

Sermon Easter 6 2019

May 26, 2019

John 16:23-33

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

I don't know if you saw this week, but there was a law that passed the U.S. House of Representatives. It was HR 5, or "The Equality Act." Of course, on the face of it, a bill calling for equality sounds like a good thing. Don't we all want to be equal, shouldn't we all be equal under the law? Of course we should, right? But the concerning thing about this law is that it is focused on gender equality. Not the equality of the sexes—although there are parts to it that appear to want to emphasize equality between men and women—but the focus really was on those who identify as something besides the sex they were born with. That said it also makes a point about women who are pregnant—something seemingly addressing the recent laws prohibiting abortion which passed in Georgia and Alabama. Why do I bring this up? Well, outside of the common concerns that I mention with regard to our culture and its understanding of sex and gender, I mention it for two reasons. One is because this aspect with pregnant women seems to give room for medical professionals who have conscientious objections to performing abortions or gender transition surgeries to be forced by law to perform procedures that they deem unconscionable. The other is because the bill explicitly calls for the religious freedom laws, specifically the Religious Freedom Restoration Act signed into law in 1993, to be excluded with regard to these concerns. What does this mean?

It means that if someone claims that they will not provide someone who is Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer with a particular service because of their religiously informed conscience, this will be considered illegal. Where does this stop and where does it begin? We don't know, and that's the fear. Our current cultural milieu certainly doesn't seem to understand that a Christian can truly love someone but be conscience bound to not do certain things for them. And that's concerning to say the least. All the more when one considers the First Amendment to the Constitution which says that the government will not prevent the free exercise of religion. In other words, it doesn't matter that the Christian Church, among numerous religions of the world, has been condemning certain things for the past millennia, in accordance with our founding fathers, now this is considered anathema. Thankfully this will require a vote in the Senate and the signature of the president, both of which seem unlikely. However, it should give us pause. It should also give us insight as to what may lie ahead.

What's the point? This is an indication that the fabric of our society is falling apart. Of course, there's also an aspect where this rebellion against what God has written, not only in the fabric of our society but the whole of creation, isn't unique to such things. We experience this in numerous other ways on a personal level.

This week we had our Pastors' Conference for the district, and one of the presenters made the point that we see such things all over the place. The example he used with us because we are pastors was that we hear what he called "erroneous messages." As pastors we might hear one message telling us that our congregation is so great because of us as the pastor serving it. Or we might hear that when a congregation experiences certain trials or shortcomings, that's our fault too. In either case there is an erroneous message. The greatness of a congregation isn't because of the pastor, it's because of the work of the Holy Spirit in it, we can't take credit. Likewise, we can't assume that the failings of a congregation are the fault of the pastor either. That's because of the fall into sin. Now that's not to say that a congregation shouldn't encourage their pastor, nor that they shouldn't address concerns, but it's easy to take those messages and interpret them in a way which is unhelpful.

To put this into terms that apply more directly to you, when you hear those voices that tell you that you are failing as a worker, or as a parent, or just as a human being, it can be easy to translate that into despair. Likewise, when you hear those voices that would tell you that you are God's gift to the world, it can be easy to assume better things for yourself than you should.

In any of these cases, then we see just how broken this world is. We see just how corrupt all things are by sin, you see how you are corrupted by it too. What to do? What to do in this world? Well, our Lord gives us such comforting words. Hear again what He says. **Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.** Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full. Speak to our Lord. Call out to Him, ask Him for His aid and assistance in this world. Pray.

Now, as I say that, I think we so often think of praying just whatever comes into our head but don't often think about praying through readings in the Bible. Do you think to do that? Sit down and read your Bible and pray through it? I've mentioned this in my classes before, but I don't think I've said it in the sermon before, but we have such a great resource for prayer in the Bible, especially in the Psalms. You know, in the Psalms there are words that run the whole gamut of human experience from joy to deep sorrow, even to anger and questioning of God. In view of that, I'll finish the

sermon this morning with an example of praying the Psalm for today. But that's where the heart of prayer really should come from, from the words of God Himself.

