

Luke 22.7-20

Dies mandati dominicalis

18 April 2019

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu Iuva +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

495 years ago to the date—18 April 1524—a diet was in session in the German town of Nürnberg—a sort of official meeting of all the important government officials of the Holy Roman Empire. And, as you might guess, the topic of discussion? Well, it was what to do with that heretic monk Martin Luther from Wittenberg.

A few years earlier, at another diet—at another official meeting of the important government officials—Luther had been declared outlawed, and a price put on his head. That was at Worms, when he had uttered probably his most famous line, “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen.”

Immediately following that fateful diet, as you recall, Luther had been whisked away into protection by the elector of Saxony, Friedrich the Wise. He went into hiding at the Wartburg, and the edict of the diet couldn't be implemented against him. He was nowhere to be found.

But soon he came out of hiding. For the Gospel cannot be muzzled.

And now, at the imperial diet at Nürnberg in 1524, on this very same date in 1524, 18 April—the edict of Worms was renewed. Luther was a marked man. Recant or die, was the message. Stop teaching the Gospel of the free forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, or you're done. Permanently.

What would you do? What would you have done?

Well, we all know what Luther did. Undaunted by what princes and popes could do to him in his body he continued to preach. At great risk to his life. At any moment any spy of the Holy Roman Emperor, any agent of the pope, could have stuck a dagger in his back. With a handsome reward to follow.

But Luther would not and could not cower, hide, or be silenced. For he had believed. And therefore he'd had to speak. He'd fallen into the hands of the God who saves. Freely. Gratuitously. By grace alone. And Luther could never, ever, go back to the way it had been. His own skin wasn't price enough to pay for the Gospel of the God who in the blood of His Son saves. For the Gospel of the God who had spelled out in black ink on white paper in the Bible what *He* had done for the world's salvation. Not what the world must do. For the Gospel of the God who doesn't expect—or even want—His sin-burdened creatures to claw their way into heaven. But who instead descends to them to save them. For the Gospel of the God who desires not my sacrifice, but who desires to show me His mercy.

Not my sacrifice, but His mercy. The heaven-to-earth elevator always moving down—from God to me. The gifts necessary for my salvation not mine to God, but God's to me.

And for that Luther was willing to let go his old “sack of worms,” as he often called his body. For by the Gospel he had Christ. By the Gospel he had God's gifts to him. By the Gospel he had forgiveness. A debt racked up in sin paid by off by Someone Else, God's own Son. Entirely.

Now, perhaps nowhere was truth of the Gospel more clearly revealed to Luther by God's Word than in the thing whose institution we gather to remember this evening—the Sacrament of the Altar.

For this is the night of the Lord's betrayal into the hands of sinners. For sinners. Tonight He is betrayed by a kiss. Tonight in the face of His own great suffering, those closest to Him, His own disciples, will fall asleep. For Peter can't pay for his own sins. Jesus must shoulder the burden Himself. Tomorrow He will be scourged, mocked, spat upon. Slapped, punched, flogged. He'll be stripped naked. Called a common criminal—not a high-minded criminal, mind you; no a Robin Hood—but a common criminal. He will be labeled the Sinner, for the crowds will prefer the release of a blood-thirsty terrorist, Barabbas, over the release of Jesus, by whose blood we have peace with God. He'll be crucified. And then laid in a grave. And the devil—the devil will think he's won the victory.

But he won't have. Won the victory, that is. The victory remains with Christ. For He renders a perfect death. A death for sinners. A death for you. And on the third day—the bonds of sin and death broken—He will rise to life, never to die again. The firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. A resurrection that means *your* resurrection. A resurrection that means you are no longer dead in trespasses and sins, but alive in Christ. A resurrection that means that God is not displeased, but pleased with you. That God is not unfriendly toward you, but your Friend and Father. That the divine verdict over you and your life at the Last Judgment will not be "guilty," but "not-guilty." That you stand not under disapproval, but grace. Not under condemnation, but mercy.

That's the Gospel. And if it was worth Jesus' dying for it—if its cost was the blood of the Son of God—then how could the heretic monk Martin Luther ever possibly think that saving his "bag of worms" was more precious than that Gospel? The answer is: He couldn't. And so he didn't.

