

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Service of Daily Prayer -- Morning
March 21, 2021

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: **Amen.**

P: O Lord, open my lips,

C: **and my mouth will declare Your praise.**

Psalm 51:15

P: Make haste, O God, to deliver me;

C: **Make haste to help me, O Lord.**

Psalm 70:1

P: Restore us, O God;

C: **Let Your face shine, that we may be saved!**

Psalm 80:3

**All: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

Scripture Readings

Jeremiah 31:31-34

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Colossians 2:16-23

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Mark 10:35-45

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And

Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Hymn: *LSB 543, What Wondrous Love Is This (v. 1-3)*

1 What won-drous love is this, O my soul, O my soul! What
 2 When I was sink-ing down, sink-ing down, sink-ing down, When
 3 To God and to the Lamb I will sing, I will sing; To
 4 And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on; And

won-drous love is this, O my soul! What won-drous love is this That
 I was sink-ing down, sink-ing down, When I was sink-ing down Be -
 God and to the Lamb I will sing; To God and to the Lamb, Who
 when from death I'm free, I'll sing on. And when from death I'm free, I'll

caused the Lord of bliss To bear the dread-ful curse for my
 neath God's righ-teous frown, Christ laid a-side His crown for my
 is the great I AM, While mil-lions join the theme, I will
 sing His love for me, And through e-ter-ni-ty I'll sing

soul, for my soul, To bear the dread-ful curse for my soul!
 soul, for my soul, Christ laid a-side His crown for my soul.
 sing, I will sing, While mil-lions join the theme, I will sing.
 on, I'll sing on, And through e-ter-ni-ty I'll sing on.

Sermon

I think that one of the primary effects of the Fall and of sin in the world is that we lost the ability to maintain balance. This world that God made is an unbelievably, almost impossibly complicated and inter-connected system -- its sheer complexity that operates (mostly) in harmony is one significant reason many people do acknowledge the existence of a Creator or higher power of some sort. And when we as human beings are acting in harmony with God and His will, we are in balance as well.

But notice I said that now the world in all its complexity operates mostly in harmony; because that's not always the case. The system is still working, but there are cracks and flaws that our sin has introduced. All the cylinders are firing, but the timing is off. The perfect harmony of God's Creation has become imperfect because of his creatures' rebellion against His design. And we now find balance is difficult to achieve: we go to extremes.

I think I hardly have to give examples of this, because there are so many around us. Too often, even when we have correctly identified a problem, we over-compensate and go too far another direction in our attempt to correct one thing. It's like a drunk person, or perhaps a toddler learning to walk: we sway and weave, and too often we fall. We see the car drifting to the left, towards oncoming

traffic, and we jerk the wheel too hard and end up in the ditch on the other side. We see the same kind of over-correcting and inability to maintain balance everywhere: in politics, in economics, in our own lives, in examples from global to personal.

And certainly it's true in spiritual terms as well. While avoiding immorality and sin, we must not fall into works righteousness; while trusting in Christ and the grace of God for our forgiveness, we must not think we are free to live immorally. Christians, still being the imperfect people we are, have always struggled with that tension and walking that balance. The good we do or the evil we avoid doesn't really change our status with God, because that exists purely by faith and His gift; and yet, we must not think that our sin is unimportant or doesn't really matter. How can we find balance in that apparent contradiction, rejoicing in the free gifts of faith while battling sin, doing the good works but not trusting in them?

Both extremes, the ditch on both sides of the road, are temptations that Satan may offer us. One is to think we can do whatever we want to do, and it's all okay; a lot of people fall into that one today. The other is to think we have to obey in order to be saved, to earn it. We certainly see that among some Fundamentalist groups. So what does this reading from Colossians today say about it?

The book starts in chapter one with this: "walk a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him and bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." But here, he seems to reject a lot of it; especially the actions and traditions that those people were used to associating with faithful conduct and lifestyle. And we see this tension here: we are to hold fast to the Head -- that is, of course, Jesus because the Church is the Body of Christ and he is the head of it, in charge of the rest of the body. We are to remember and rely on this connection we have with our Lord, because just like a person, if the body is separated from the head we don't last very long at all.

We are to hold fast to our Lord Jesus, because it is through him, Paul writes, that we are nourished and knit together, it is through him that we grow at all because that growth comes only from God. Yet at the same time we are to stop the indulgence of the flesh, to restrain indulgence in all kinds of earthly pleasures. How? That's his topic here. Our actions do matter; our lifestyle matters; we are called to live in a way that is fitting for a Christian, and the option of "do whatever you want to, because you're forgiven" is not open to us. Yet none of this has any impact on the really important things, forgiveness, eternal life, salvation.

