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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/8/2011, The Third Sunday of Easter
Luke 24:13-35
Justice in this Fallen World

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

³²They [Cleopas and the other disciple] said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” (Luke 24:32, RSV)

What a Bible class that must have been, to have Jesus as the teacher! I like our Monday evening Bible class on the Psalms, but those classes are pretty humble things compared to a Bible class taught by our Lord himself. The village of Emmaus was about seven miles from Jerusalem. I bet those seven miles went by easy as these two disciples walked along and listened to Jesus as he opened their eyes to Holy Scripture. Afterwards, they said that their hearts “burned within them” as Jesus taught them, and I bet they did indeed!

What a blessed burning that would be, to listen to the divine Teacher and to sense things falling into place, one by one, with growing excitement as they began to perceive the magnitude of what was happened those days. Why, the crucifixion of their Lord did not mean defeat after all, but rather victory teeming with hope for our world.

Oh! How I long to have an afternoon walk with Jesus and ask him the things on my heart. I bet you would like that too. There are so many questions we have and such sorrow over things that are hard for us to explain. But Jesus could explain them. He could explain things, comfort us, and fill us with absolute certainty that things are going to work out okay. We could talk with him and know that the arm of the Lord is not shortened, his wisdom and strength are sufficient for every challenge, and his heart is so big and good that he is going to work wonders of love no matter how terrible sin, death, and the devil have been in life.

Well, that afternoon walk with Jesus is going to come for you and for me. It surely is going to come, for Jesus is risen and he means to answer all our questions, fulfill our godly hopes and dreams, and end our fears.

Meanwhile, we live in what the theologians call “a fallen world.” We live in a world beset by sin, by limitations of knowledge, by limitations of sympathy, and by death and the devil.

In this fallen world, it seems that our best efforts are often marred by ambiguity, uncertainty, and compromise. We seek the good. Most of us do. Yet we sometimes fall short of it, not from lack of effort or good will or prayer, but because things are complex, we do not have all the information we need, we are immersed in a world where our neighbors sometimes have different and contrary notions of the good, and sometimes the challenges are just too hard for us.

The difficulty of doing good things perfectly in this fallen world troubles many areas of life, including raising children, being great husbands and wives, scientific and medical research, and creativity in art and music and literature. But the area of life that is especially on my mind this week is the area of justice on earth. I am thinking of matters of justice because of the death of Osama bin Laden. I am glad that his work of terror on earth has come to an end. I think many people are glad for that and grateful for the planning, skill, and courage involved in this fight. But I am mindful that his death does not bring back those who died on September 11, 2001, or the lives of those who have fought against terrorism all the years since then. Nor does his death mean that everything will be safe going forward, nor that everything is now right on earth. The pursuit of justice is often like that. We do the best we can in this fallen world. We do the best we can in this land of shadows and sorrows.

Let me pause to point out something about my preaching that I bet many of you have already noticed. That is that I try not to preach politics from the pulpit. That is not because I have no political convictions. I do, and often they are passionate convictions. But I try not to preach them for an important theological reason. I mean Luther's doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers." I might discuss this doctrine at more length in some other sermon, but here let me simply say that you are ones who know your jobs and place in life better than I do. It is your high priesthood to work out an intersection between Christian faith and your particular web of knowledge and responsibilities in the world. I do not want to trespass on how you work that out. That is your ministry, your priesthood.

Still, it seems to be that there are *background* matters relevant to political opinions. These are matters of Christian character and our identity as followers of Jesus, and so these are the kinds of things I try to lift up in my sermons.

As an illustration of Christian character in face of ambiguous human justice, let me refer to the case I mention in my pastor's notes: the murder of Pastor George Winkler. On April 23, 1527, this young priest was lured to a lonely road and murdered there. He had been led to believe that he would be ministering to a would-be convert. Instead, he was done in. The case was never solved, much to the frustration and grief of Martin Luther, who knew the young man.

Luther was unwilling that the death of Pastor Winkler should simply pass away quietly as an unsolved murder. So he wrote "A Letter of Consolation to Christians at Halle," where Pastor Winkler had served. Luther wanted to publicize this case. He wanted the blood of Pastor Winkler to "cry out to heaven," as did the blood of Abel long ago when he was murdered by his brother Cain.

Luther begins his letter by reminding the people of Halle that we live in a fallen world and therefore we should not be surprised that murders and crimes happen:

So because we have to and wish to live on this earth, we also have to remember that we are guests at an inn whose keeper is a villain. Over the door hangs the sign, “Inn of Death and Untruth.”¹

Luther means the Devil. He pictures him as the innkeeper of our world. For now. Not for much longer, we hope, for we daily pray for Christ’s return, “thy kingdom come.” But for now.

