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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/13/2010, The Third Sunday after Pentecost
2 Samuel 11:26–12:15, Psalm 32, Galatians 2:15-21, Luke 7:36–8:3
The Believer's Unity with Christ

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

My text this morning is from our Second Lesson, from St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, Chapter 2, Verse 20. It is a text that has captured the imagination of the Church. It speaks of what is called "the believer's unity with Christ," and it is a central thought for Martin Luther. Here is what St. Paul writes:

²⁰I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but *Christ who lives in me*; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20, RSV)

It is strange language, I know, extraordinary language. There stands Paul. He speaks, thinks, moves, and hopes and dreams as Paul. His mother would recognize him for sure. "Of course that is my son!" she would say. Yet, Paul himself says that *he* no longer lives, but that *Christ* lives in him. Oh! Blessed blurring of identities!

One conviction has come to me over the years of reading St. Paul and of reading Martin Luther: The notion of "faith" needs to be understood in light of this notion of "Christ lives in me." When Paul says that we are "justified by faith," the "faith" of which he speaks is nothing so mild as "intellectual assent" to a teaching, not even the highest or holiest of teachings. It is more along the lines of clinging to Christ, to throwing ourselves into the arms of Jesus for our salvation and for our guidance in life.

Clinging to Christ is like seeking and finding shelter in a storm. You might well have heard the story of Martin Luther as a young man caught in a summertime thunderstorm. That storm terrified him. Imagine the young man. He's about the same age as my son, Sam. There he stands in the meadow. He is twenty-two years old, won't be twenty-three for about five months, and the way this July storm is raging about him, he wonders whether he is going to live to that age. He cries out to St. Anne to help him, dashes to the monastery at Erfurt, throws himself into the monastic life, and is fundamentally changed thereby. My idea is that if he had thrown himself into the arms of Christ, not the monastery, but Christ, and sought shelter there, not wanting to depart in any way from his shelter, I think that would be close to what St. Paul means by Christ *living in* the Christian.

Such shelter King David could well have desired in this morning's Bible story. The man needs healing. The man needs shelter. What ailed him was not a physical infirmity. He had no broken bones. He had not been wounded in battle. But he

desperately needed healing. The thing that ailed him was a spiritual sickness, for the great King David had succumbed to temptation and had fallen into sin. How many of God's commandments did he break? Well, let's see. He had coveted another man's wife – that's one. He had committed adultery – that's two. He then committed murder by ordering the death of Uriah in battle – that's three. Not to mention the cover-up, the lies, the deceit, the greed, the pride, and the abuse of power that were at play in this story as well. And at the root of it all was David's failure to love God with his whole body, mind and soul. In fact, at this point in his life, King David seems to have forgotten the Lord God altogether. He fell into sin because he fell away from God.¹

Sins have piled up on David and he goes merrily on his way, as if unmoved by the horrors he has committed, until the prophet Nathan confronts him with the stark words, "Thou art the man." David is the sinner. All his kingship, all his glory, all his armies, all the king's horses and all the king's men, cannot spare him from the wretched truth about himself: he is a miserable sinner who has offended not only humanity, but humanity's Maker. David is in deep, deep trouble.

A couple lines from this morning's Psalm help give expression to David's anguish:

³While I held my tongue, my bones with- | ered away,*
because of my groaning | all day long.

⁴For your hand was heavy upon me | day and night;*
my moisture was dried up as in the | heat of summer.

Sin unconfessed was for David like the withering away of his bones. The most substantial part of him - his very bones - were withering. Under the guilt of his sin, he was wasting away.

Each of us, to some degree, has participated in sins such as David. And each of us this day is invited to seek shelter from the storm in Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther is wonderful in expressing comfort for the heavy-burdened conscience, as for example in this passage from his commentary on our text where he speaks of "Mr. Devil":

Thus the believer can raise himself up through faith alone and gain a comfort that is sure and firm; and he need not grow pale at the sight of sin, death, the devil, or any evil. The more the devil attacks him with all his force and tries to overwhelm him with all the terrors of the world, the more hope he acquires in the very midst of all these terrors and says: "Mr. Devil, do not rage so. Just take it easy! For there is One who is called Christ. In Him I believe. He has abrogated the Law, damned sin, abolished death, and destroyed hell. And He is your devil, you devil, because He has captured and conquered you, so that you cannot harm

¹ Much of this fine paragraph comes from my wife, Carol's, sermon for this day.

me any longer or anyone else who believes in Him.” (Martin Luther, Commentary on Galatians 2:15-21)

Now, this is a charming and important quote about justification by faith. The soul that clings to Christ finds shelter from the storm in Him. Sin, death, and the devil meet their match in our champion, Jesus Christ.

