

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Next week, we're holding a confirmation reunion for certain honored classes. It's not unlike the alumni weekends at Concordia High School, though much smaller in scope. I enjoy having these Zion honorees here; they often tell some great stories.

Now, Mr. Thom, I'm sure nothing like this would ever happen when Concordia plays one of the Bishops schools, but when Zion and St. Peter's Catholic both had schools—this is what I've been told—our kids would walk to school on the south side of Creighton; St. Peter's kids would walk on the north side of Creighton; and if they met in the middle, you can imagine what transpired — a matter/anti-matter explosion of fists and elbows, pulled hair and torn clothes.

Not a very pleasant planting of the Lord in His vineyard at Hanna and Creighton. Not "*justice, but behold, bloodshed*"; not "*righteousness, but behold, an outcry!*" If the Lord was looking for good grapes, He found some wild ones. They must not have gotten the memo from Jesus' parable: those engaged in beating and killing and stoning are not being commended.

But that's the way it was back then, goes the excuse. They were ... Catholic! We Lutherans can no more tolerate Catholics than the Hatfields can tolerate the McCoys, for weren't the religious wars of the 16th century Catholics making war against Lutherans? We were just defending ourselves—and the Gospel.

I'm thankful that we're not at war any longer with the Roman Catholics, even if we still disagree on many things; and I'm thankful that Lutheran students and Roman Catholic students don't have to meet in the middle of the street to rumble. We can meet on different turf or on hardwood — and, of course, we still want to win, but our lives don't depend on those. Our swords and spears have been beaten, metaphorically speaking, into footballs and basketballs.

And, here at Zion on October 21st, we can even invite a Roman Catholic professor on this 500th Anniversary year of the Reformation to tell us a bit about how Roman Catholics think about Luther and Lutherans these days — and we'll listen and question without acrimony. And we'll respond — our own Dr. Ziegler first, but then we, too. I invite you to come and join us. You will be edified.

But, of course, when Isaiah speaks in the Old Testament, and then Jesus in the New, there is a specific context. Isaiah is speaking to the unfaithfulness of Israel and Judah shortly before the Lord permits Israel to be overrun by the Assyrians. "*Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made*" (Is. 2:8). Therefore, the Lord speaks a word of judgment: "*I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.*"

And Jesus tells His parable, having entered humbly into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, having cleansed the temple, and having had His authority challenged by the Jewish leaders, as He prepares to do the consummating act of His judgment.

The two parallel one another. In both, the Lord had been hard at work planting choice vines and caring for the vineyard. In Isaiah's song, the vine produced only wild grapes — thus, judgment ensued. In Jesus' parable, judgment came after the wicked tenants beat, killed, and stoned the Lord's servants and even the heir, His Son.

The chief priests and Pharisees could recognize that Jesus was talking about them. They surely knew Elijah's lament: *"the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life"* (1 Ki. 19:10). And it didn't take a doctor of theology to understand what kind of judgment those wicked tenants deserved: *"What will [the owner] do to those tenants?" "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."* That is, as Jesus explained, *"the kingdom of God will be taken away from you [chief priests and Pharisees] and given to a people producing its fruits."*

But what are these fruits, that we might not fall under the same judgment? Isaiah said, He looks *"for justice."* He looks *"for righteousness."* Just as the prophet Micah had answered: *"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"* (Micah 6:8). Jesus Himself would tell the Pharisees what that fruit is that He is looking for: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, ... you ... have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness"* (Matt. 23:23).

No problem, for us Lutherans, right? Wrong! Even St. Paul counted his own impressive pedigree and his *"righteousness under the law"* as rubbish as compared to gaining Christ. Do you have more confidence in your flesh, in your abilities, than St. Paul? Repent!

No, this fruit of justice and righteousness are *"not ... of my own that [come] from the law,"* St. Paul said. They *"[come] through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God [and justice] that [depend] on faith,"* that come through repentance.

The problem *"the chief priests and Pharisees"* had was not that they were evil people who never did anything good or worthwhile. Their pedigree was probably similar to Paul's and their zeal likewise. No, their problem was in not having the righteousness of repentance and faith. Their problem was that they were the builders rejecting the cornerstone upon which God's justice and righteousness are built. They were rejecting Jesus, the Son, and they had been plotting to kill Him as their forefathers before them had *"killed the prophets with the sword."* For this stone was not what they were expecting. He seemed to have flaws. He seemed

weak, and he offended them by rejecting their man-made laws and by befriending “*tax collectors and sinners*” (Matt. 11:19). He had to be rejected!

The lure is still there today to reject this stone for other foundations, our Lutheran pedigree, our works, our own righteousness according to the law, but this stone that the builders rejected is the cornerstone upon which the church is built. It’s not by rejecting this stone, but by falling on it in repentance and faith, and being broken by it, that you are saved. For that’s the righteousness from God—not the sacrifices that you offer Him, but “*a broken spirit.*” The Lord does not despise “*a broken and contrite heart*” (Ps. 51:17), but forgives it, ever again creating in you a clean heart and renewing a right spirit in you, declaring you righteous through faith. Only in this way can you offer “*spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God*”— they are acceptable to God “*through Jesus Christ*” (1 Pet. 2:5).

On the other hand, that same stone is the one that crushes those on whom it falls, that is, on those who reject Him. And although we don’t rejoice in the rejection by the tenants, the Jewish leaders, still we do rejoice that we “*have received mercy because of their disobedience*” (Rom. 11:30) and not because we’re obedient; not because we keep the law when the Jews could not, but rather because , “*God has ... [had] mercy on all*” (Rom. 11:32), mercy, through the stone rejected, through the Son—killed—crucified.

But even though the Son’s death and judgment is the end of the parable, and Jesus’ death is the climax of our redemption, it is not the end of our story; death did not win, and it does not defeat us either, who fall on this Stone in repentance and faith. Christ is risen; He is living! The stone the builders rejected is “*a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious*” and on this stone are we, “*living stones ... being built up as a spiritual house*” (1 Pe. 2:4-5), or, to mix metaphors, you might say that we are choice vines planted on the Rock rejected. We shall not be put to shame, we, who are His pleasant planting, whom “*he has caused ... to be born again,*” by water and the Spirit. He works in us to produce good fruit: not combat with Catholics on Creighton, but justice and righteousness that comes from faith, mouths that “*proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light,*” that acknowledge His mercy received, and hearts that abide in “*a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,*” a hope that we, too, will rise from the dead, and receive “*an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [us]*” (1 Pe. 1:3-4).

May God grant us, as choice vines planted on the Rock, faithful servants that tend to us by word and sacrament and keep us strong and fruit bearing until the day of harvest.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.