

### ***Crux Sola Est Nostra Theologia***

In the name of the crucified Lord of glory, dear friends in Christ: In our Lenten devotions we've been reviewing the "Sola's" of the Reformation. Thus far we've considered Scripture alone, Grace alone, Faith alone, Christ alone, and Glory to God alone. This evening, as seems fitting for a Good Friday service, we come to the Sola that sums up the overriding principle behind the Reformation of the Church. It's this: *Crux Sola est Nostra Theologia* – the cross alone is our theology. As Lutheran Christians, we strive to be theologians of the cross.

What does this mean? For the answer we turn to Luther, the great reformer himself, who in his Heidelberg Theses of 1518 explained that there are two kinds of theologians in the world: there are theologians of glory and there are theologians of the cross. And every believer in God is a theologian. We all have a view of who God is, how he operates in the world, and how he relates to us. The default position, the one we come to by nature, is to be theologians of glory.

As theologians of glory, we look for God and the signs of his good pleasure in the things that are attractive to us. So, where we see good and happiness and prosperity, that's where we know God is at work. That's where we see his hand of blessing. And we say so: "Oh my, how God has blessed me!" and "Well, you certainly are blessed." On the other hand, where we see sorrow, sadness, and suffering we conclude that these are signs of God's displeasure; or we exonerate God completely and consider them to be works of the devil. Naturally, we want to remain on God's good side and so enjoy his blessings. And the way to do that, as everyone knows, is to strive to obey his Laws – which we can do for the most part if we apply ourselves with enough gumption and effort. To get good from God we must be good. And if something we do looks good, then it is good. That's the theology of glory. And it's wrong. It is the basis of all man-made religions and every distorted version of Christianity.

Consider the story Jesus tells of the rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. The former lived luxuriously, the latter in squalor and misery. The theologian of glory concludes that the rich man enjoyed God's gracious favor while Lazarus did not. In fact, Lazarus likely deserved his wretched life on account of his sin, his laziness, and his poor financial planning. But that's not how God sees it. The rich man's wealth led him away from trust in the Lord. He ended up in hell. Lazarus' poverty and poor health led him to rely on the Lord. There wasn't anyone else for him to turn to. Upon his death he was carried by the angels to Paradise. So, ask yourself, in earthly life which of the two enjoyed more of God's gracious favor?

Or consider the story of Job. He goes from great wealth and having a big family to having nothing in just one day. All his possessions are gone, and his children are dead. And then his health fails too, and he's struck with a painful, disfiguring skin disease. His three friends come ostensibly to comfort him in his sorrow and affliction. Instead they accuse him and tell him, "You know, Job, you had this coming. It's obvious that God is punishing you for some terribly evil sin you're hiding. So, come clean. Confess. And God will be sure to restore you." They are consummate theologians of glory. But you, the reader of Job's story, know that Job wasn't singled out by God for his sin, but for his faithfulness and righteousness. God was actually bragging on him when he mentioned Job to the devil.

Or consider the story of Joseph the patriarch, which could be called a series of unfortunate events. His brothers hate him because he's dad's favorite. They first plot to kill him and then they come up with a better plan: sell him into slavery, which is as good as killing him and they make a tidy profit too. They set things up so that dad thinks he's dead. Meanwhile Joseph is serving as best he can in the house of his Egyptian master, until the day he is falsely accused by the master's wife and he's put in prison. It's a case of no good deed going unpunished. If you're Joseph and you're thinking like a theologian of glory you conclude that God must really hate me. He gets a brief moment of hope when he interprets the dream of the Pharaoh's cup bearer; but upon his restoration this man promptly forgets all about poor Joseph. Never a break it seems, just more disappointment; until the day comes when the Pharaoh has a bad dream and suddenly the cup bearer remembers Joseph. Next thing you know he's the prime minister of Egypt. He's running the whole show storing up for the famine that's on the way. When it hits, Joseph finds himself in a position of power over the brothers who despised, betrayed, and sold him. Later, when he reveals himself to them, they are terrified of how he will take his revenge. Instead he forgives them, and he tells them that what they did to him they meant for evil, but God meant it for good – to save many lives.

The point is this: contrary to the theology of glory which operates according to the wisdom of the world, there is no direct correlation between outward circumstances and what God is actually doing in the world. We only think we know. We only think we can see what he's up to. It's a deception. God's ways are hidden to us. We can't see.