That's the kind of works righteousness that this passage is concerned with, and it's the kind that's awfully appealing to human beings. The problem in that specific context was whether or not Christians had to follow the Jewish ceremonial laws and customs - some of these were from the Old Testament, while some were later traditions that had evolved among the Pharisees. But there's plenty of other forms: at the time of the Reformation, it was the rules of monastic lifestyle for monks like Luther, and the expectations on all the people for things like fasting during Lent. There's always a cultural form of religion for "being good."

It may feel like we don't have a lot of connection with that sort of problem. And yet, many of the unwritten rules and social expectations we have about what it means to be "a good person" are more powerful and influential on many minds than the Biblical picture of a Christian life. A persistent form that this cultural idea of religion has taken in America is "self-help." God helps those who help themselves, you've heard that? Not only is that not in the Bible, it's almost the exact opposite of what the Bible teaches! God helps those who cannot help themselves, who give up any illusion of helping themselves, who come to Him with nothing to offer and humbly accept the gifts He gives.

Or you have the kind of people who say they find God in the sunsets, in walking on the beach or in the woods, who find God more on hilltops and hiking trails than they do in church. They might refer to this as being "spiritual but not religious." Or, "I'm a Christian because I believe in God, but I

don't ever need to go to church." There is always a tension between what God has revealed and what we have devised. We prefer our ideas of good to God's ideas.

Maybe it doesn't seem similar at first glance -- ancient Jewish regulations and traditions, versus our self-defined, self-help pull-yourself-up attitude, but I think they really are the same at heart. It puts us in control. It lets us be in the driver's seat. If or when we improve, we have ourselves to thank. Look, God! Look how good I'm doing! Then, maybe it was "I'm keeping kosher!" Now, perhaps instead it's "I'm accomplishing self-improvement!" I'm doing the work!

That's a new popular phrase: you have to "do the work." Improving yourself means "doing the work" in facing all of your subconscious bias, your place within an unjust system, and so forth. It's the idea that you have to take on all this intellectual and emotional work to make yourself good. You're presented with society's ideas about right and wrong, you're in the wrong, and you are solely responsible for the work to improve. The root problem is exactly like what Paul was dealing with. There may be an appearance of wisdom in self-made religion, he wrote here. But it does not produce the righteousness of God. Human solutions do not lead to the holy living God commands. This is part of bearing our cross in following Jesus: doing the good God puts in front of us, not what we choose and decide is good.

The point is this: if your idea of faith, your idea of God, your understanding of Christ is "do this, don't do that," then you have the wrong message. And usually, the ideas of what we do and what we avoid aren't even conditioned by Scripture, but by culture -- we know God's just and holy Law, love God above all else and love your neighbor as yourself. But we find it too difficult, so instead we come up with other "good works" to do that seem easier. And so, worldly ideologies end up in one of two places: either "you can do it" or "you don't even have to try." They're both attractive answers in their own way, but here in the faith we find the tension, "You have to do it but you can't. Yet, Jesus has already done it for you."

It's a helpful reminder here at the end of this Lenten season. I have no idea how many of you follow the ancient tradition of giving up something for Lent -- as Lutherans, we're fine one way or the other. There's value in the tradition, but it's just that: a tradition, not a command. Likewise, there is value in the goal of self-improvement, and in a very real sense we are called to "do the work" of reflecting on ourselves and repenting in light of God's Word and God's Law, repenting in order to return to Christ and receive his gifts. In many of these human approaches, there is a seed or a trace of a good thing; as Paul says, an appearance or a hint of wisdom.

But we are seeking balance and harmony, lost in Eden but promised in the restoration Jesus will bring. There is one place we find that: the words of this passage, "These things are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." Whether it's physical things or spiritual things, it is all at best a mere shadow. The substance belongs to Christ. He is the head, and he is the source of the growth which comes from God.

As we heard in today's Gospel reading, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." In him we find the substance of our righteousness, the place of our salvation, the definition of what it means to be restored in balance with the world around us and in harmony with our Creator. Not in "doing the work" but in being served by the Lord himself.

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;**

**give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

**For Thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

C: Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

P: Almighty God, by Your great goodness mercifully look upon Your people that we may be governed and preserved evermore in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C: Amen.

All: I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: Thanks be to God!

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: Amen.