

Sermon Proper 16 2019

August 25, 2019

Hebrews 12:4-29

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

In the history of Lutheranism, it's often been said that the doctrine of justification is the doctrine, the teaching—after all, that's all that the word doctrine means, is teaching—but that the teaching of justification is the one upon which the church stands or falls. And as I say that on the one hand I can imagine you're thinking, "Wow, that's one way to start a sermon," or maybe you're thinking "I've heard of this, but what does it even mean? What does it mean when we talk about justification?" Well, when we speak of it as Lutherans, it means we are so sinful that the only way we can be made right with God is through the forgiveness of sins which Jesus won for us on the cross. In more common parlance, we can't get to heaven by doing good things, instead we get there because Jesus died for all of our sins, and the benefit of what He's done is given to us through faith in Him. And as the Church, if we don't teach that correctly, we'll fall.

Now, as I say that, this is one of those things that you hear week in and week out. Perhaps to the point where you wonder if we have to hear it again. And if you feel that way, it proves the point. We are so sinful that we forget just how sinful we are and how desperately we need that forgiveness. Like I've said a lot recently, we always, always, always underestimate the effect of the fall into sin. And because of that, we don't realize how much that sin is showing when react in that way. And what does that show? It shows that just like with the rest of the world, we don't like this teaching.

To this point, a couple of weeks ago, I was in Indianapolis for my brother's wedding. While I was there I ran into some friends from High School. As we were bemoaning our aging bodies, one of them said to me, "You've got connections in your job, can you figure out what this is about?" And I said, "Well, from a theological perspective, I can tell you: our sin has cut us off from God who is the source of our life, and so we die." And her response was, "I'd like to think my sin isn't so bad." That's us, isn't it? We'd like to think our sin isn't so bad. We think that just like in the world, where we pick ourselves up by the bootstraps and we can succeed, the same must be true before God.

And on the flip side of that, if it's not the case, that's scary. If God isn't happy with me because I'm so good, then He's angry with me, and that's terrifying. Of course, that's what the author for the letter to the Hebrews is referring to. He's referring to the terror at Mt. Sinai. If you remember that, you remember that the Israelites were brought out of their slavery in Egypt, they were carried through the wilderness, and at a point, God gave them the Law, and in particular, He gave them the Ten Commandments, and when He did that, they were scared. The author even says that Moses himself was terrified. This was an extremely scary experience. Think about it. The voice of God speaking from the mountain. The threat that should an animal even touch that mountain, it should die. There is something jarring in that, isn't there?

And so that weighs on us. It weighs on us to always try to be good enough. Which we see manifest in so many fashions. I was listening to a podcast making the point that our trying to prove our own worth can even be seen in how we treat food. "Oh I was so bad this week. I ate terribly." "Oh I was really good this week, I had salad every day for lunch." You can hear it, there's a moral quality to it. Or it also pointed out parenting things, like vaccines. "You vaccinate your children, oh that's terrible." "You don't vaccinate your children, oh that's terrible." We're all looking at the world and justifying ourselves, making ourselves out to be right that we can feel good over and against the jabs we take constantly; over and against what we as Lutherans call the Law—the Law spoken by God in the Commandments, but even the law as it manifests in our interactions with the world and others in the world. It all weighs on us.

And this is where this justification comes in. This is where we need justification from God, where we need the forgiveness of Christ. Listen again to what the author to the Hebrews says about that. Here he's just been talking about Mount Sinai, like I said, and then he comes to a shift. He says, you haven't been to Mount Sinai. No, where have you been? **But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.**

Do you hear justification there? You've come to Mount Zion, and who's there? Well there's God, there's the heavenly Jerusalem, there's the angels, the assembly, the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and there's Jesus. There's Jesus. There's the One whose blood speaks a better word than that of Abel. I'm guessing you remember the

story of Cain and Abel, how Cain and Abel offer their sacrifices and God is pleased with Abel's which is the first fruits, the best stuff because He trusts that God will give Him enough, then there's Cain's which is there but not the best. And so God isn't as pleased, and Cain gets jealous and he kills Abel. But what does God say? "Where's Abel? I know something happened to him. Where is he? His blood cries out to me from the ground." Abel's blood cried out. And to what end? For justice. But there's this blood of Jesus. This blood poured out to satisfy the justice our sin deserves. The blood that was poured out to fulfill all sacrifices. The blood that was poured out crying out for you before God saying, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." There's that blood and it's where these Hebrews have been, it's at Mount Zion.

