

Sermon Easter 6 2018

May 6, 2018

John 15:9-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. The words for our meditation this morning are the Gospel Lesson previously read, especially these words of our Lord, **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ‘Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.’”**

Not long after the death of Luther, there arose a dispute amongst the Lutherans on good works. Some said that good works are necessary for salvation and that it is impossible to be saved without them. On the other end of the spectrum, there were a few who said that good works are actually harmful to salvation. Finally, the Lutherans concluded the truth was in between. Good works are necessary; not necessary for salvation, but necessary in that the Christian will do them. However, as a balance, they also said good works do not preserve our salvation. It's not as though Jesus looks at you and says, “You're doing enough good works, I'll keep you around for now.” No, but that being said, unrepentant sin can have the effect that it destroys faith. In other words, it's not as though we can think that our actions are utterly disconnected to our faith. And as I say that, what we can then see is the need to understand this in light of Law and Gospel. The Law says do this. It always says do this. The Gospel says, “It is done.” It always says it is done. Done for you by Jesus. Perfected in His life, atoned for in His death, overcome in His resurrection. All of it for you.

What this means is that all of what Jesus has done for you is yours by faith. Listen to what the Formula of Concord, one of our Lutheran Confessions and the work that came forth as the result of this and other disputes, listen to what it says of faith and good works: *‘faith alone is the mother and source of the truly good and God-pleasing works that God will reward both in this and in the next world. For this reason St. Paul calls them fruits of faith or of the Spirit... Faith is a divine work in us that transforms us and begets us anew from God... Likewise, faith does not ask if good works are to be done, but before one can ask, faith has already done them and is constantly active... Faith is a vital, deliberate trust in God's grace, so certain that it would die a thousand times for it... and therefore without any coercion a man is willing and desirous to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything for the love of God and to his*

glory, who has been so gracious to him. It is therefore as impossible to separate works from faith as it is to separate heat and light from fire."

Now as I say all of that, how does Jesus put it in our lesson this morning about good works? **This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.** In other words, these works are commanded of you. What works? Works of love. And what is love?

Of course, in our day love is known emotionally, isn't it? It's a feeling of warm affection toward someone. How do I know I love my wife? Because I feel warm affection, a sense of joy and pleasure, when I think about her, or when I see her. But what happens when that feeling disappears? Obviously, she did something to rid our relationship of that feeling, and so now it's gone. What should we do? Cast it all aside and find the perfect someone who won't lead the relationship down the same path. That's love today, isn't it?

Or to consider another aspect, I was listening to a podcast this week that was saying that in the not too distant past, some have even said that love equates to greed. Is that it? Is love maybe not a feeling, but a strong desire for something or someone? I want them, because I am greedy to have them, to have time with them, to be in their presence, greedy to receive their affections in return? While perhaps the connection here is clear, it makes more sense that greed would actually be the corruption of appropriate love since the fall. In other words, the sinful nature turns a desire to love someone for things of their benefit, to something ending in my own enjoyment.

And so how do we understand all of this? What do we think love really is? Look at the calls for us to just love one another, the songs that tell us that it's all about love, the demands that we love people by accepting them and by not disagreeing with them. We see this all around. And as we hear this, then, when we hear that Jesus tells us to love, it's pretty easy to assimilate the cultural baggage into Jesus' words and assume that this is exactly what He is saying, isn't it? It's easy to hear Jesus' call to love and assume that if we are critical of the practices of abortion, of divorce, of gay marriage, of the issues related to transgenderism and gender fluidity then we aren't loving those people, isn't it? After all, doesn't it sound loving to tell someone wrestling with their identity that you support them no matter who they determine they are? And as I say that, notice I said support them, not love them. We should love all people caught in all

sorts of sins, caring for them, not being intentionally unkind, but loving, loving even those it is uncomfortable to love.

But how does Jesus define love? Is it that mushy feeling? Sure sometimes that feeling of fondness might accompany it, but He gives it more concrete parameters. There's the connection to what God has revealed for us. Love God by not fearing, loving, or trusting in anything more than Him, by calling upon His Name and not profaning it with false teaching or a sinful life, by hearing and learning His Word. And your neighbor? Love your neighbor not just abstractly, but concretely. Not supporting them in sin and the things that manifest our fallen natures. In fact love isn't even just supporting them in every physical need. I mean we think of that a lot too don't we? We think that loving our neighbor, that the greatest work is caring for the needs of the poor, don't we? And is that good? Is that loving? Yes! Jesus talks about caring for the poor a lot! So we should! Help your neighbor in their physical needs! But what commandment does that fall under? Do not murder—don't harm them in their body, in fact help them in caring for it.

But there are six more, aren't there? Six more describing how to love our neighbor: honoring authority—something that's hard for us in our day, as we're taught that value is found in despising it; also not stealing but helping to improve our neighbor's possessions and income; not bearing false witness, but building up our neighbor's reputation; and not coveting, not coveting their house and inheritance or anything that belongs to them. When you hear this call to love, do you think about how all of this applies to dealing with your neighbor? That all of this is love?

And as I say that, it's hard, isn't it? It's because it goes against our sinful tendencies. Our sinful nature tells us to look out for ourselves, for our own interests, for our own wants. But Jesus tells us to die to those doesn't He? He says that we are to pick up our cross daily and follow Him. When it comes to love, what did He say in today's lesson? **Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.** What is love? It's not a mushy feeling, it's not support, it's not the things we think it usually is. Does it include those? Often. But not always. But it always includes the giving of something of our selves. It always includes you laying down your life—whether it be through your effort, or your time, or your money—it always includes setting aside yourself for someone else.

To our sinful self, this sounds painful, but as John says, this is not burdensome. How? Because that is what our Lord has done for you. He has laid down His life for you. **Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.** Greater love has no one than this: that the God who has entered into humanity and laid down His life for you.

All of your selfish wants, He killed those in His death. All of your sins, He paid for them with His blood—the blood which is the life. All of ways that you have not loved, He has made up for with His perfect love. And the death which you deserve He has overcome in His resurrection for you. And He gives you that love now. Showering His love upon you even more, giving you His life in the waters of baptism, the nourishment of His Word and the food of His body and blood.

And so He says, **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”** In other words, Christians, He has loved you, now go love. He has loved you so go show love to those around you. It is His command, His commission, your duty in your life in Him. Love not as you see fit, but as He does. Love such that you lay your life down for others. Do this in your vocations as Christians, as employees to employers, as citizens to the government, as parents to children, children to parents, husbands to wives and wives to husbands. And do this to your neighbors around you. Do this as Christ has done this for you.

This is what good works are, they are the works which you do, not because you are so great at loving, but because Christ has first loved you. As John said in the reading last week, “This is love, not that we have loved God, but that He has first loved us.” And He has loved you. As you trust that to be true, you are now free to love. Free to love not because you need something from it, but free because God has loved you and promises in His love to care for you always. That’s what the Lutherans understood when they concluded that “Good works are necessary.” They are necessary because you do them as Christians in Christ, your friend who laid down His life for you. Amen.