

Pastor Gregory Paul Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/20/2008, Epiphany 2A  
John 1:29-42

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>29</sup>The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

Strangely enough, the first and plainest meaning of this text is one we sometimes miss. John says that the Lamb of God “takes away the sin of the world.” Well, that seems plain enough. And yet, because of all our theological notions, we are tempted to hear that as, “the Lamb of God takes away the *guilt and punishment* of sin.”

And certainly that is true. With the Lord, there is forgiveness of sin. The Lord is gracious and never wearies of forgiving sin.

Yet, the text does not speak of the guilt or punishment of sin, but of sin. Here stands the sinner, and over yonder lies the sin, for Christ has taken it away! You’ve seen a dog shake off water. Growing up on the river, I remember that. The Chesapeake Bay retriever has been playing in the water. He comes out of the water, pauses, and shakes himself. The water goes flying, and there stands the dog, with his red coat shining in the sun, and over yonder lies the water that used to cling to the dog but has now been shaken off. So it is with the sinner and his sin. The ministry of the Lamb of God is to “take away” the sin, as if giving the sinner a good shake and sending the sin flying. What remains when Jesus is done with a man, with a woman, a boy, or a girl, is a new Adam, a new Eve, who “should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God’s presence,” to use the words of Luther in his discussion of Baptism. (*Small Catechism*)

This is the plain meaning of the text with which I want to linger in this sermon.

But before getting to that, let me try to pay tribute to that other sense of the text – the one about taking away the guilt and the punishment of sin, for this too is important. Yea, it is of eternal importance.

This is the joy of a clean conscience. Jesus takes away the guilt of sin. The one who has come to Private Confession with a troubled conscience and has left with the assurance that his sins are lost, that her sins are lost, in the sea of God’s forgetfulness is the one who rejoices in the authority of Jesus to forgive sin. Jesus takes sin away. He absolves it. He has the authority to do so, and he is eager to do so. His love for you and for me is such that he is glad to say, “I forgive you. Go in peace.”

This is the joy of the Absolution at the end of the Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness. How weary Jesus must be of me kneeling at the Communion rail and confessing the same sins over and over again, Sunday by Sunday. So many failures to love God, failures to love my neighbor as myself: the dreary confessions repeat themselves over and over, yet I hop up at the end of the confession eager to hear the absolution the same as you. I believe along with you that the Lamb of God himself is the One who never wearies of forgiving sin.

This is the joy of the one who comes to the Blessed Sacrament and receives the very Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus into hand and mouth. We! As no-account as we often are! We are welcomed by the living Jesus Christ himself to the Sacrament, and he, as it

were, gives us a hug or pat on the shoulder for the week and tells us that he forgives us. Go in peace.

Theologians have theories about why it is that Jesus has the authority to forgive sin. These theories are called “theories of the atonement.” They ponder how it is exactly that Jesus has the authority to forge reconciliation between the Triune God, of which he is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, and you and me, lowly sinners that we are. One thing is pretty certain: the innocent death of Jesus on the Cross and his resurrection to everlasting life is crucial to our faith that Jesus has authority to forgive sin and take it away from us. He has paid the price, like an innocent sacrificial lamb, that permits you and me to have hope. He is the lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

So, that is the first joy of the Agnus Dei. Jesus has the authority to forgive sin, and he gladly does so.

But in the conduct of our day-to-day life, we should also be mindful of the second joy of the Lamb of God. As the text says, Jesus “takes away the sin of the world.” He does not simply take away the guilt of sin, but also sin itself. That is his continual labor and ministry: to take sin away from us.

And we should permit him to do this, by walking in his ways, lest we end up with some awful regrets in life. The years will slip on by without us becoming any better than we already are. There will be essays we will not write, inventions we will not create, institutions we will not reform, illnesses we will not solve, students we will not nurture, people we will not take of. Or if we do these things, we will not do them as well as we could have, if only we had let Jesus take sin away from us by conforming ourselves to him.

This past week I heard a country song on the radio and was very moved by it. It was sung by Roy Clark back in 1965, but I never heard it until just recently. I mentioned the song to a friend in Texas and she could quote lines from it by heart. It’s a song of regret called, “Yesterday, When I Was Young.”<sup>1</sup> I’ve read that Mickey Mantle requested that Roy Clark sing this song at Mickey’s funeral, which he did. It has a haunting melody.