Of course, what's actually being said here? Did these Hebrews get to have a special trip? Did the golden chariot that took Elijah up to heaven swoop down and carry them up? What's the author talking about? He's talking about worship. He's talking about the Divine Service. I've made this point before, but it's worth repeating. When you're here in the Divine Service, when you gather around this Word of Jesus, when you gather around His body and blood, He's here. Heaven opens up and Jesus is here. You're with the angels, with archangels, and all of the company of heaven—that's why we say that in the prayer. And you're around the throne of Jesus in a particular way. In fact, I make this point in the Narrative Service where I explain the parts of the liturgy, but that's why we sing what we sing in the service. These are songs given in Scripture, some of them in glimpses we see in heaven. The Gloria, "Glory be to God on High," the words sung by the angels at the birth of Jesus. "Holy, Holy, Holy," the words sung by the angels around the throne of God. God, there, with the whole company of heaven. That's why the Church picked the songs so long ago.

Now of course, this isn't something we grasp easily in our sin, is it? We can't see, and so it's not true. And this is all the more influenced by the Enlightenment, isn't it? By the philosophies that have become so prevalent since the 1600's or so? If you can't see it, it's not so. Heaven can have no bearing on earth. That's the underlying assumption of so much of science—and as I say that, I'm not against the study of science or the world around us, but the academic world of science says it is required to interpret the world solely naturally. So in view of that, there's no awe.

But what do we see in the Scriptures when they talk about being in God's presence? We see reverence, awe, we see, "**Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.**" Think about what that means.

Reverence, awe. God is a consuming fire. Think about it, when it comes to our worship, how should we gather? In that reverence. In that awe, in that fear. This should affect our attitude—the joy with which we should come to church. We get to come in the presence of God!!! The manner of how we come. Think about coming in that fear, in that reverence. Not just like you're meeting your buddy, but the almighty God. Think about how you approach the service, the altar. How you carry yourself, how you dress even. Think about this. And think about what we come for.

What do I mean by that? Well, I started this whole thing talking about justification, and I alluded to it, but to hone the point with worship a bit, first ask yourself why you're here. Why are you in that pew today? Just because it's the right thing to do? Just because God commands it? Are you here to give something to God? You know that's all common stuff. Does God just want you to do this because it's right? Does God need you to come? But does God need your gifts? These are a start, but are they the end? **I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving.** Do you hear it there? God has all that He needs. He doesn't need your gifts. So what's the point of coming here? Well, He speaks of offering thanksgiving. But thanksgiving for what? For forgiveness. You see, you're here, and God brought you here to meet with you, to give you His forgiveness. To absolve you, give you Jesus' body and blood. He's dwelling with you that you might be His people. He did all of this first. It's only after all that that you can give Him thanks. And you need all of that stuff first. You need it constantly. You need it week in and week out. Does that mean if you miss a Sunday you're going to hell? That's the wrong question!! Why would you be anywhere else? Why would you want to put yourself somewhere where you're not meeting with this God, not hearing the joy and the promise that He has justified you?!

And in that, then you hopefully see why the Church stands or falls on justification. The Church is the only institution that has this justification, and justification is the only unique gift the Church has for the world. You can get classes on self-improvement, on being a better person, on picking yourself up by the bootstraps anywhere, but it's only here that you can meet with God and He'll tell you "it's done. It's forgiven. I have baptized you and made you my own." That's what the Church stands and falls on, and as we live in such a mess of a world, that's what we stand and fall on too. Amen.