

Toward Christian Maturity

In the name of him who gives us rest, dear friends in Christ: As you know by now since I've repeated it many times, here in the non-festival season of the Church Year we focus our attention on growing in Christian faith and living. And what we're discovering is that a good deal of the Christian life is counterintuitive; that is, it goes against conventional thinking or what we might naturally be inclined to expect. For example, here we've been given the absolute best news in the world that for the sake of Christ God looks upon wretched sinners such as ourselves with tender mercy, freely forgives us for all of our offenses, and promises to give us eternal life in his glorious new heaven and earth—this tremendous Gospel of our salvation; and yet, as a rule, this best news ever is received poorly by the world, and often with open hostility toward those who believe and proclaim it. That just doesn't seem right.

Then last week we heard Jesus say that if you seek your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life for his sake and for the sake of his Gospel, you will find it. That too seems rather backwards: to win you must lose.

Well, it turns out that we get another example of this today, and it comes to us in all three of the readings before us – and trust me, it's pretty rare to have all three texts addressing the same issue. It has to do with the question of Christian maturity, that is, growing up and becoming an adult in the faith, which has nothing to do with a person's age. Some people go their whole lives remaining spiritual infants; and that's not a good thing.

Anyway, we understand how maturity works in the natural world. A baby comes into this world one hundred percent dependent upon its parents. It can't do anything for itself. But as the child grows the parents teach it how to do things: to walk, to talk, to feed and clothe itself, to tie its shoes, and so on. As age increases so do the complexity of the tasks the child learns: how to behave in social situations, how to handle money, how to drive a car; all toward the goal that the child becomes a responsible adult who is able to take care of him or herself and is dependent upon no one.

We'd like to apply the same sort of thinking to our spiritual lives. Sure, at the beginning of the life of faith we have to admit (as we say in the confession) that we are lost and condemned creatures who rightly deserve God's wrath and punishment, and that we cannot free ourselves from our sinful condition. We are one hundred percent dependent upon God's mercy and forgiveness. Our standing before the Lord, our righteousness, relies entirely upon Jesus. Indeed, it's in his righteousness that we stand.

But the thought is that as we mature in faith, with the aid of the Spirit, as time goes on we ought to be making improvements: sinning less often, becoming purer of heart and mind, growing in virtue, shifting some of the effort for attaining that righteous standing before God our way; so that we're no longer one hundred percent dependent upon Jesus, and with the goal of achieving a sort of independence of righteousness – or at least in this life, the closest thing to it.

Now, the Lutheran in you is probably thinking, "That doesn't sound right"; but that is the way people of faith tend to think. Certainly, that's what was going on at the time of our Lord's earthly ministry. The Jews of his day had the rule book: The Law of Moses. And they had distilled from it some six hundred plus specific commands to obey. The path to pleasing God,

they thought, was to keep these commands. And to the extent that they did, they counted themselves righteous before God.

The same thing was going on in the time leading up to the Reformation. The Church had developed a long list of detailed instructions for improving your standing before the Lord. There were the standard do's and don'ts, of course, but if you *really* wanted to please God you took holy orders: you entered a convent or monastery, took a vow of poverty, simplicity, and celibacy, you fasted regularly, you wore rough, uncomfortable clothing, and you prayed the canonical hours – the seven or more worship services scattered throughout the day – whatever your particular order dictated. You did all that and you were definitely going to be seen by the Lord as more righteous than those who lived normal lives. Oh, there were ways for *those* people to improve their standing too: going on pilgrimages to sacred sites, keeping the required fast days, venerating the relics of saints, and so on; but these sorts of things hardly compared to going all the way and taking holy orders.

We see this same sort of thing in our day among many church bodies that claim to be heirs with us of the Reformation, but they've turned full circle. The idea is that the grace and forgiveness of Jesus get you in the door, so to speak, but then it's up to you to start picking up some of the accountability for your righteous standing before the Lord. "Yes" they say, "Jesus is your Savior, but have you made him your Lord?"—by which they mean living a life of total submission and perfect obedience to all that the Lord has commanded. According to these folks, growing toward maturity in the faith is primarily a question of making moral improvements, becoming more outwardly righteous.

And don't kid yourself: we too tend to measure our progress and that of others according to what we see in terms of moral behavior. A good Christian does this and this; a good Christian would never do that or think that way. Say it another way: we measure Christian maturity according to the Law. The better I am at keeping God's commands, the more spiritually mature I must be.