Then Luther reviews the public facts of the case and the rumors he has heard. He does not charge Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz with responsibility for this murder, but he does express his suspicion that members of the Archbishop’s hierarchy bear responsibility.

Luther is very frustrated that the pursuit of justice in this case is so half-hearted, so lukewarm. It is clear that Luther wants the murderers to be arrested and tried. And if they are convicted, well, Luther believed in the hangman and prayed for that grim official.

Next Luther defends the evangelical practice of “Communion in Both Kinds.” This means that both the bread and the cup are to be distributed to laypeople. We are used to this, but back in Luther’s day, the cup was reserved for the priests. Luther argued that this conflicts with the Bible and violates the Priesthood of All Believers. This was the practice that probably got Pastor Winkler murdered.

Then Luther reminds the Christians at Halle that though the murderers meant Pastor Winkler no good, they in fact provided him a strong blessing, for they dispatched him to heaven, and thereby saved him from this troubled world and from the chance that he himself would fall into sin later in life. This is Christian faith talking. If Luther did not really believe in heaven, he could not have comforted the people of Halle in this way.

Finally, Luther urges the people of Halle to pray for their enemies and to not succumb to thoughts of bitterness or revenge.

This is the combination I commend to you: Luther wanted earthly justice, yet believed that Pastor Winkler was safe in heaven and that Christians are to pray for their enemies and seek peace, even if those enemies are lax in pursuing justice or even responsible for the crime.

I hope we can have a similar spirit in face of all of life’s injustices. With all our hearts, we should pursue the good. But if the good evades our grasp, or if the good we do is mingled with compromise and ambiguity, then do not give up. Press on as best you can, and leave the rest of God.

This combination of whole-hearted striving for the good, along with hope that our imperfect work here below will be accepted by God and brought to perfection in due time could well grace all kinds of work in this earthly life. You researchers, for example: you have to deal with limitations of knowledge, limitations of funding, limitations of equipment or staff, yet do what you can. Press on with all

¹ Luther, Martin, *A Letter of Consolation to the Christians at Halle*, 1527. Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.); Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.); Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): *Luther's Works, Vol. 4: Devotional Writings II*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1999, c1968 (Luther’s Works 43)

your skill. Salvation does not depend on you, not in the end, but your part is to do your best.

Likewise for you doctors and therapists and teachers and attorneys. Oh! What ambiguity and uncertainty you often face, with home and environmental uncertainties sometimes hard at work undoing all of your work. Yet work on. Press on. And at the end of the day offer up your work to God and ask that he bring good from it.

And, on this good day, let me say a word about mothers and their work. I address myself to the children of the parish: When I was a boy, it seemed to me that it was effortless for my mother to be my mother. She seemed wise and strong and able to do whatever needed to be done. I bet my sons grew up thinking the same thing about Carol, their mother. And yet from the other point of view, from the point of view of your parents, often they are fatigued and worried and uncertain about how best to raise you. Sometimes that uncertainty knocks them to their knees in prayer, sometimes it knocks them to their knees in worry. They have to go on. Each day presents them anew with the call to be good parents to you. But like all good work in this troubled world, few of us parents can claim to be absolute masters of our responsibilities. Why, every time we begin the liturgy with the Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness, I send up a quick prayer, “Heavenly Father, make me to be a better father!” It is not easy to be a parent, so pray for your parents and be good to them. Especially today, this good Mother’s Day.

And the summit of this sermon is simply this: Easter means that all of our striving for the good in this fallen world is worth it because the One who is charge of everything feels the good in his bones! The justice that senators, judges, attorneys, police and soldiers, all strive for is a cry for justice that Jesus feels in his bones, for he suffered cruel injustice and yearns that others not go through out. The mother’s love that drove Mary to cling to her son even on the Cross and the son’s love that led him to commend his mother to John with his dying breath, such love Jesus knows about by personal experience. The suffering of the lame and the blind and the leper is a suffering Jesus beheld and rushed to help. The need for justice and love and health on earth: these are not theoretical matters for Jesus, but the stuff of his daily life, both back in Palestine and even now, this very day, and till his kingdom comes, where there is no more sorrow nor sighing and God himself wipes away the tears from every eye.

Till then, let each of us renew our striving for the good, even in this imperfect world, and offer our striving up to him who is well able to bring good from it, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.