I do not mean to read aloud all the verses for you, but to lift up a couple. The poetry includes parallelism by which an idea is sung in an early verse, and then repeated near the end of the song, but from a different angle. One of those verses concerns songs:

Yesterday, when I was young,  
So many happy songs were waiting to be sung...

Then, at the end, after telling how he squandered his years, lost his opportunities, let down his friends, he speaks of songs again:

There are so many songs in me, that won’t be sung,  
I feel the bitter taste, of tears upon my tongue,  
The time has come for me to pay,  
For yesterday, when I was young

He recounts the egoism, the self-indulgence and the self-absorption of his life, as if the only thing that finally mattered to him was some good state of himself:

I ran so fast that time, and youth at last ran out,  
I never stopped to think, what life, was all about,

And every conversation, I can now recall,  
Concerned itself with me, and nothing else at all

And he regrets the friends he lost:

The game of love I played, with arrogance and pride,  
And every flame I lit, too quickly, quickly died,  
The friends I made, all seemed somehow to drift away,  
And only I am left, on stage to end the play

Well, no doubt the man is being too hard on himself and failing to see the good that he also accomplished over the course of a life. Still, it was a life that could have been better, and that is a sad thing to have to say.

Jesus came to take away our sins — not just forgive them, but also to take them away from us: to deprive us of them, to leave us bereft of sin, but shining with the beauty of holiness.

And the stark reality is this: We do not become more saintly by magic, but rather by obedience. You belong to Jesus by way of Baptism. You need not, then, fear hell. But to what end has Jesus freed us from the fear of hell? It is that we might turn to good works and not have so many doggone regrets in life. It is that we might cast off dull sloth and all vice that weighs down, and rise up in this world as children of God, which has got to be a blessing for our world! Indeed, Jesus takes away sin from us in the same manner he took away sin from Andrew and Peter and all the disciples: by bidding them to come and walk with him, for when we walk in that manner, we walk with steady step away from sin.

To Jesus, the Lamb of God, be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

*Yesterday, When I Was Young*  
Copyright © 1969, Hampshire House Publishing  
Original French Lyric and Music by *Charles Aznavour*  
English Lyric by *Herbert Kretzmer*  
Recorded by *Roy Clark*, 1965

*“It seems the love I’ve known,  
has always been the most destructive kind.  
I guess that’s why now,  
I feel so old before my time.”*

Yesterday, when I was young,  
The taste of life was sweet, as rain upon my tongue,  
I teased at life, as if it were a foolish game,  
The way the evening breeze may tease a candle flame

The thousand dreams I dreamed, the splendid things I planned,  
I always built, alas, on weak and shifting sand,  
I lived by night, and shunned the naked light of day,  
And only now, I see, how the years ran away

Yesterday, when I was young,  
So many happy songs were waiting to be sung,  
So many wild pleasures lay in store for me,  
And so much pain, my dazzled eyes refused to see

I ran so fast that time, and youth at last ran out,  
I never stopped to think, what life, was all about,  
And every conversation, I can now recall,  
Concerned itself with me, and nothing else at all

Yesterday, the moon was blue,  
And every crazy day, brought something new to do,  
I used my magic age, as if it were a wand,  
And never saw the worst, and the emptiness beyond

The game of love I played, with arrogance and pride,  
And every flame I lit, too quickly, quickly died,  
The friends I made, all seemed somehow to drift away,  
And only I am left, on stage to end the play

There are so many songs in me, that won’t be sung,  
I feel the bitter taste, of tears upon my tongue,  
The time has come for me to pay,  
For yesterday, when I was young

*(Roy Clark sang this song at Mickey Mantle’s funeral in 1995. Mickey had heard Roy sing it before*

*and thought it depicted his life so well that he specifically asked Roy to someday sing it at his funeral.)*

To hear the song, Control+click on this web address or copy and paste it into your browser:

<http://www.jesterradio.com/lyrics/royclark-yesterdaywheniwasyoung.htm>