

Title: “Step Into Christ”

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Matthew 14:13-21

8/2/2026

Service Readings: Isaiah 55:1-5; Romans 9:1-13 Matthew 14:13-21

Before stepping out, we step toward Christ, where He feeds us.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

The mission of our congregation is to make disciples and how we approach this is detailed in our vision statement. Empowered by God's Word and Sacraments, the St. Mark fellowship makes Christ-like, caring connections with our community and beyond. This is our framework for how we are to live as people redeemed by the blood of Christ. Make no mistake, this is not a manual for how we are to *acquire* this redemption. It is not a list of rules that we are to follow or a demand of how we are to live our lives, for we know that redemption is a gift freely given to us through the death and resurrection of our Savior. We are empowered to live a life that reflects Jesus, not because of our work but because of his. It is a response to the gifts of grace that he sends to us through his Word and Sacraments. Our vision statement, then, is not a *prescription*; it is a *description*. It *describes* a life that flows naturally as a response to the gifts that God has given to us. And what our vision statement describes can be broken down into three simple statements. We are invited to grow upward in our relationship with Jesus; we are invited to grow deeper in our relationships with each other, and we are motivated to reach further into our families, workplaces, communities, and world to share these gifts to others.

This month our church will focus on our vision statement. You have seen the banner in the Narthex when you first entered through the main doors, and you have seen the list of topics and events that are scheduled during Education Hour. In the coming weeks we will explore how the ministries and people of St. Mark live out this vision through the framework of growing upward, growing deeper, and reaching further. Our Gospel passage this week provides us with a wonderful example of what this looks like and so I'd like to start there. It opens with Jesus having just received word that his cousin, John the Baptist had been killed.

¹³When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

Let's pause here and consider his actions. He had compassion on the crowds and served them, but before doing so, what did he do? He went away and prayed. Matthew doesn't specifically record that he prayed, but we know from other places that this is a practice that Jesus regularly engaged in. Luke, as just one example of many, records that Jesus "often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."

What does this teach us? That the life of Jesus was one of constant upward movement. He regularly met with the Father in prayer – finding in him support, encouragement, strength and comfort. This is especially true on the night before his crucifixion – he spent hours in prayer as he prepared for the suffering that was to come.

Only *then* did he then turn his attention serving others. Having *first* received from the Father, he could *then* be sent out into the world for continued service. Only a few verses later we see this same pattern play out

again. The crowd is hungry and there is not enough food for them to eat. The disciples want to send them away. Instead, Jesus takes the only food they have.

¹⁸ “Bring them here to me,” he said. ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves.

Here again we find Jesus first approaching the Father before serving the crowd. Before we see Jesus as an example, we must first see him as our Savior. Jesus didn't live this life of perfect trust in the Father merely to show us how it should be done. He lived it for us. Where we constantly turn inward, relying on ourselves, Jesus remained perfectly turned toward his Father. He is the faithful Son that we have failed to be. And through his death and resurrection, he does more than forgive our failures. He joins us to himself. In Baptism, his life becomes our life. His relationship with the Father becomes our relationship with the Father.

So, what does Jesus' life reveal to us? For one, growing upward means turning to God first, *before* serving others. In doing so we recognize the source from which our strength, our motivation, our gifts come. These are not from us but from God and reminding ourselves of this aids in positioning ourselves as servants to those around us. For another, growing upward means that in order to step out to help others we must first step out of ourselves. Jesus emptied himself by taking on the form of a servant. While still remaining fully God, he lowered himself to that of a created person in order to serve. Our response is to do the same. We empty ourselves of all our pride, all our judgements about others. We empty ourselves from using the gifts of time, talent, treasures for only our own use – gifts that God has bestowed on us. We use them in service to others.

Jesus stepped out of heaven into our humanity so that we might be brought out of ourselves and into him. So, stepping out of ourselves means stepping into Christ. This is what it means to grow upward. It's not just coming to Sunday Worship so you can check it off your list. Nor is it just keeping Jesus in the wings to be called on when you need a favor.

Stepping into Christ means first remembering your own baptism. On that day, it wasn't just you, your family, and your pastor that were present. God was there with you. And he was not a spectator, he was the actor. Through the power of his Word he placed his name on you, adopted you, and made you an heir. He pulled you out of yourself and placed you in Christ. When Jesus was killed, your sinful self was put to death, too. But just as Christ was raised from the dead, so too were you. Adopted, resurrected to new life, you are now in Christ. And he doesn't abandon you but has sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within you, mediating on your behalf. And each week he invites you come to this place where he meets you with his own body and blood – offering to you the gift of forgiveness.

This is stepping into Christ. It is recognizing that every worldly thing, health, family, even vocation, comes from him. It is recognizing that every time you repent of your sin, it is he who is forgiving you. It is recognizing that the creator of *everything* comes down to give you everything in him – life, forgiveness, and an eternity in his presence.

Step out of yourself; step into Christ. And grow upward in your praise and gratitude to your Savior

Please pray with me.

Heavenly Father, draw us out of ourselves and into Your Son. Through Your Word and Sacraments, strengthen our faith, fill us with gratitude, and send us to serve others in the love of Christ. In His holy name we pray. Amen