But there is another side to the believer’s unity with Christ. So far, we have been talking about *justification* by faith, which is ours by laying claim to Christ as our Savior. But now let us move onwards toward faith’s *sanctification* of the believer. This is the simple, plain idea that to really cling *to Christ* is to start upon a path that is going to change us. Seeking shelter from the storm in Jesus Christ comforts our *guilty* conscience, but now I want to move on to the second point that seeking shelter from the storm in Jesus Christ also moves us away from sin toward holiness of life. Abiding in Christ’s shelter should permit us to have less to be *guilty* about in life.

Let us turn, then, to the moral dimension of St. Paul’s great saying, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ in me!” I want to have three go ‘rounds in trying to think out the practical meaning of “Christ in me.” First, and most important, we will let Paul interpret Paul. I will do this by referring to the Third Chapter of Colossians. Then we will consider some thoughts and images from Martin Luther. And then I will conclude with a few of my own simple, plain ideas, all to the point of trying to explain the moral dimension of the believer’s unity with Christ.

First, St. Paul. In this Second Chapter of Galatians, the apostle uses his extraordinary language about being “crucified with Christ,” about “not I who lives,” and “but Christ lives in me.” Now let us consider the Third Chapter of Colossians, where St. Paul converts his language about “Christ in me” into the language of exhortation. He tells us what we should “seek” -- those who have “Christ in them”:

¹If then you have been raised with Christ, *seek* the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²*Set your minds* on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. (Colossians 3:1-3, RSV)

Notice the verbs in these verses. St. Paul is calling for action -- believer’s action. When speaking of *justification* by faith, the apostle speaks of what Christ has done. Christ has risen from the dead, and conquered sin, death, and the devil. But here, the apostle is speaking of the daily life of the redeemed, and he calls up us to “seek” and to “set our minds” on that things that are above.

Let me continue with Colossians Chapter 3:

⁵Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷In these you once walked, when you

lived in them. ⁸But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. (Colossians 3:5-7, RSV)

That is, it is appropriate for those who have been crucified with Christ and in whom he now lives that they should flee wrath. Of course they should! What does Christ within us have to do with evil desires, covetousness, and so on?

Finally, St. Paul turns to the positive character of Christ living within us:

¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, ¹³forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:1-17, RSV)

The believer's unity with Christ should mean that we develop habits of virtue. Our characters should be reformed in the direction of Christian virtue.

It occurs to me that that last verse there can serve as the great principle for the Christian's daily life. This is our rule, this is the standard for those who want to be able to say, "It is no longer I who live but Christ in me." Our rule is this:

¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:17, RSV)

So, those are some of the thoughts of the New Testament concerning our unity with Christ. Let me move on now to some of the imagery of Martin Luther from his great commentary on St. Paul's letter to the Galatians.

When Luther speaks of the believer's unity with Christ, he uses the language of the carpenter. He speaks of cement:

But faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated but remains attached to Him forever and declares: "I am as Christ." And Christ, in turn, says: "I am as that sinner who is attached to Me, and I to him. For by faith we are joined together into one flesh and one bone." ... Thus also I look at a woman with my eyes, yet with a chaste vision and not in desire for her. Such vision does not come from

the flesh, even though it is in the flesh; the eyes are the physical instrument of the vision, but the chastity of the vision comes from heaven. (Luther, Commentary on Galatians, Chapter 2)

I like the strength of Luther's image here. Our unity with Christ should not be some lightweight unity that we can easily break away from. No, we should seek to be cemented to Christ, in a firm unity with him, such that even our eyes will come to speak with his chastity and our tongues to speak with his purity.

Finally, let me try my hand at expressing the moral meaning of clinging to Christ. We begin with the simple truth that apart from Christ, we face deep troubles, owing to our sin and to the opposition of the devil who hates us. It is for us as it was for that young Luther back in the July thunderstorm: danger flashes and strikes all around us. We are safe but only so long as we cling to Christ, for God has sworn that he will never strike Christ, since he is the innocent One. And you and I are safe with Christ, so long as we cling to him.

Like Robin Hood, Satan sends out his arrows against sinners... only they are not mere arrows, but more along the lines of shafts or even the main mast of some old sailing ship. If they hit us, they will slay us. If we stick a shoulder out from behind Christ, Satan will hit us with an arrow so stout it will blow our shoulder off. And sin is what does it. Sin is a stepping away from Christ and his protection. Sin is venturing onto very dangerous ground.

Therefore it is with us as it was with the Psalmist of old: that we have a hiding place in God himself:

⁷Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in | time of trouble;*

when the great waters overflow, they | shall not reach them.

⁸*You are my hiding-place*; you preserve | me from trouble;*
you surround me with shouts | of deliverance.

Why is there shelter with Christ? Because he loves us, as our text says:

...and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God,
who *loved* me and *gave himself* for me.

We should therefore cling to him so closely that none of us sticks out, tempting lightning, tempting the punishment due sin. We should cling to Christ as our righteousness, bragging of none of our own. We should cling so close to Christ that in due time it will seem right even to us to say, Why, I have conformed myself to Christ for so long that it now hard to distinguish me from him any long. Indeed, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.