That, as it turns out, is exactly wrong. Consider: there are many folks who have no spiritual life at all, no faith in Christ whatsoever, and yet are outwardly pretty decent people. You don't need to be a Christian to obey the letter of God's commands. But it's not just the letter of the commands that God requires us to obey. He requires that we obey the spirit of them as well. And when we try to do that, we soon discover that the Law is a cruel taskmaster.

This is what Paul is expressing in today's Epistle. He writes, "We know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin." He means that the Law is a good thing, but that the sin nature in him runs right down to the very core of his being. It contaminates every thought, word, and action. No matter how hard he tries to do what is right in the sight of God, he always falls short of the mark. The Law requires that he love and trust in God above all things, and love his neighbor as himself. But he doesn't. He says, "I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I don't do the good I want, but the evil I do not what is what I keep on doing." Every effort to get ahead morally by doing better fails and results in more sin and guilt. Every time I try to make myself better by the Law, it only shows me that I'm worse than I imagined.

That's what Luther discovered too. He had bought into the whole make yourself better by entering the monastery thing. Swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. Did all the fasting and praying and what not, and then was always left wondering if he had done enough or done it with the right attitude and proper sincerity – and then realized to his horror that he hadn't even come

close. Instead of making himself better, he was only seeing how rotten he was and how black his heart. He even began to resent the Lord for making it so hard: to demand so much and then deprive him of the ability to do what is required. And then, and as he should, he felt guilty about his resentment of the Lord. He found himself in the same vicious cycle that Paul describes of only digging himself deeper into sin, the burden of his guilt only getting heavier.

And that was a good thing. It allowed Luther to find the solution to his predicament in the same place Paul did. In the midst of Paul's turmoil, he cries out in despair, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" He sees that life under the Law is dead end. But then he gives the answer: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ." The answer is Jesus. He is the Savior of sinners. His perfect obedience to the Law, his innocent suffering and death as a sacrifice of atonement, his resurrection and ascension on high – that's what saves sinners and releases them from their guilt. And the guiltier you know you are, the more you see your need for the salvation God grants freely through faith in Jesus.

So, it is that Jesus says in today's Gospel, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Stop trying to carry that load of making yourself righteous. It'll never work. It only gets heavier. Hand it over to Jesus. Depend more on him. It's he who sets you free.

And this is why he thanks his heavenly Father saying, "You have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children." Who are the wise and understanding? They are the ones who think they've got this maturity thing figured out. They've studied the Scriptures. They know the commands and are trying to obey them. They are the grownups, dependent on themselves. And they don't get it. To them the truth is hidden. Who are the little children? Those who know they can't take care of themselves. Those who know they are entirely dependent upon Jesus and always will be. This is the essence of true Christian maturity. It's looking to Jesus and to Jesus alone not to help you to be a better person, but to free you from the guilt of your sins.

This is what we see also in today's reading from Zechariah, which you may recognize as a text that foretells the events of Palm Sunday. That's when Jesus came into Jerusalem humbly riding on a donkey while the crowd hailed him as the King. The people themselves are portrayed as prisoners in a waterless pit. It's the prophet's picturesque way of describing life under the bondage of the Law. There's no way to climb out of it, and nothing down here to drink. It's death to everyone in it.

That's why he directs their attention not to themselves but to the Savior: "Behold, your King is coming to you, righteous and having salvation is he." And the prophet tells them how he's going to do it: "Because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free." That blood, we know, is the blood of Jesus shed for sinners on the cross. That blood is both the price of atonement and the guarantee of God's faithfulness to his promise to save you from your sins.

And this is why it's no coincidence that we revisit Palm Sunday in every Divine Service. It happens in the liturgical hymn we call the Sanctus in the service of Holy Communion. The congregation sings, "Hosanna! [That is, save us now] Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Doing so, we're effectively putting ourselves in the crowd hailing our King who comes to us in humility to lay down his life for our sins. And then we do see him, as the prophet says, "Behold, your king"; but instead of seeing him on a donkey, we see him as he comes to us in his body and blood under humble bread and wine. That's where

we see our Lord Jesus and the salvation he brings. That's where we see the blood of his covenant by which he sets us free.

To the wise and understanding, it remains something hidden. They don't see it. But to little children, who know they are fully dependent upon Jesus, it is revealed. And that brings us to the strange paradox: growing toward Christian maturity means becoming ever more like a little child. It means turning from independence in your pursuit of righteousness to total dependence on Jesus – on Jesus who gives us rest, sets us free, and delivers us from this body of death. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!