

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.”

You are Christians. The Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel, gathered you into his church, sanctified you by the blood of Christ, and enlightened you as someone who is a new creature in your Lord. You are a Christian, a baptized child of God. This is an important thing to never take for granted.

As you sit here, then, this morning and listen to God’s word, he’s preaching to you as a Christian. You hear his word as one who has been called out of darkness and into the light of Christ. The Epistle reading for you is instructing you as a one who delights in God and what he teaches you. Your prayer in faith is what was said in the Introit a few minutes ago from Psalm 27, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.” When God is your light and your salvation, and he most certainly is in Christ, there is no one or nothing to fear. The way of the Lord is good and so you seek after what he lays before you.

So, what is this today the Lord teaches you? “Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.”

Preaching on these verses in a sermon, Martin Luther said, “All this says nothing else than that we should love one another. For here what Scripture ordinarily compresses into a few words is set forth in detail. St. Peter means to say: This is the sum and substance of the kind of outward life you should lead. You should have unity of spirit. The apostles Peter and Paul often employ this expression. It means that we should all have one mind, one spirit, one conviction. What seems right and good to one should also be regarded as right and good by the others. This is a powerful, noteworthy word. One should understand it well. St. Paul, in particular, wrote much about it.”

Take note then of who and what you are to be a Christian. See too how you fit together in this in the body of Christ, the church. Living together in the church is living together as one people. In the Gospel reading Jesus uses the image of a boat, fish, nets, and fisherman when he talks about the church. Jesus told the men to let down their nets. It’s God, then, who speaks and works this faith to turn us toward him and trust this word. In the reading today Simon spoke great words of faith. Listen again to what Luke recorded, “And Simon answered, ‘Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.’” The miracle of so many fish, pointed Simon to Jesus who spoke those words to him and worked this great catch of fish he and his partners were unable to achieve. Jesus was teaching them and us something in this whole encounter. It’s no wonder how Simon Peter responded, “But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’”

The church is brought about by the word of God. Without God’s word there is no church. Jesus sent out the men to catch fish, to be fishers of men. He sent them out to be preachers. God catches people. God kills to make alive. God has caught you; he has redeemed you. “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.” God has claimed you as his own. He has given you a new life. And this is who you are, then, in the church of God.

Look around you too and you see this image of the church. You are sitting in the nave, a nautical term. These are your brothers and sisters and Christ with you. You do so together in times of joy and peace and in times of persecution and suffering. St. Peter quotes from 34 when he writes, “Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

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God calls you as the church to have unity of mind. You are the body of Christ together. No one of you is more important than the other. Together you are God's people. You look at one another in the church on an equal level. Married or single. Rich or poor. No matter what vocation you may have, you are united in Christ. Connected to this this is sympathy. You share one another's burdens. You have compassion for each other and pray for each other. You sacrifice for your brothers and sisters in Christ. This is brotherly love. The people sitting next to you and all saints in Christ throughout the world you are to regard as your brothers and sisters in Christ and treat them accordingly. This is seen as well with through a tender heart and a humble mind. This is what God instructs you about who you are to be as a Christian living in the church and then, in turn, the world.

You have been bought with the price of Christ's blood and you have him who is good. When you face evil in your life your response is to return it with good. "Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless." Your old man wants to curse. He wants to get even. He wants to revile. He wants to be the judge, jury, and executioner. This is especially difficult as the church faces mockery and insults and you are despised when you are faithful the Lord and his word. The devil, the world, and your fallen flesh would have you try to justify a response in kind to what you receive. But you see this is not who you are dear people of God. That's not who Jesus is and what he did when he was despised, stricken, smitten and afflicted. You are saints who delight in repaying evil with blessing and showing mercy and forgiveness even as your Lord Jesus has repaid your sin with this same mercy.

David, who wrote Psalm 34 which is quoted here, was fleeing from Saul at the time. Even as he was being pursued, he was called to turn away from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it. That's who God called him to be and it's the same for you. It's that same word of God which teaches you what you are to live as a Christian. Keep your tongue and lips from evil, that is you are to not curse, swear, or lie but to speak the truth, confess the Christian faith steadfastly, speak well of your God and to speak well of your neighbor. Bless him rather than curse him. A Christian's tongue is informed by God's word and speaks according to it. Seek and pursue these things.

Likewise, your response, your mouth and tongue are to confess and give a defense. The Christian faith confesses. St. Peter wrote, "Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."

Know who you are in all this as a new creature in Christ. Your hope is in the Lord who has made you, redeemed you, and made you holy. You have a good conscience before God as you go through this life. In verse 16, right after the Epistle lesson ends, God through St. Peter wrote, "having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil." Always ask yourself before you lay down your head at night, have I listened to God's word? Have I thought, lived, and spoke according to what my Lord teaches? Of course, you will always see where you have fallen short, repent of those things, but also go running back to the Lord's word and let your conscience be held captive by it. When you suffer then, for doing good, count it as a blessing and don't be sorry one iota for being faithful to the Lord for he will never put you, who trusts in him to shame. Know this too and most importantly, as you live out your Christian life you have a good conscience even if you should suffer for it and be mocked as an individual or the church.

Your conscience is good, you know what God says about you this whole time, every day and when your last hour arrives on this side of the grave. What is this? It goes on further to say after the Epistle reading to say, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus

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Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.”

God has saved you in Christ. He has saved you in the waters of your baptism. You do good works God instructs you to do and in accord with the new heart and spirit God has given to you. Do these as you have been instructed with a good conscience knowing that your sin is forgiven, and you have eternal life. Don't be afraid of doing good but delight in your Lord and seek first his righteousness. Your confidence is in the righteous one who perfectly obeyed God without any spot or blemish. His righteous life, his atoning death, and his resurrection are all yours through faith. This is a freedom, then to live. It's a freedom to hear, rejoice in God's teaching and live as one who turns away from evil and does good, who seeks peace and pursues it. The Lord's eyes are on you, the righteous because his eyes look through the shed blood of his Son as your righteousness.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. Give me not up to the will of my adversaries; for false witnesses have risen against me, and they breathe out violence. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” Thanks be to God for such a Lord and such a life he has given to you now and forever.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.