

21st Sunday After Pentecost
October 17, 2021

We sometimes wonder about the world around us. We even go so far as to think that we are in unique times. Sure, there are things that are different in our physical world, but remember that we are not fighting against flesh and blood, but against principalities and forces. What does this mean? If we look through the eyes of faith, we see that every generation is facing many of the same things.

The fall into sin is based upon something we all see and recognize. The wicked one fell because of pride. Just about every trouble in the world can find a basis in pride. Although we may not have the audacity of the devil, actually thinking that we can be like God, we often act as if we did have control over our lives and circumstances. We go into competition which is nothing less than the lie of, "I'm as good (or better) than you." You and I were created by God and it is not the other way round. The plethora of atheists in our culture want you to prove that God exists – as if they were in some kind of bargaining position to determine whether or not they will give God the pleasure of their time. Such arrogance, but we all see it. It is nothing less than pride.

When Job questioned God, the Lord turned it around and asked Job who he was to question the ways of the Lord. Does the clay tell the potter how to make what the potter is making? Seen this way, we begin to understand the absurdity of the arrogance that sin instills in us. Luther's meaning to the First Article of the creed begins with, "I believe God created me." From this belief, we understand that it is God who is doing the work, not me. You and I have been invited into a new life which Christ will create in us. He is, as He must be, the author and finisher of our faith. He knows what the Father will make of us, we do not. What we do know is that this new life will include being conformed to the image of the Son.

Although He was (and is) a Son, he learned obedience through what He suffered. This world has always been filled with suffering. Jesus even said to James and John, amidst their arrogant request, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized" Jesus told them and tells us that we are going to suffer for the sake of the Gospel.

I wonder how many, in our age of such conditional commitment, do not go to church because they do not like, in reality, the truth of the Gospel. It is as if some think that they can set the boundaries around their role and even more, determine for themselves right from wrong, not realizing that they are in the heart of the original sin of believing they know good from evil. We do not. That is the illusion. God has promised to work all things together for good. If God's word be true – for this is the arrogance of this age – then we really are brought to the point where either we realize that God's word is true, or else continue on the path which leads to destruction. There is no joy in watching folk go the way of destruction. That is why we were reminded by James that our objective is to help a wayward one come to (or back to) the Lord.

In a very worldly way, James and John wanted what the world says is the marker of success. "Place us at Your right and left, Jesus," they asked. Jesus responded to them and to us, "It is not for me to determine where the Father will place you, for that has already been determined." The Lord knows what He is making of you and me. We do not know, for now we look in a mirror dimly, but then, when all has been revealed, we shall know even as we have always been known by our Maker. But Jesus did not stop there. He went on to ask whether James and John were going to live the baptism with which they would be baptized and drink the

cup that Jesus would drink. In ignorance, they said yes. I imagine that they were thinking along the lines of some test that would gain for the what they were after. In reality, what would unfold were two things that are instructive for us. James would be the first Apostle martyred. John would be the only Apostle who witnessed the martyring of each of the other Apostles. The suffering – the cup of which Jesus spoke – was and is great. Following Jesus and becoming fishers of men was the baptism they underwent.

In all of the nonsense lifted up in Jesus' name, there really does seem to be a thread that causes some to believe that if we just do it right, live to the best of our ability, and go along to get along, it will be well with our soul. But this life is filled with suffering. We know that, for we have experienced it. We are then faced with the reality of the Gospel.

On the one hand, there are those who see grace as covering everything, so we need not worry about these things. Look what has happened in our generation where to even suggest that something is not in the order God has established is answered with hostility, anger, and accusation. I've always pondered this simple question, "If you are so sure about your position, why are you so hostile to another who does not hold to the same position?" On the other hand, there are those who are strict with themselves and others that they figure they need to do all in their power to assure that a right way of thinking and doing is imposed on the self and upon others. Free-for-all cheap grace on the one hand versus being a pharisee on the other. Neither is the baptism Jesus asked James and John about.

Sisters and brothers, our faith is really quite simple. Because of sin and our age-old rebellion, it is not easy to do, but it is simple to understand. Either we trust that not only do we need to be saved but that God Incarnate, Jesus our Savior, has come to do just this, or we go any other path thinking that we do not need to be saved. And being saved is not about being brushed off and sent out on our way, but about being made new in the journey of salvation. In very simple words, Jesus must be – and for those who believe, is – the author and finisher of the whole of the journey He has set before us. Too many, I fear, are willing to go a little distance, but not the whole way. It really is a matter of being in or out. It is all or nothing. That is what we are signed up for when we embark on this journey of faith.

I have done enough funerals to see things in a different way. For the one who lived for themselves, be they devil-may-care or pharisee, they die, for the most part, alone. For the ones who lived the Gospel, loving their neighbor as themselves, you see that they truly loved and were loved. I do not remember having attended a funeral where the pictures were about the stuff collected in this life. The closest was the son-in-law who said, "I'm glad my father-in-law was rich." But even here, it was pictures of family and friends. Folks, it is about relationships. All the stuff is just stuff. Jesus has told us this time and again. He has told us what He will do if we walk with Him. He will make of us obedient, perfect, and loving children of the Heavenly Father.

We begin each week repenting and confessing. That is good. We are encouraged to take the next steps, as the Lord leads, and go wherever Jesus will send us. Know that our Lord and Savior is and will be with us each step of the way. Leave behind the ways of the world, whose pollution runs deep in each one of us, and be reconciled to our Lord and Master. He loves us enough not to leave us in the mess of this age, but will gently and lovingly lead us all the days of our lives. Let this world remain silent and hear Jesus calling us over the tumult of this world. Abide in Him as He abides in you so that we may learn to love the Lord with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Amen.