal life. Joe had been baptized; but he was troubled about something in his previous religious life. I don’t know what it was. But what I do know is that the only thing a Lutheran shepherd cannot leave menacing the heads of the Sheep of the Good Shepherd: doubt. So, we gathered here and baptized; because Joe’s mouth was still hanging open; his ears; his heart; his...sins? All of Joe.

So, it is fitting today that I try—in memory of my dear brother—to open Y’ALL’S mouths, ears, souls, sin-lockboxes and poorly hidden doubts. I knew Joe, pretty well. I knew his circle. He opened to me his heart. And, I must run a great risk here today and address a group of people that Joe was just DYING—LIVING!—PRAYING!—PLEADING WITH GOD!—that they TOO would stand in wonder and awe at the Good News of Christ the Slave of sinners, sinners ONLY! He was worried, he confessed, that there were Christians he knew that were not as fully wowed and made happy by the Gospel as he was: freedom; burden that is no burden at all; yoke that has no weight.

And, perhaps some of y’all are now guessing who I’m talking about? I guess I’m a daredevil. Here goes. Joe Jennings died with the prayer in his heart that I would lay out the Lutheran Gospel so that a very specific group of people, at his funeral, would fish-mouth-gape and be glad:

And that group is you Lutherans!

Joe got y’all to hear the Gospel on a Wednesday in August. The prayer of a righteous man is something else!

THIS is the reason the Father loves ME—says Jesus!!!!!---I have secured GOD’S attachment to ME—says the Eternal Son???? My mouth is open....

‘Because I lay down my life for my sheep.’

Joe Jennings lives. He can never die. I don't mean the nonsense the unbelievers belch out about him living in our hearts and so on. Joe will be driven from our hearts in just minutes when we stand in line for meatballs.

Joe lives—because...If Joe DOES not live, now, then Jesus did not do what He was sent to do.

Joe will rise—because—here's the Gospel; listen up, Lutherans! The rest of y'all are invited to rejoice too. But the Lutherans are the ones in rough shape.

Joe will rise—or Jesus is going to be kicked off the throne of heaven, pushed back into the grave and sent to blazes.

Let me try again. The ONLY reason Jesus rose from the dead after His suffering, is because He had secured Joe's rising from death; more important, Joe's rising from sin.

Listen up, Lutherans! Don't listen to the world that holds out God-heaven-eternal golfing or pigging out or whatever nonsense...

Close your mouths and ears and souls—don't listen, your Good Shepherd comforts you---no need to listen for one second to those who hold out your life everlasting, your dear Father in heaven—hold Him out as something yet to attain. Maybe He is at peace with you; maybe not. Ugh. Yuck. I want to apologize to Joe for bringing in such

trash from the curb today into his triumph day. But I think he understands my need for a contrast.

Don't even listen to your OWN insides, religious selves, whatever—that holds out your God, your future, your life, your death, your rising, your eternity—as something still hanging in the balance.

You pray to your Father this way: 'Dear Father, if you do not accept me, right now, without one bit contributed from me, then your Son did not fulfill your will, take away the sins of the world. But on the cross He cried out 'It is accomplished! Work done forever!' And YOU agreed with Him, raising Him from the dead. I have sins; I have doubts; I even feel tempted by all the religious folk who insist on judging me daily and much, helping me, improving me, making godly suggestions...Ugh. But remember what my Shepherd pledged! The only reason you accept HIM, is because you now accept ME!'

By the way: Lutherans are all about good works. Because there is nothing left for us BUT good works, once THAT pledge and guarantee lands in our mouths, our ears, our hearts, our souls, our new man. Good deeds are all things that are forgiven. GREAT deeds are done when we do what He does: 'Hey, sinner! I am in with God. So, YOU MUST be! Here's my guarantee! If YOU do not rise to life on the Great Day, then I will insist on being kicked out of heaven too! But, that's not really up to me. It is up to One Man, Who laid down His Life for you, his sheep; me too. And the Father loves Him: because the Father will NOT hear anything negative about YOU! Not even from YOU!'

That's all I got in me today, dear people. That's the sort of stuff Joe demanded, more and more. Sometimes, he wore me out.

The Holy Spirit calls each one of you to take and eat, hear and rejoice, rise and live boldly and confidently as a dear child of your Father above, as a dear sheep of the Good Shepherd. Take it or leave it: that's the great thing about the Gospel! It does not change, whether we're glad about it or not.

Joe Jennings was glad to hear the Gospel. I suppose the last thing he'd want me to say, is what His Shepherd told him: Love one another, the same way I have loved you.

Hear Joe:

“I, Joe, pledge to you: if YOU do not rise from death, from guilt, from sin, from this world, to live in joy with God forever—then I, Joe, will refuse to rise on the Last Day too. Since I AM loved by God, then YOU must be! But the Father's love HAS been secured—not by me, or you, but by the One Who picked up the Life He laid down for the world. If you have any troubles on the Last Day, come see me. I will rise. The only reason I will rise, Jesus tells me, is to make sure you do too.”

In the Name of Jesus.