

April 29 – May 5, 2018

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In 1539, Martin Luther penned *On the Councils and the Church*, a treatise which is, most basically, Luther's most developed theology of ecclesiology. One of the big concerns in Luther's day, as in our own, is who had power and whence the power came. At the end of this treatise Luther famously identifies what he believes are seven marks of the Church: (1) The Word of God, (2) Baptism, (3) the Lord's Supper, (4) use of the Office of the Keys, (5) Consecration of Ministers, (6) Worship, and (7) possession of the cross – suffering. This week we'll go through seven marks one at a time.

Sunday, April 29, 2018

Text: Hebrews 4:12-13

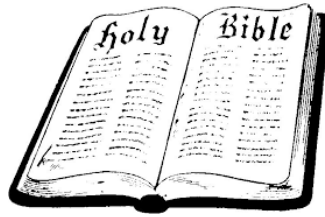
“...the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

It's no surprise that Martin Luther would note how important the Word of God is for the Church. Various corruptions and accretions had seeped into the church during his day and thus the need for reformation. There is the very human tendency to add something to what God has said in Scripture. For some it is as if God's Word and teaching in Scripture isn't enough. Either something must be added to the church's teachings because Scripture isn't clear, or something must be added or dreamed up because Scripture is old, irrelevant and doesn't speak to our current situations. C.S. Lewis had a term for this: Chronological snobbery – the idea that what is new and novel is always better because it is new and uncritically received as truth.

Luther and other church reformers had a battle cry – *ad fontes!* To the sources! And the source, the font of truth is what we have received in Scripture as God spoke through the prophets, the apostles, and “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...” (Hebrews 1:2). It is not the “spirit of the age,” the *Zeitgeist*, that determines what is true, holy, and good; it is God's Word which establishes the foundations of what is true, holy, and good for the Church which is and always shall remain Christ's Church. Words from the apostles come front and center: Acts 5:29 – “We must obey God rather than human beings!”

Luther and the reformers of the Church knew what was at stake in going back to the Word as the source and norm for truth and Church teaching – they could lose house and home, job security, reputation, perhaps even their lives. The powers that be also knew what was at stake if they went back to the source too – that they just might be wrong! And so here we are also with God's Word – the Scriptures – the same Word the Church has had from the beginning. May we all cherish the Word in how it challenges and corrects us, enlightens and educates us, and delivers to us the commands and promises of our holy and awesome Lord.

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, help us to appreciate Your holy word for what it truly is and for what it truly teaches. Through Your Word bring us to a deeper love for and devotion to your Son, Jesus our Lord who lived, died, and rose from the grave for us and for our salvation. Amen.*



Monday, April 30, 2018

Text: Acts 8:36-49

"...as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing."

As essential as the Word of God is for the Church, so also are the Sacraments – what Luther (following St. Augustine) would call "Visible Words." THE Sacrament of the sacraments is baptism. Baptism is commanded by Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20) and is a means of grace which brings salvation (1 Peter 3:21). Baptism brings death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-11) – not just symbolic but actual death and resurrection; death to the old you, life to the new you through daily repentance and forgiveness. Baptism unites us into the body of Christ – also known as the Church (Galatians 3:26-27; Ephesians 4:4-6). Baptism brings justification and sanctification (1 Corinthians 6:11). Baptism isn't a "been there, done that" sort of thing, but remains with us our whole life long; a promise and reality that brings spiritual regeneration (Titus 3:5-7) to the Christian struggling against the flesh, the power of sin, and the temptations of Satan.

When talking about baptism though, one must also talk about the importance of faith too – personal trust in Jesus Christ. Luther notes in *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism* the following point about baptism so as to guard it from being misunderstood as some sort of magic trick: "Believe and you have it. Doubt, and you are lost." What he means by this is that those who are baptized and believe have exactly what baptism promises – forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life, being able to live a free and forgiven life here and now, and so on. Those who are baptized but don't believe have nothing baptism promises. The fault here lies not with the Giver (God) or the gift, but with the receiver. God wants and desires to pour out his grace, love, and mercy in baptism, but he/she who rejects that baptism and faith in Jesus is one who throws a gift back into God's face. The one who does not believe is as if they were never baptized at all, never apart of the Church, erased from the Lamb's book of life. This is why faith formation at home is so important – so we know what we believe and why we believe it. And this is why hearing the Good News week in and week out is so important too – so we don't forget it, neglect it, or gradually wander away from where God promises to be.

