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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/28/2010, Sunday of the Passion
Luke 22:14 - 23:56

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

⁴²And [one of the malefactors who were hanged there] said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:42-43, RSV)

Do you remember the Bible story of humanity’s removal from the Garden of Eden? Adam and Eve were sent out of that fair place. They lost their home in Paradise and were deprived of the Tree of Life. They were sent on their way to earn a living by the “sweat of your brow” from soil that was contrary and beset with thorns and thistles. Furthermore, the way back into Paradise was blocked by cherubim and a fantastic sword, flaming and flashing in the sunlight:

²³Therefore the LORD God sent [the man] forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. ²⁴So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (Genesis 3:23-24, KJV)

But all of that begins to be reversed and healed in today’s story of the Passion of our Lord, for Christ commands the cherubim to “Stand aside! and let a malefactor lead the way back into Paradise.”

Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise. (Luke 23:43, RSV)

And so it is that He who is Lord of the cherubim, and whose authority far outranks theirs, commands them to lower that flaming sword and to let the sinner pass into Paradise.

Martin Luther of old asked, why? Why begin the return to Paradise with such a sinner, with such a scoundrel? Would not it have been more heavenly to let some saint lead the way back into Paradise? Let me read aloud Luther’s fun words about this:

Why doesn’t Christ first take care of Peter or some of the other saints? Why does he allow the firstfruits of his prayer [“Father, forgive them...”] to be a scoundrel and murderer whom he redeems and saves from sin and eternal death through his blood and wounds? Answer: By

this he wanted to show that this kingdom is meant not for saints but for sinners; that it is for the comfort of all poor sinners that they firmly believe and do not doubt that Christ did not die for the righteous but for the unrighteous and sinners, as he himself says, (Matthew 9:13): “I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” For this reason the one who thinks he would like to die holy and without sin *will enter that “heaven” where flames leap up to the window and devils dance*. For the one who is unwilling to acknowledge his sin never stands in need of the Lord Christ and his suffering. But he did not die for himself but for sinners!¹

This is one of Luther’s two great themes about our salvation. His first theme is that Christ died for *sinners*, and so if we should be one of them, then be of good cheer. We qualify. We are the sort of people Christ came to save. Luther’s second great theme is that Christ died for sinners that we might turn from our sin toward righteousness and holiness of life -- indeed, that we might become “little Christs” in this world. Let me take these two great themes in order.

First, Christ dies on the Cross for sinners. Those who are not sinners do not need his death, nor his prayer, “Father, forgive.” This is what Luther is getting at in his saying about “that ‘heaven’ where flames leap up to the window and the devils dance.” Such an unhappy place, Luther says, is the destiny of “the one who thinks he would like to die holy and without sin.” Here Luther does not mean that we should aim to sin, but rather that those who imagine themselves to be so holy that they can die without sin, do not need Jesus and, alas, are not likely to be in that good crowd led by the malefactor into Paradise.

We can phrase this no more perfectly than our Lord has already phrased it. Righteous folk had murmured about him and about his friendliness with sinners:

³⁰But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners? ³¹And Jesus answering said unto them, They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. ³²I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:50-32, KJV)

Are you part of that crew -- those who need the Great Physician? Tug a bit on your finger, or tap your foot, or blink your eyes, or something. Are you not flesh and blood, set here in a world that sometimes vexes you, sometimes tempts you, sometimes defeats your best intentions? Examine your conscience and reflect on your past. Are you not to some degree kin to that malefactor on the Cross? If so, join that man whose only accomplishment in an otherwise miserable life is that with his dying breath he cries out to Jesus, “Lord, remember me...” Yes, join that

¹ Ibid., page 433.

poor sinner in turning to Christ, and in the end follow that sinner into Paradise itself.

Do not imagine that you have somehow sunk so low that Christ does not want you. Christ gave first admission back to Paradise to a dying criminal. He is pleased for each one of us to follow that criminal into heaven. Indeed he longs for each of us to come to him now, for the remainder of our lives, and for all eternity.

So far I have interpreted our Lord's saying about the Physician in terms of those who sin. Jesus himself meant that, for he goes ahead to say that he came to call sinners to repentance:

They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. ³²I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

But I do no injustice to this saying if I point out to you that Jesus uses medical terminology here. He speaks of a "physician" and "they that are sick." And judging by the actual conduct of his ministry, Jesus came to heal the sick too. Altogether, Jesus came to call those who are *hurting*, whether they hurt because of their sin or hurt because of their sorrows and troubles.

