

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

I was surprised by a question a person posed to me as he came out of church last Sunday, not that the answer was hard. The person wanted to know Zion's stance on the so-called "Third Use of the Law"; I say "so-called" because I don't really like the word "use" in the phrase. It's misunderstood by some who think it's talking about how we use the law, rather than how God uses it. God gave us the Law, and He determines how it functions. Thus, I like the word "function" rather than "use," and I like to talk about the Third Function of the Law — how does the law function in the world.

So, this person asked about Zion's stance regarding the Third Use, meaning really, what does Zion's pastor believe and teach about the Third Use. The answer was quite easy, actually. Do we believe in it and teach it? We do, indeed, for we are Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. We hold to that Augsburg Confession and to the Formula of Concord which expounds upon it. One article in that Formula of Concord is on "The Third Use of God's Law" (Article VI).

Let's begin with a bit of a catechism review. Regarding God's Law, we confess: "The Law was given to people for three reasons: (1) that by the Law outward discipline might be maintained against wild, disobedient people." In catechism class, we talk about the Law functioning thus as a curb, keeping people by force or threat on the straight path.

The second reason the law was given us is so "that people may be led to the knowledge of their sins by the Law." Again, in catechism class, we say the law "shows us our sins," and in this way, it functions as a mirror in our lives, reflecting our utter failure to keep the law. In church, then, we are led to repentance and are preached the good news of Jesus, that we may believe in our forgiveness for Christ's sake, and believe that we "*will not perish but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16).

And finally, the law was given us "that after [people] are regenerate and <much of> the flesh still cleaves to them, they might on this account have a fixed rule according to which they are to regulate and direct their whole life" (Epitome VI:1). For this function, the catechism comparison is to a rule or a guide. The word of God as "*a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*" (Ps. 119:105), so that, no longer by coercion or threat, but urged on by the love of Christ (2 Cor. 5:14) and instructed in the way we should go (Ps. 32:8), Christians seek to do God's will.

So this question was still running through my head as I considered our texts assigned for today — of Mary with Joseph going to the temple after the time of her purification and Mary and Joseph consecrating her firstborn son to the Lord — the

holy Mother of our Lord and Joseph, our Lord's guardian, were being guided by the Law, that is, the Third function of the law.

Regarding Mary's purification, women were considered unclean for a time after childbirth. When the prescribed time was complete, a woman would bring an offering to the temple for the priest to sacrifice "*before the LORD and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood*" (Lev. 12:7). The holy couple brought the offering of a poor family, but it was all done in accordance with the Law of Moses, guided by this Third function.

Similarly, as we heard in our Old Testament lesson, the holy family followed another requirement of the LORD: they consecrated Mary's firstborn son to Him. Because in Israel's deliverance from Egyptian slavery, in the tenth plague, God took the lives of the firstborn of both animal and men, therefore He commanded that all the firstborn of Israel's animals be sacrificed to Him while all the firstborn sons of the mothers were to be consecrated — set apart — for Him. Thus, in this trip to the temple, Mary and Joseph fulfilled both requirements. They offered the sacrifice for Mary's purification and they consecrated Jesus to the LORD ... "*according to the custom of the Law*" — guided by the law's Third function.

The Lord surely was pleased with the couple's obedience flowing forth from their faith. He knew their faithfulness, and he knew their intent to do according to the law, and so He caused His Holy Spirit to come upon faithful Simeon, to reveal to Simeon that he would have the privilege of seeing "*the Lord's Christ,*" and to move faithful Simeon to come to the temple on that day. Filled with the same Spirit, Simeon recognized Jesus, a child of only 40 days, as that Christ. He took the Child in his arms, blessed Him, and proclaimed Him the Lord's salvation, "*a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to [God's] people Israel.*" The prophetess Anna, too, pleased God. As she witnessed Simeon's proclamation, she joined in the praise of God, and she began to bear witness to Jesus as "*the redemption of Jerusalem.*"

Now, I do want to be clear as we are thinking on the law today: our keeping of the law does not save us. Salvation is only through Christ, through faith in Him. Our redemption is only through His shed blood, only through His death and resurrection.

Now, for us today, things are a bit different than for Mary and Jesus. The purification requirements are no longer in force. Jesus came and fulfilled these laws for us. Just as Jesus' death does away with circumcision laws for men — "*[f]or freedom Christ has set us free*" (Gal. 5:1) — so Jesus sets women free from the law's purification requirements. He also sets families free with regard to the requirements for consecrating their firstborn sons. But that doesn't mean that there

are no requirements for Christians, who through baptism have died with Christ and been raised with Him, raised to *“walk in newness of life”* (Rom. 6:4), or as St. Paul puts it shortly before our Epistle text, raised to *“seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God”* (Col. 3:1), to *“[s]et your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth”* (Col. 3:2).

God wants His will done still, but He doesn't call us to childbirth purification rites and “opening the womb” consecration rites. Instead, He calls upon us who have been born from above in baptism and made new creations to *“[p]ut to death ... what is earthly in [us]: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness,”* and to *“put ... away anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from [our] mouth[s]”* (Col. 3:5, 7). St. Paul supplies us a guide to how God wants us to act as Christians ... what not to do.

It is law; they're commandments; the verbs are imperatives! And, oh, yes, this law surely still functions in us today as a mirror, shining the light on our sins, calling us to repentance for our disregard of this law, for although we are believers, we are not completely regenerate. We *“struggle [constantly] against the flesh ... against [our] corrupt nature and character, which cleaves to us until death”* (Epitome VI:4). But the law here is also functioning as a guide for us, instructing us what not to do. You'll have to get your Bibles out and check it out — these instructions come in chapter 3 right before our Epistle text.

But our Epistle has plenty of law, too, this law also telling us believers how God wants us to act, this time what He wants us to do. More imperatives ... *“[p]ut on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive”* — more instruction for holy living. *“[P]ut on love ... let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts ... be thankful ... [l]et the word of Christ dwell in you richly ... do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus”* God is pleased with such law-keeping. We are still unworthy servants by the doing, but we have done our duty.

Things are different for us in another way. Simeon and Anna had a personal encounter with Jesus that we do not get to have. Any Spirit-filled utterance we might make, any song we might pen, will not fill the pages of Holy Scripture as Simeon's did. Moreover, his words are in our hymnals, spoken and sung with our mouths. Nevertheless, we do encounter Jesus. We do so in the pages of Holy writ, in the words read aloud here at church and by us at home, in the preaching from this pulpit, at the altar of Jesus' own body and blood. We have been filled with the Spirit at our baptism, and here again at the Divine Service. Therefore, may we, as righteous and devout people of God, filled with the Lord's consolation, go forth

from here, also seeking to do God's will, in bearing witness to Jesus, still the Lord's salvation, still our Savior, our Redeemer, proclaiming His excellencies (1 Pet. 2:9). May we go forth, our paths lighted by His revelation, doing good works in His name, giving glory to God the Father, trusting that our salvation is by God's grace alone, through faith in Christ Jesus. God grant it ...

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