Baptism is God's work. Baptism is your pledge and promise from God to be your God and you His adopted child, heir to the kingdom of God. And baptism places you in the church's lap with

other baptized believers who struggle and toil day in and day out, a place where other baptized believers receive food and drink from God each week to have their faith strengthened by the forgiveness of sins. As Psalm 34:8 testifies: “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!” But for this other sacrament – the Lord’s Supper – we must wait until tomorrow.

Let us pray: *Gracious God, in baptism you have claimed us as your own. You have called us by name. You have given us a new family: the Church. Thank you for the precious gift of baptism and for all the ways you nurture our faith in your Son Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*



Tuesday, May 1, 2018

Text: Matthew 26:26-28

“While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”

The Lord’s Supper – also known as the Eucharist, the Sacrament of the Altar, and Holy Communion – is something that the Church has celebrated ever since the Lord instituted it for the Church, for us, for our faith. In *On the Councils and the Church*, Luther notes the following: “God’s people...are recognized by the holy sacrament of the altar, wherever it is rightly administered, believed, and received, according to Christ’s institution.” Without this meal we lose our identity. Without receiving the body and blood, eating the bread and drinking the wine, our faith – like our bodies lacking food and water – will slowly wither and deteriorate. There is a reason why Jesus said “Do this” after all: That you actually would “Do this” and in remembrance of He who died and rose again.

So why is this meal so special? Because Jesus says it is. This is one of the messages I try to convey to our youngsters going through First Communion classes. Yet how often do we pause and reflect on the magnitude of this sacrament? How often do we take into prayerful consideration what this gift is and means to us? What we are receiving is not some sort of symbolic representation of Jesus, a simple reminder of God’s love, but we are receiving Jesus Christ himself in the bread and wine, given graciously to us who have betrayed him. “This IS my body...this IS my blood” Jesus promises! Like butter left out on a sunny summer day, the Christian who neglects to receive this gift and promise too will have their faith melt away. May this not be so!

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, the precious gift of your Son’s body and blood in the bread and wine nourishes and strengthens our faith. Help us always to appreciate such a magnificent, yet simple, gift. Help us also to bring others to the table who are in despair because of their sin so they would find you as their Redeemer, Savior, and Friend. Amen.*



Wednesday, May 2, 2018

Text: John 20:22-23

...[Jesus] breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

The first few marks of the church concern matters pertaining to worship, as well as the means by which the Lord communicates and gives His grace to His beloved people. Our current focus, the office of the keys, is also a way in which the Lord communicates His grace and love to His beloved people. Though confession is not a sacrament (there is no visible "thing" like water, bread, and wine that is attached to a promise from God), confession is still "sacramental." And why is that? Because in the word spoken after confession, the absolution, is nothing but pure grace – the forgiveness of sins. It is God's promise spoken to you and for you, a broken, contrite, repentant sinner. When the pastor says, "In Christ's name, I forgive you your sins," that is God's voice, God's promise coming to you through the pastor's words.

Now at this moment some may say, "Well I don't need to confess anything to anyone! I know that God has forgiven me!" To which I would say: "How do you know that God has forgiven you? When has the Lord spoken to you directly and said this?" And the reason I would say that is because the Lord speaks to people through people. God uses people, human language, to bring the message of forgiveness and hope specifically and particularly to you. If you don't want to listen to the pastor then you do not want to listen to God Himself. In Luke 10:16, Jesus tells the disciples, "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me." So to not listen to Christ's Word is to ignore and turn a deaf ear to God himself.