A Lutheran Pastor who was arrested in World War II for his involvement in a plot to kill Hitler named Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it well: "We should let the richness of God's Word and not the poverty of our own hearts determine our prayer." And that's consistent with what our Lord Jesus means when He speaks about asking for things in His Name. This doesn't just mean that we append the Name of Jesus to a prayer then expect it's heard. It's different from that. Think about it. What do we pray in the Lord's prayer? Do we say, "I believe just give me what I want!"? No, we say there, "Thy will be done." Thy will, O Lord be done, and not mine." Or think about what we say in the Catechism about the petition in the Lord's Prayer for God's Name to be hallowed. How is God's Name kept holy? "God's Name is kept holy when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity and we as the people of God also lead holy lives according to it." So that Name relates to the truth of God, to His purity and ours. Our prayer then also aligns with that. Of ourselves, in our sin, this prayer won't, but in Christ it does.

I hope it won't seem too much like a broken record to quote Luther again on this, but he wrote an excellent little work on prayer to his barber Peter called "A Simple Way to Pray." Now, I know I've referenced this before because it's within this work that Luther sort of draws out a pattern for prayer; a pattern grounded in the reading of the Scriptures. When I referenced it before, I talked about the "fourfold strand" Luther speaks of with regard to Scripture. That is, Luther spoke of Scripture reading by encouraging you as the reader to consider four things as you read it. First, he suggests to seek what the passages informs you about God or about yourself. Second, he suggests you find what sin the passage calls you to confess. No matter what the passage is there always something we can find to confess, even if that confession might come in the form of being distracted while we read it, or even if we think the passage of the Word of the God who created the entire universe is boring. Third, he says to look at what the passage calls you to give thanks for. Finally, what does the passage call you to pray for? In short, he says look at Information, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Prayer.

However, within that same work, he shares some very wise words about prayer. He says, "*We have to absolutely certain we do not allow ourselves to be distracted from genuine prayer. The devil is not lazy! He will never stop attacking us. And our flesh is all too ready, willing, and able to make us resist the spirit of genuine prayer. That's why saying out loud the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the words of Jesus, etc., will move your heart and you will realize it is time for you to get down on your knees, or stand, and with folded hands look toward heaven and say out loud, or think, 'O, Heavenly Father,*

Dear God, I am an unworthy, wretched sinner. I do not deserve to lift my eyes and hands to heaven and pray. But because you have commanded us to pray and have promised to hear such prayer, and because you have taught us through Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, both in word and deed. I now come on the basis of Your command in obedience to You. I take my stand on Your gracious promise, and in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ, I pray with all Your holy Christians on earth, as He has taught me: 'Our Father, who art in Heaven...' "

In those words, then I think we hear the greatest joy of prayer: the promise of the Lord to hear that prayer. In our lesson this morning we hear the invitation, we could even say the command to pray. Our God says to pray. Therefore, do it. Pray to Him. Call upon Him in every trouble, pray, praise and give thanks. But know that He promises to hear you. And know that this is good. This is the promise of the God who is so good He sent His Son to die for your sins. He loves you so much that He died on the Hill of Calvary. Now pray to Him knowing in that same goodness He hears you.

All the more know that this Jesus who hears your prayer is also the One who overcame the world. **"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."** As I said at the beginning, you are directed by your trials, by the brokenness of the world, by the din of voices that would drive you to pat yourself on the back, or would drive you to despair; you're driven by these things to pray. But speak that prayer in the knowledge that this Jesus has risen from the dead.

Next week, we'll be talking about the ascension of Jesus and the good that He promises us in that, but in your prayer know that He has ascended to the right hand of the Father, so He can hear that prayer. But He also rose again to show His victory over the world. This brokenness in this world comes from sin, likewise death comes with it. But He has been raised and shows He has overcome the world. He has overcome, He has forgiven your sin. It's done. It's dealt with. It's left in His tomb by your baptism. Now when you pray, you know that it's as good as done. Maybe not exactly how you want it. But how you need it.

To close I am reminded of a conversation I had with the relator who sold my aunt's house this last year. It was something so relatable. She said that she used to pray for patience all the time. Then God gave her all sorts of things to test her patience and increase it. That's what He does. He gives us the things maybe not exactly how we want them, but how we need them. All out of His love. Therefore come to Him in that prayer, Christian. He has overcome the world, and will give you every need of body and soul in that victory, now and eternally. Amen. (Prayer from Psalm 67).