So what does all this have to do with the Sacrament of the Altar?

Well, there's perhaps no clearer place than right here, in the Sacrament of the Altar, where the Gospel as the Bible gives it diverges from other teachings. From other teachings that say that you, a creature, have to stretch to lay hold of God, your Creator. That *your* sin is *your* problem to solve. God'll help you out, to be sure. But it's mostly up to you to deal with. From the other teachings that say what *you* do for God matters more for your salvation than what *God* does for you. That the Lord's Supper is your doing for God. An unbloody re-sacrifice of Jesus to the Father. As if the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the world were not enough.

Because when Luther looked hard at the words—and you take it for granted because you know them so well—this is what he saw: "GIVEN AND SHED FOR YOU. FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS." God giving. God shedding. Not for Himself. But for you. Sins done away with. Not by you. But by God, who forgives them.

You see, his whole life long he'd been taught that the Sacrament was good, pious thing he did for God. That what happened in the Sacrament—the arrows were pointing from Martin to God, and not the other way around. And as long Martin kept sending gifts along those arrows, he'd erase his own sin—and maybe, just maybe—gain enough merits (you can think of them as points in the game of eternal salvation) someday to get into heaven.

But like a lightning bolt those words: Given and shed for you. For the forgiveness of sins—those words of the Lord Christ Himself—like a lightning bolt they shattered every preconception and misconception.

Because here, in the Sacrament, I don't rise to God—not in body, not in mind, not spirit. He descends to me. Even my eating and drinking are no good work of mine. No act of obedience that pleases the Lord.

Instead, God does it all. The heavenly food you eat—*He* feeds *you* with it. The heavenly drink you drink—*He's* the one who supplies it. And the good work that is done? Not yours, but the Lord's. It is the good work He began in you at your Baptism. His good work that by this meal He's bringing to completion in the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ. Feeding the faith that He Himself gave at the font. Forgiving all sins. Again. And again. And again. And everything—mockery, scourging, spit, fists, cross, and grave—everything that Christ endured to gain your salvation, He makes over to you. In the very body by which He won it; in the very blood shed once for all. A salvation—mine, and yours—that He was willing even to die for.

That was 1524. The Catholics had taken the clear directionality of the Sacrament—God's gift to you—and turned it around—your gift to God. Luther—he wanted to stake his claims on nothing but what Christ Himself had said.

But today the challenge to Christ's own words are no less.

So beware. Not all churches that claim to teach what Scripture teaches do. Christ says this is My Body, this is My Blood. And they say, "Not really. The bread and wine just represent Christ's Body and Blood." Christ says, "This is My gift. For you." And they say, "Not really. This is a pious thing you do for God." Christ says, "For the forgiveness of sins." And they say, "Impossible."

And where does that leave you then?

Right back in the boat brother Martin Luther had been in.

- Faced with a God telling you to try harder and do more.
- Faced with a God whose sermon to you isn't, "I forgive you all your sins," but "Learn to forgive yourself."
- Faced with a God who dwells in the remote heavens, whom you can never know, and therefore whose heart toward you you can never know.
- Faced with a God who says, "Climb," when you're stuck in the mire of your own sin and death. In other words, faced with a God who is the devil himself.

But praise and thanks be to God, that is not the God of the Bible! That's not the God who died for the sins of the world. And it's not the God who instituted the Sacrament of the Altar.

And that's why Luther was willing to confess it even when faced with death. Because even if there was nothing else he could be sure of he could be sure of this: The God of the Bible in His own Son Jesus Christ had redeemed Martin, that sack of worms. And here in the Sacrament the God of the Bible was giving it all over to Martin by words that cannot be understood in any other way than they read: "My Body. My Blood. My Gift. For you. For the forgiveness of sins."

Fellow-redeemed: that's the same God who walks among you this evening. It's the God who has bought you with His own blood. The God who assumed a Body for no other reason than to die the death that was yours. Who had Blood pumping through His veins for no other than to shed it for you. The God who comes to you in His holy Word and blessed Sacrament. And who in His own Body and Blood gives you the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

Amen.

pax dei, etc.

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