The office of the keys – binding and loosing, forgiving and retaining sin, confession and absolution – must be handled with the utmost care because the office of the keys was given to us, the Church, by our Lord Himself, for the sake of bringing comfort to the weary saint-sinners/sinner-saints of Christ's Church. What the Lord entrusts ought to be held in great reverence and cherished. Why cherished? Because the Lord never tires of forgiving sin and granting his mercy on those who truly love, fear, and serve Him.

Let us pray: *Forgiving God, you indeed are slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Not only do you promise forgiveness, but you pour out your forgiveness as often as you can. Help us to never tire confessing, never tire admiring you for your grace, and never tire of the abundance of your love you give graciously to all who but ask. Amen.*



Thursday, May 3, 2018

Text: Ephesians 4:11-13

“...he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...”

What is so significant about the ordained ministry? Why does the church call people to lead, to teach, to preach? Can't anyone do that? Egalitarian Americans may cringe at this thought: How could God choose some, but not others for the tasks of teaching, preaching, and administering the Sacraments? Aren't all equally capable for doing what the Lord wants done in His Church? And the answer to that is short and sweet: No, not all are capable because not all are called. Just like not everyone is meant to be a millwright, or a nurse, or a lawyer, or a plumber, or a psychologist, or a truck driver, and so on. Every Christian has an important functions and roles to live out, but St. Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4 how only some are called to be pastors.

Now, this doesn't make pastors better than anyone else. It doesn't mean those called to ordained ministry are more holy than anyone else (though they are expected to live holy lives in service to the Lord – but so are God's people!). And it certainly doesn't mean the Lord loves His ministers more than the other sheep of the flock. But it does mean they play a crucial role in the public life of the Church, in the passing on of the faith, in defending the faith “that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

The Church is recognized in this world by what she teaches and preaches, but also in how some are chosen to lead, teach, and preach. The Church and her called servants – pastors, reverends, ministers, etc. – are very visible and are supposed to be visible. They have been publicly called by God to serve the Church in many ways. Four of those ways are the first four “Marks of the Church” above: Preaching, the Sacraments, and forgiving or withholding forgiveness. It might not seem like much to the eyes of the unbeliever, but in the eyes of the faithful, the Lord's servants that are set apart to teach, preach, and do what the Lord commands all for their sake, for the sake of the Church and her Christians. It is not a calling of power and glory. It is not a calling to a life of riches and comfort. But it is a calling in which the Lord God Almighty wants to speak to His people through His servants. But why? So that they, God's people, would be reminded they have a generous and loving Lord; so that they would be reminded of God's mercy; so that they would be reminded that they are to be a holy people and are to live holy lives and need to fight against the powers of sin and the devil; so that they would be reminded of the depth and power of Jesus' sacrifice for them, a sacrifice that makes the believer holy and pure through faith in Jesus' name.

Let us pray: *God of mercy, we thank you for all those called into ministry. We pray for current and future seminary students. We pray for our pastors and the many things they do. We pray our*

pastors would faithfully teach and preach from the Word of God with confidence and conviction. We pray, above all, our pastors would love you Lord – Father, +Son, and Holy Spirit – and be shining examples for others to follow. Amen.



Friday, May 4, 2018

Text: Hebrews 10:24-25

“...let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

The penultimate mark of the church is worship. Worship is central to who we are as Christian people. In *On the Councils and the Church*, Martin Luther writes: “...the holy Christian people are externally recognized by prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving to God.” That is to say, where there is no worship you will find no Church. This is why you don’t find Church in the middle of the wilderness; there is no worship there. Certainly there is a beauty and grandeur of creation that “sings” to God; but that’s not worship. No people are gathered, God’s Word is not heard, and the sacraments are not found. There is a reason why the Lord gave us the Third Commandment after all, to “Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy.” The Lord wants us to worship Him!

