

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Sixth Sunday after Trinity (2021)

Be Reconciled

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“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23–24, ESV)

The Gospel for today opens with Jesus saying to His disciples, *“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20, ESV)* This statement by Jesus has caused confusion among Christians ever since the beginning of the Church. What, they ask, is the meaning of *“your righteousness”*? How can it exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? What, if any, is the difference between *“your righteousness”* and “God’s righteousness” or “righteousness” in general?

When our Lord speaks of *“your righteousness”* He is speaking of an attribute or a product of yours: the good fruit produced from being a part of the good tree. That of which St. Paul speaks in his letter to the Ephesians. Telling us that, *“we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10, ESV)* But lest we get too big headed and think that somehow our *“good works”* will lead to salvation, we need to listen to Jesus a little later in His sermon when He warns, *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:1, ESV)* Here Jesus warns us of living a life of pietism, *“your righteousness.”* A life lived in hope that others will notice and be impressed by your charity, your prayer, your fasting, or anything else that you do with the goal of impressing others with what appears outwardly as godly. God alone sees and knows your faithfulness. Therefore, it is enough to receive God’s blessings as a response to your fidelity to Him.

So, for this reason our Lord says that whoever wants to be a disciple of His and enter the kingdom of heaven, must have a righteousness that is different, that is better than that of the scribes and Pharisees. Fact is, the scribes and the Pharisees are not disciples of Jesus. Indeed, they are His opponents. They reject His claim that the reign of God is present in His ministry.

By contrast, the disciples of Jesus receive a blessing and a calling from Him, who fills them with the “righteousness” for which they hunger. Therefore, from that relationship of grace and promise and future blessing, the disciples of Jesus perform works of righteousness, seeking to let their light shine (however imperfectly) for the benefit of others. The righteous good works of Christ’ disciples flow from their relationship with Him. Thus, the disciple’s righteousness abounds and exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Our Lord sums this up beautifully on His last evening with His apostles, telling them, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” (John 15:5–6, ESV)* Good works flow from being a branch in the Vine of Christ.

But the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees is a righteousness totally different from the disciples of Christ. Their righteousness is based upon a literal interpretation of the Law. As an example, when the Law said, ***“You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13 ESV)***, the Pharisees saw only the literal words of God — the taking of another person’s life. They couldn’t see that this Command was part of the summary of the second table of the Law which declares: love your neighbor as yourself. So, if someone was angry with his neighbor, well technically, that wasn’t murder. But our Lord Jesus says, ***“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:22 ESV)***.

The Fifth Commandment is only four words, yet in those words God speaks volumes regarding man’s obligations to his neighbor. We’re reminded that God said, ***“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:17-18 ESV)***

This commandment from God is often and easily forgotten among men. Hate, anger, resentment, etc. these emotions flow freely among the children of men, and sadly even among the children of God. True, sins such as these and even murder are forgivable, but there is more at stake here than the soul of the offender. There is also the soul of the victim. Murder brings death, the end of one’s life, but hate, anger, resentment left unresolved, these are a continuous offense. Unresolved hate begets more hate. What’s more, such hate continues to abound because the hater most often stands firmly on their assumptions, more specifically, their stubbornness which insist they are in the right. Such stubbornness is equivalent to the self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. But such stubbornness, left unrepented and unresolved, has eternal consequences.

In the Gospel for today, Jesus warns that murderers, ***“will be liable to judgment.”*** Continuing, He says, ***“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” (Matthew 5:22, ESV)*** Here, the use of the word ***“brother”*** has significance for disciples of Christ. A ***“brother”*** is specifically a fellow disciple, a fellow believer, one whose “good works” are to shine before others, that they may ***“give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16, ESV)*** All who hear the word of the Gospel, which calls them to faith, call God ***“Father.”***

As Lutheran Christians you are familiar with our Lord’s directive for resolving conflict and sin. In the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew we hear our Lord specifically give us His outline for resolving and thus reconciling anger, hate, resentment, and all other sins against a ***“brother.”*** Resolution is brought about through a collaborative effort between the offended and the offender. Yet, we know that because of our flesh and Satan, our Lord’s directive is not always followed, and the sins caused by anger go unresolved. When that occurs, our Lord Jesus warns us, if we are unwilling to reconcile, don’t be anxious to offer your gift at the altar.

Regarding such self-righteous anger, our Lord Jesus says, ***“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24 ESV)***.

This instruction is given to those who think they are perfect, who are certain of their anger, and who refuse to reconcile because they might have to admit they’re not as perfect as they think! But such an attitude goes against the *Unalterable Law of God* to be reconciled with your brother

before coming to the altar; either to offer sacrifice or to receive the sacrificed body and blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Speaking to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:23-24 and those who considered themselves perfect and unwilling to reconcile, Luther said, “If he will not do this humbly, I shall be content, in place of the pastor, to let him seek salvation elsewhere, for I will not tolerate his wickedness, nor will I be damned on account of his sins.”

In his letter to the Church at Corinth, St. Paul warns not to approach the Eucharist when you are harboring division and especially bitterness or rivalry against your brother. So, when St. Paul encourages you to, “*examine yourself*” (1 Corinthians 11:28) he is including examining your feelings towards others. If you are harboring bitterness, hatred, resentment, etc. against a brother, do not come forward to the altar rail and receive the body and blood of Jesus. To do so invites God’s judgment. Let all who come to the altar rail be reconciled and at peace with one another.

Let us remember what St. Paul so clearly tells us, “***In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation***” (2 Cor. 5:19 *ESV*). While we were still sinners, alienated from God, non-believers and self-righteous; God’s only begotten Son brought the gift of Himself to the Altar of the Cross on our behalf; He brought His body to be sacrificed so we could be forgiven and made children of God. When He was hated, reviled, and brutally beaten, He did not strike back in anger, although He had every right. Nor did He revile us, although our sinful lives were an abomination to Him and led to His death. Instead, He forgave us, He reconciled Himself to us, He loved us, He made peace with us, and now we live in the sanctity of His love. He loved so we could love in return. Not just Him, but our brothers in Christ as well. Thus He reminds us, do not be self-righteous, unwilling to forgive, unwilling to reconcile, instead be reconciled with your brother then come and receive the gift of forgiveness our Lord wants to give you; come and receive His body and blood in and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

I remind you; you have received the imputed righteousness of Christ won for you by His atoning sacrifice on the Altar of the Cross, would you denigrate that gift with your anger? If you do not relent of your anger yet come forward to receive our Lord’s body and blood, you are receiving the Eucharist unworthily and to your own condemnation. Such self-love closes the door to heaven. No matter how good you are in your own opinion, your righteousness is wholly inadequate. Only the righteousness of Christ which covers your sin can make you blameless, spotless, and acceptable in the sight of God. Thus, He calls you to come and hear the Gospel which draws you to the foot of the cross. For it is there at the cross of Calvary that you can recognize your sins and your inability to resolve them. It is there that you look and see that only the blood of the Crucified Christ can bring you salvation, and it is there that Jesus accepts you and cleanses you of all your sins, receiving you into fellowship with Him where you shall dwell in His presence forevermore. *Be Reconciled* and live in peace with God and your neighbor. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.