What we can do is *hear*. And this is how we become theologians of the cross. To truly know God and understand his ways we have to go to his self-revelation in Holy Scripture. We must *hear* what he has to say. And what he says often contradicts what we see and experience. We see two men praying: a Pharisee striving his uttermost to be a good and faithful man, obedient to the Law of God. And we see a traitorous, conniving, low-life, thief of a tax collector. Jesus tells us that the first goes home steeped in his sin and the second goes home righteous in the sight of God. It doesn't look that way; but there it is straight from the mouth of the Lord. The tax collector confessed that he is a sinner. He pled for God's forgiveness and received it. His is a righteousness not of his doing but of his trusting in God's grace and mercy.

This was the faith of Abraham who was reckoned righteous by God not on account of what he could see because for the most part he could see nothing of what God had promised him. "Look up and count the stars", God told him. "So, shall your offspring be." It was laughable. Abraham was an old man with a wife well past the age of childbearing. Humanly speaking, he was powerless to become a father. Nevertheless, he believed the Lord's words and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

This is a different kind of theology. It's the Theology of the Cross. And it begins by recognizing that the Theology of Glory is what got us into this mess in the first place. The fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was good for food and delightful to the eye and desirable to make one wise like God. But God said, "Don't eat it. If you do, you'll die." Our first parents chose what they could see and experience. They chose what appealed to them – and the word of Satan – over and against the word of God. The result was decidedly not good. What seemed so wise in their eyes turned out to be folly of the worst kind.

And now God in his hidden wisdom revealed directs our attention to the fruit of a different tree. It's an ugly, dead tree stripped of its leaves and most of its branches. Its fruit is not at all appealing: it's a mangled, bloody corpse. There doesn't appear to be anything wise or

desirable about it. Indeed, it's quite offensive. But God says of the fruit of this tree, "Eat and you shall live forever."

It flies in the face of everything we think we know or desire. We seek the wisdom of the world; God saves us through his wisdom that the world considers foolishness. We seek pleasure; God saves us through anguish. We seek comfort; God saves us through pain. We seek justice; God saves us through the greatest miscarriage of justice that's ever occurred. We seek beauty; God saves us through a sight we recoil from. We seek delight; God saves us through horror. We seek exaltation; God saves us through humiliation. We seek honor; God saves us through shame. We seek victory; God saves us through defeat. We seek success; God saves us through failure. We seek kindness; God saves us through cruelty. We seek dominance; God saves us through submission. We seek strength; God saves us through weakness. We seek good; God saves us through evil. We seek life; God saves us through death: the death of his innocent, beloved, and only-begotten Son.

This is the theology of the cross. It's an offensive theology all the way around. And what's most offensive about it is that there's no room in it for our part. This is the great stumbling block that so offends the self-righteous Pharisee in each of us: you've got nothing to offer: not your best effort, not your good intent, not your ability to choose, not your willingness to believe, not any sacrifice you can make, not whatever you can come up with to please God. You are *dead* in your sin and trespass. And we resist this so desperately because it wounds our pride to admit it. Surely, we think, I ought to be able to do something. But no: the reason God's Son had to take on our flesh and go to the cross to suffer and die is because we are powerless – completely unable – even to lift a finger toward attaining our salvation.

As St. Paul says, "the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the *power* of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart'.

"Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

"... But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'.

"And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know *nothing* among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

Search as we may, we won't find God or understand how he relates to us where we would like to: in good, in prosperity, in success, and in the things that are attractive to us. To know God, to understand his purpose, will, and disposition toward us, we must go to the one

place he reveals all this most clearly: to the cross of Jesus. That's how God wants to be known to you: in the suffering Savior. That's the only way he wants to be known. He refuses to be known in any other way.

Consider this: when Jesus was being crucified his enemies mocked him saying, "If you are the Son of God, then come down from the cross." They were theologians of glory. Give us a good sign. Show us your power; then we'll believe in you. And the thing is, Jesus could have done it. He could have utilized his divine power, stepped off the cross, and healed himself in an instant. Everyone would have been amazed. They would have fallen down to worship him. All glory, laud, and honor to Jesus!

But that would not have saved a single soul from eternal hell fire. Yes, there were nails driven through his hands and feet, but they weren't what held Jesus to the cross. What held him to the cross was his love for those who were crucifying and mocking him. What held him to the cross was his love for you and me and his desire to save sinners

That's how God wants to be known to you: through the Father's love in offering up his Son, through the crucified Savior's love in submitting himself to the Father's will and his earnest desire to save the dead in sin. That's how we as theologians of the cross understand all things in all circumstances of life: always through the cross of Jesus. Then it doesn't disturb us or shake our faith when in God's wisdom he causes us to suffer the trials of Job or Joseph or Lazarus. Because we know his great love for us in Christ, we know that whatever his hidden will is for us, it's for the best. It's for our ultimate good. It's for the saving of life – our own and perhaps others as well.

The cross alone is our theology, for God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Grant this, Lord, unto us all. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***