The scandal of worship is how the Lord promises to be only where He wants to be found. The Lord God almighty doesn’t want you to find Him in your heart. He doesn’t want to be found out in the woods. He doesn’t want to be found at the grocery store, on a potato chip, and so on. So, in the end, where does God want to be found? He wants to be found in worship. He wants to be found where He promises to be: In the Word that is proclaimed, in the body and blood of our Lord that is given and shed for you in Holy Communion. You can’t worship by yourself because (what we talked about yesterday) you need a preacher to have God speak to you. And you can’t worship by yourself because the Lord calls His people, His church, to gather around Word and Sacrament.

It’s always troubling to a pastor when the Lord’s people are not in worship. To neglect worship is to be cut off from the chief ways in which the Lord nourishes our hearts, minds, and souls. Also, to neglect worship affects our brothers and sisters in Christ. When the Lord’s people aren’t worshipping with their brothers and sisters, those fellow Christians can get discouraged at the absence of others. What this is to say is don’t just worship for yourself and your needs; worship for the sake of your brothers and sisters in Christ and their needs too.

Worship is central to who we are as the Lord’s beloved, yet imperfect, community. Worship makes a public statement of who is our God and what are priorities are. And worship is so important to the Lord that the Third Commandment is devoted to it. However, we don’t worship

because we have to; we worship because we want to, because we get to, because we love to, because we love the Lord Jesus and need to be fed with the bread of life and drink the cup of salvation, because we need His Word so desperately and His Spirit to invade our lives as often as He can.

Let us pray: *Lord of all, you indeed are holy. Holy is your name and great is your power. You let your power break out in worship and we pray we would truly feel that power reverberate through our heart, mind, and bodies. Have your way with us in worship as we become captivated by your presence and power. Amen.*



Saturday, May 5, 2018

Text: Romans 5:3-5

“...we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

The ultimate mark of the Church is the holy cross – suffering. Wait, what? Suffering? Yes, suffering. Why in the world is suffering a mark, the mark of the Church? Simply because our Lord suffered greatly for us, for this world, for all humanity and if we are following him, suffering will come our way. Not just the regular suffering we face by virtue of living in a fallen world – cancer, diabetes, mental health issues, accidents, and the like, but a particular sort of suffering because we are Christians, suffering because we have taken the cross upon ourselves in our lives, suffering because we love the Lord Jesus more than country, more than family, more than anything or anyone.

In the early Church, those first Christians had to make many sacrifices and suffered greatly because of their faith. Converting to Christianity sometimes meant being disinherited from a father's will. Converting to Christianity sometimes meant being disowned by one's own family who were not believers. Converting to Christianity sometimes meant you were going to be looked at with suspicious eyes by others – particularly people who you knew very well. Converting to Christianity meant that you might lose your job or have to quit a job that was unbecoming of a believer. Converting to Christianity meant that your reputation would be tarnished. Converting to Christianity meant that you might even lose a spouse who didn't want to be married to a Christian who followed a Crucified God. Following Jesus in the ancient world was going to cost you something. Nowadays, what do we give up by being a Christian? Nowadays, what will we give up to be a Christian? Or to connect it with our last mark of the church: For our Lord Jesus, how are we willing to suffer?

Like it was stated before, the thing about suffering is that you don't need to look for it – it will find you. We live in a fallen world and suffering is our lot as human beings. But particularly

because we are Christians, other forms of suffering will come our way. While we suffer, we also remember Christ's promise in Matthew 5:11-12 – "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven..." No other religion in the world will say something like that. And that's because every other religion in this world seeks to avoid suffering. But in the Christian faith, following our Lord, we see how suffering can be redemptive and that suffering is not meaningless. Jesus' suffering redeems, transforms, sanctifies, and clarifies our suffering by showing the beauty of glory which follows the darkness of suffering: Resurrection is coming!

Let us pray: *Lord of life, you indeed can accomplish good through pain, anguish, misery, and strife. The greatest good you already have accomplished in the work and person of your Son. By your Spirit, transform our personal moments of suffering into moments to glorify you, giving you thanks that we would be considered worthy to suffer for your holy Name. May others be transformed by God's work of transforming our suffering into unending joy in Christ, the Savior. Amen.*

