

Christ is risen. Alleluia.

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We've come to the end of the Season of Easter. It's a season for reveling in the extraordinary Good News of Jesus Christ — what St. Paul called the things “*of first importance*” for us in the Church — “*that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures*” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Again, St. Paul highlights this cardinal doctrine of the Church saying, that “*Jesus our Lord ... was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification*” (Rom. 4:24-25). Jesus earned our forgiveness and salvation by His cross and resurrection.

And our own “justification” is the judgment that we are accounted righteous before our God, not by some supposed good works, but as a gift from God received through faith — by believing the good news of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice for us. As we confess: “Our churches [that is, we Lutherans] teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. [Rather,] [p]eople are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight ” (Augsburg Confession, IV:1-3).

This teaching about justification has long been called “the article upon which the church stands or falls.” The saying is attributed to Luther, but that exact phrase is apparently not Luther’s. According to Jack Preus, “Lutheran theologian Balthasar Meisner used it in 1613, referrring [sic] to it as a ‘proverb of Luther,’” and suggesting further that “[p]erhaps he was referring to the statement of Luther in his 1540 exposition of Psalm 130:4, in reference to the doctrine of justification by faith.”¹ What Luther wrote was, “Because if this article [on justification] stands, the church stands; if it collapses, the church collapses”².

For we see today in the First Reading the despair that filled Judas, caused by the thought of a sin too great to be forgiven, a sin committed by a man too wicked to be considered righteous before God. How interesting what Peter said of this disciple of Jesus ... that he had been “*allotted his share in [Jesus’] ministry,*” and he betrayed Jesus by becoming “*a guide to those who arrested Jesus,*” and what he didn’t say. What I didn’t hear in Peter is condemnation.

¹ Jack Preus, in Correspondence in *First Things*, 58, December 1995, 2-9; found on leaderru.com.

² WA 40/3.352.3, quoted by Justin Taylor, “Luther’s Saying: ‘Justification Is the Article by Which the Church Stands and Falls,’” thegospelcoalition.org, August 31, 2011.

Perhaps that's because Judas' sin of betrayal was surely similar in kind to Peter's denial of Jesus. Yet, Peter was forgiven and restored! Why? Because he kept on believing and his faith was counted to him as righteousness; while Judas in despair didn't trust that Jesus could or would forgive him.

Judas' story is a sad one. His demise was not because the blood of Jesus didn't atone for his sin ... it did! "*[T]he blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin*" (1 John 1:7), John says. Similarly, "*[o]ut of the depths*" of his own sorrow over sin, the Psalmist firmly asserts: "*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared*" (Ps. 130:3-4).

But Judas didn't believe that he could be forgiven; so, he didn't fear the Lord. In despair, he went out and hanged himself (Matt. 27:5). And you heard the gruesome result: he fell headlong from his noose onto this "*Field of Blood,*" and "*burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.*"

Such is the history of this tragic disciple of Jesus as recorded by the evangelists Matthew and Luke. And it truly happened, but one can also use it as a metaphor for Luther's proverb, our justification dictum. For the church that does not preach and believe in the forgiveness Jesus won by His cross and gives by Word and Sacrament is a church that, like Judas, has died and fallen and spilled its guts on a field of betrayal of these first things.

The true church, the church that stands, however, is built on these first things as shown by the choice of Matthias as the apostle to replace Judas. He had to be one that had been with the twelve from the beginning — "*from the baptism of John until the day when [Jesus] was taken up from us,*" that is, when Jesus ascended into heaven. And this was so, that he might be "*a witness to [Jesus' cross and] resurrection,*" that we might believe, and eat from the fruit of this "*tree of life*" and receive through faith in Christ "*wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption*" (1 Cor. 1:30).

Truly, as we exit the season of Easter and move into the season of Pentecost, starting with Pentecost itself, we move into the time of the Church in our church calendar. And how appropriate for us not only to preach this foundational churchly message, but also to join in with Jesus' prayers for the Church, for that's what He does in our Gospel. In this last third of His High Priestly Prayer, as it's called, Jesus turns His attention to "*those who will believe in [Him] through [the apostles'] word.*" That's the Church — an apostolic church, "*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone*" (Eph. 2:20).

And this Church is one, just as Jesus prays: “*that they may all be one.*” Despite external appearances, there is “one, holy, Christian and apostolic church” (Nicene Creed), and its membership consists of all those who eschew their own works and look to Jesus Christ alone for their salvation. It’s an invisible, internal unity that members can’t see, even as in the divine being, the Father and the Son are one, the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father. But we can recognize this unity by the Church’s marks — the Gospel purely preached and the Sacraments rightly administered.

This unity of the Church begins in Holy Baptism in the one name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul acknowledges: “*as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ ... you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal. 3:27-28). This unity is nurtured as we are instructed in the faith and confirm it in the creeds we learn and confess, creeds that bear witness to the unity of the Trinity and our unity in this Triune God: “I believe in one God, the Father almighty ... And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of the Father, ... God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, ... being of one substance with the Father ... I believe in the Holy Spirit, ... who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified ... And I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church” (Nicene Creed).

And our unity is manifested in the pure proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners, a salvation received as a gift through faith. Our unity is most keenly experienced at the Lord’s table where we join together as people unified in our confession that we poor sinners receive Christ’s very body and blood in our mouths, and that by this eating and drinking we receive forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Finally, this Churchly unity is manifested when we work together with other Christians to love and serve those of the household of faith — like we do in our Lutheran South Association, and like we do with our sister churches in our circuit and District — but also to love and serve those who don’t yet know the name of Jesus or believe in Him, like we do in our school. The Lord desires all to be saved. He reminds us that the fields are ripe for the harvest. Let us unite in this one mission.

God grant that we may continue to receive the pure Gospel in Word and Sacrament, rejoice in it and in the churchly unity to which it testifies. And God grant that we may show forth this unity in lives of service to God and neighbor.

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

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