You might be part of that crew too. You might be among those who need Jesus because you have suffered some deep disappointment, or you struggle with illness, or poverty, or unemployment, or loneliness. Consider this economy, for example! It frightens me for the sake of the people of our land. I've read in the *New York Times* about certain configurations of economic factors that mean that those who are struggling now might continue to struggle far into the future.² I pray that that is not so. I pray for a season of peace for the people of our land -- including financial and vocational peace. Meanwhile, I worry for young people searching for careers, for people struggling with too much debt, for elderly folk slipping into forgetfulness, for people living in fear of crime or illness. People of our land and across this earth are hurting, and this too is a chief concern of our great Physician of Soul and Body.

On that Cross, hanging from those cruel nails, Jesus exercised two of his priestly functions. He *prayed* for us and he *offered his life* as the basis of his intercession for us. He made that Cross an Altar. As long as this world lasts, he continues in his high priestly work. At this very moment, he looks down on you and prays, "Father, forgive." He looks down at you, hurting however you are, and prays, "Father, let us save!" And he points to his own wounds to remind his heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit that you mean so much to him, that he gave his body and his blood for you. You mean more to him than life itself. He let the suffering, dying, malefactor lead the way into Paradise, and he welcomes you and me to follow that path too, sinners though we be.

So, that is Luther's first theme about Christ on the Cross: You mean more to him than life himself, and he came to save sinners and all who are in need.

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/21/business/economy/21unemployed.html?hp>

Luther's second theme is that when Christ calls a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, he calls that one to become a new person and enter upon a better way of life. Check it out, and you will find it possible. Christ came to save sinners, including saving them from their sins. Here stands our sin! Christ calls us to forsake it, to leave it where it is and walk away. "Farewell, sin!" Christ calls us to this high path every day, and so I urge us, let us check it out and find we can do it.

Luther illustrates this new manner of life by pointing to the malefactor in this morning's Bible story. There are two malefactors there, two criminals, two men who have made a wreck of their lives and of the lives of other people. One of those malefactors continues hard to the very end. He joins the crowd in reviling Jesus:

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. (Luke 23:39, KJV)

But the other man is drawn to Jesus and grows more gentle in the process:

⁴⁰But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. ⁴²And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. (Luke 23:40-42, KJV)

Luther says that we should emulate this man, the malefactor who defends Jesus. Luther uses a lively phrase to describe the daily life of those who pray to Christ to remember them. In the English translation, Luther speaks of "sweeping sin out." Here are Luther's words:

Of course, Christ did not die in order for sinners to remain and continue in sin. He died in order to redeem them from sins and to change them so that they become upright and holy, just as we see happening here with the malefactor... This example we should emulate and not be influenced by coarse, godless people who carry on and say, I shall go on sinning so that Christ might redeem me and demonstrate his grace on me. No, never...while before we were caught up in sins and in death, that is no reason for us to continue in sins. Now it must be our concern how to crawl out of this, how to become reconciled with God, and ever more and more, by God's grace, *sweep sin out*.³

You've seen your father or mother sweep out the dust in the house. You've probably done it yourself. Well, Luther says that's what you and I should do who

³ Ibid., pages 433-434.

want to belong to Christ: we should grab the old broom and start sweeping sin out. Sweep out that rust and dust and dustballs that so soil our souls.

It's not so hard to do. You know the Ten Commandments. Seek to obey them more and more. You know our Lord's call to love God above all else and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Often, that gives us quite clear direction for our lives. And in the unclear cases, we can seek the counsel of the Bible and of the Church's long tradition of moral teaching and of seasoned brothers and sisters in the Lord who might be able to share some wisdom with you.

Altogether, Luther would have us contemplate the events of this holy day, the day of the Passion of our Lord, and to try to reckon, with increasing earnestness, that "through this suffering all creation is radically altered and all things made new⁴" through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

⁴ Martin Luther, *House Postils*, Holy Week, "Fourth Sermon," Luke 23:32-43, preached at the parish church of Wittenberg on Good Friday, April 2, 1534. *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, Volume 5, edited by Eugene F.A. Klug (Baker Books: Grand Rapid, Michigan, 2000), page 421.