

August 1, 2021 - Pentecost 10

The Gospel message for this 10th Sunday after Pentecost sets the table perfectly, I believe, to share with you one of my favorite quotations by which to sum up the Lutheran theological lens and its valuable view upon living the Christian life.

In his book, “Justification By Faith: A Matter of Death and Life,” Gerhard Forde (FUR-dee) writes almost as if he were directly responding to the query of the crowd who catches up to Jesus in verse 28.

“We have to *do* something, don’t we?” Furdee asks rhetorically, paraphrasing the questioners at that time, of Jesus. “No!” he replies, just as Christ implied. “In fact, that is no longer the question. Now the question becomes, ‘What *are* you going to do now that you don’t *have* to do anything?’”

Now let's back up and give that a little more context. Forde, and really as we believe, Jesus, is getting to the heart of what it says on our sign out facing Walker Street. Word Alone. Grace Alone. Faith Alone. And we can talk about what the implications are of putting those three "alones" out in front of us, without giving further context for them another time. But these words of Martin Luther's are *indeed* at the core of a shared expression of our faith.

And they come into play here. These folks who go after Jesus clearly feel they have to *do* something. They've already put out some considerable effort to reach him. They probably think they're going deep ... but Jesus begins to teach immediately that they are instead remaining rather shallow. You want what you have seen, what satisfies you for a moment ... but there's more, he says. You'd think he was a fisherman and not a carpenter the way he gives them this tantalizing bait to keep them sniffing around.

But they got caught up on kind of the wrong thing. Or put the cart before the horse, so to speak. You've got work to do, they hear Jesus say.

That's not wrong.

If you're confused at this point and recognize some contradiction here, hang with me. God is pretty good at this whole paradox and parable kind of stuff. This leads me to another piece of wisdom, ancient in this case, from Rabbi Tarphon, a Jewish teacher and spiritual leader who lived during the time when much of the New Testament was written: "You are not obliged to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."

The work we are to do *originates* with believing. As Christians, it's the belief that indeed Jesus was sent by God to save the world. To change the world, irreversibly for the better. That is Jesus' work and it is not ours to do alone.

Thanks be to God! This is Good News. This is excellent news. This is freeing and life-giving news.

It's resisting this news, refusing to believe it because it's too good to be true, which gets in our way when it doesn't need to. The work is not back-breaking. It's not the kind of against-all-odds, nearly-impossible quest of which legends are made. It's really quite simple, but artificial obstacles the world places in the way make it seem a lot more difficult than it ought to be. Believe in the one whom God sent and let everything flow out from there.

It's about the centrality of God in our lives. It's remembering we don't do the work that we do to make the world a better place, and then dutifully invoke God once we have done everything on our own — in our own way of doing things —and then bring God in as an afterthought. Literally billions of times, people — including widely-recognized-as-good-God-fearing people — have done just that. I have done

that at times in *my* life, too often actually. I suspect many of us here have. In all fairness, it's what gives me job security — if all it took were Jesus preaching, once and for all, and we all understood the message and did as he taught, encouraged, *commanded* ... none of us would be here.

But here we are. We need *plenty* of reminders that it's not all about me. We aren't going to get those kind of reminders from the ubiquitous marketing the world we live in blasts at us. But it's not about you. It's not about me. It is about God. And then, secondarily, it's about us. Helping one another to live this life of faith. Leaning on one another. Encouraging one another. Forgiving one another when we mess it all up and fall short of what we are supposed to do.

We are church together because, yes, we *can* be people who believe individually ... but when we come together, when we are at our best, we remind each other of who God is. We see the image of God in the faces of *every single*

person, whether we like them or not. It's harder for us to see that divine image in some of our neighbors than it is in others — I won't deny that, we're all human. But I suspect one of the reasons we are here is because we hope that gathering together, being in community, sharing a longing for a little bit more of Jesus is going to make us better. It's going to help us to do better.

That is believing in the Word alone. *Jesus love me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.* Martin Luther put it this way in his writing about what Scripture is: “You may find divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies.”

It is the Word of God which tells us the Word of God is truly revealed in Jesus Christ. Many a Lutheran has been asked, “is yours a Bible-believing church?” Sometimes that's a question that can make us uneasy. It can carry the baggage

of assumptions about inerrancy, about literalism and legalism. I've found it a helpful perspective to think of the answer in this way. Yes! We absolutely believe in the Bible and we take Scripture seriously. Seriously enough **not** to always take it literally. Consider the last verse in this Gospel passage this morning ... "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry," Jesus says, "and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Taken literally, removed from all context, historical and literary, well-meaning believers have been recipients of spiritual abuse. "I'm hungry," one thinks. "I'm thirsty ... so I must not be in God's good graces. I must not be *doing* enough in my attempts to follow Jesus." It's that kind of fear — and a spiritual epiphany that broke down that fear — which led Luther to his great theological breakthrough: We can never *do* enough on our own. God saves us by God's own work and not anything we can do. It's not *our* doing that makes the difference but *God's*.

Only by the grace of God are we forgiven for all the times we fall short of God's vision for us. It is grace given freely ... but at the priceless cost of Jesus' innocent blood.

And by faith alone do we have the source for all the good we might be able to accomplish in this world. When we try to live as God wants for us *on our own*, rejecting God, we never get there. But when we let our faith dictate that we will always come back to God as the ultimate source of our being, and recognize that *God alone* has the answers, the strength, the tools we require to build up the Kingdom of Heaven, *then* we can live freely. Existential angst and anxiousness can melt away. As long as we live in a broken world, it might find its way to creep back in. But as people of faith together, we strengthen our defenses against those things that steal our joy. We share the bread of life.

Which brings me to one last favorite quote I'll leave you with, this one usually attributed to the Sri Lankan pastor D.T.

Niles: “Christianity is just one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread.” When we are together as one, if any one of us forgets *where* to find God’s word, *how* to accept God’s grace, or in *whom* we need to place our faith, another one of us is here with the same bread. Here, we can say ... Take. Eat. You never need to be hungry. Amen.