

The 5th Sunday of Easter; Confirmation Sunday May 2, 2010

Text: John 13:31-35 Title: What's Most Important

INI

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

If there's one question today's Confirmands have heard once, they've had to answer it a hundred times: What is the most important teaching of the Lutheran Church?

Do you know the answer? To tell you the truth, I didn't know the exact right answer until last year... well, I mean, I knew it- I think all who are True Christians know it- but when the question is worded in just such a way, the answer may not come quickly.

People can decipher what is most important to us by listening to us talk, seeing us work, and observing our lives. So, what is the most important teaching of the Lutheran church?

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus gives a new Commandment- "Love your neighbor as yourself."

He commands us to show that we are His disciples by doing something that sounds so simple as loving one another. If we love our neighbor, we show them respect, we greet them as they walk into their house after a long day's work. We lend them power tools and bake them pies. We keep an eye on their house when they are on vacation. We may even mow their grass once in a while or help them with yard work. We can be good and loving neighbors to the people who live right next door to us. We can be justified by following this new Commandment. I'm a good neighbor.

But if we were truly people who loved our neighbor as ourselves, we would have no use for a Savior. We would be perfect and blameless. If we were good and loving neighbors to everyone, there would be no stealing, no murdering, no coveting, no adultery, no disrespect, no hate, no malice, no ill will, no shame, no discord... If this were the most important teaching of the Lutheran Church, the burden of salvation would be left upon us... we who fall short of God's demands for perfection.

In our reading from Acts, Peter realized that Jesus is for everyone! But a popular teaching when people preach about Jesus, is to leave the preference of believing and accepting Christ up to the individual's own choice. By this popular teaching, people place the burden of salvation on themselves by confessing their choice to believe in Jesus, thinking as if by our action, we can believe and be saved.

There would be no room for Grace, then, if the choice is left in our hands to believe in Jesus Christ. Those who are without cognoscente thought, like babies, young children, mentally handicapped individuals, even adults with Alzheimer's, would have no hope of salvation if it relied upon thinking clearly and holding to a choice. Even then, don't we all who are blessed to be "in the right mind" make the choice to do things apart from the will of God when we go against His will for our lives?

Maybe the most important teaching, as we heard from Revelation, is that the one who conquers will have the heritage of life in heaven. Taken out of context (as many people tend to do with the Bible), when a conqueror stands victorious on the battlefield, all eyes are turned to see who it is that has all the glory of victory. That is what we want- to be recognized for our accomplishments, to be seen as an important person, to be a cut above the rest, to bring glory to ourselves... thinking that, by doing so, it's all good with God.. He knows me, what I believe, and you can't tell me nothing. We have earned it.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. When God the Father sees His creation, He sees what is most important in the lives of many human beings: *Ourselves*- not our neighbors. *Our* choice to believe- not faith as a gift of God. *Our* glorification- not glory to Christ. When human beings want to be like God, knowing good from evil, everything becomes muddled in gray, and false teachings take the place of the most important teaching of the whole of Scripture...

"We are justified by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, apart from the deeds of the law."

When this is the most important teaching of the Church, it consumes every minute of life. It is taught, applied, confessed, practiced, studied, and preached in every Sunday worship service, every Bible Study, every time the Word is read, and every interaction between human beings who believe this. This teaching sets the Lutheran Church apart from every other church on earth, and professes the only way to be saved- completely by the work of God... by the means of Grace.

The means of Grace-Word of God, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper- create, strengthen, and sustain faith. Faith grasps onto and believes the promises of God. The promise is that our deeds play no part in salvation, only the perfect deeds of Jesus, our substitute. Christ Crucified and risen is the cornerstone of the most important teaching of the Lutheran Church.

The confession of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith apart from deeds of the law is what many of you before these 8 confirmands have professed undying faith to, as we all look to Christ who makes us right with God.

You are justified-declared not guilty, in God's court of law. The charge against you is sin. The gavel is dropped, and the Almighty Judge declares "not guilty." In this amazing turn of events from what was expected, you look around to see how this was possible that your sin is gone, and who your lawyer was that got you off the hook. Your eyes fall upon Jesus as He walks out of the courtroom, and to a cross on a hill, upon which He is crucified and died. He is the guilty one in your place.

This is grace. To be freed from the debt of sin to God at Christ's expense. The death and condemnation that should be yours, was placed on Christ, and in its place, you are given a new life. It is by Grace you have been saved, through Faith.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Trusting that the Words and promises of God are true.

When the water and the Word are present at Baptism, the Holy Spirit working in the heart of the baptized is unseen, but we believe the Word does what it says, and faith is created.

When the pastor speaks the Word of forgiveness in the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, by faith we see Jesus standing there, forgiving us.

When we take communion, although we don't see it, we believe that Christ's True Body and True Blood are truly present in, with, and under the bread and wine- and through this sacrament, our faith is strengthened, and Christ gives us life.

All this leads us to today, Confirmation Day in the Lutheran Church. A day when many of you in the past have confirmed the teachings of the Lutheran Church to be what you believe, and have professed before the congregation, and before God Himself, that you will continue believing these Words and promises the Lutheran church, feeding your God given faith until death.

What was received at Baptism, with sponsors and witnesses pledging to remind the baptized of the important day when the Word was spoken, the water was poured, and God made the death and resurrection of Jesus your own, and created faith in your hearts to believe this, today will be confessed by these 8. They will be publically making the statement that this is the most important teaching in their life, that they will follow the Word of God to the best of their ability, and will always confess that we are justified by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, apart from the deeds of the Law.

With this foundational teaching- the most important teaching- so important in the life of a Christian, may your example as parents, sponsors, friends, and members of the church, always and continually point future generations, your children, and your neighbors, to Jesus Christ, who alone washes us clean, and by whom we are justified before God, and saved. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, until the Day of Everlasting Life. Amen.

SDG