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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/10/2013, The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Joshua 5:9-12, Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
Come Home

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

<sup>17</sup>But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will arise and go to my father...  
(Luke 15:17-18, RSV)

## THE ALTAR CALL

Let me begin this sermon by talking about the “altar call.” It is part of American pietism. I am not sure the rest of the world has the altar call. In fact, I am not sure even America has it much anymore. But our land did have it when I was a boy—not in the Lutheran Church or the Catholic Church, but in pietist parts of the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Billy Graham Crusades, and so on.

The reason I would like to discuss the altar call is that this morning’s liturgy contains two of the classic altar call hymns from my youth. I did not request them. They are simply there, part of the liturgy. I believe they are among the officially recommended hymns for this, the Fourth Sunday in Lent. That means that Lutherans across our land might be joining us in singing these two hymns.

We have just finished singing the first of the two. It is the appointed “Hymn of the Day” for today: *Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling*. The second hymn on my mind is a Communion hymn for today: *Just As I Am, without One Plea*. I plan to mention this second hymn later in this sermon, toward the end. For now, let me speak some more about the altar call and about the hymn we have just sung.

I come to my knowledge of the altar call fair and square in that I grew up in American pietism. My father was a preacher in a pietist branch of the Methodist Church—a part that is now called The Wesleyan Church, after the great reformer John Wesley. Dad did not remain a Wesleyan. As a young clergyman, he surrendered his ministry and became a Catholic—something that I now see must have astonished Dad’s colleagues in the Wesleyan Church. Dad remained a devout Catholic for the rest of his life, and so affection for the Catholic Church is part of my heritage.

But my mother remained Wesleyan, and so did we children while we were young. By the time I was in high school, I was already drawn to Martin Luther,

and I became a Lutheran long ago, in my twenties. But for my childhood I went to the little Wesleyan Church in Greensboro, Maryland.

The altar call was part of the sermon. It was the end of the sermon—not every sermon, but as the Holy Spirit led the pastor. Our pastor was Rev. H.D. Dukes. He would be preaching along, holding his beautiful King James Bible in his hand, calling out the next passage of scripture, and we would all turn in our own beautiful King James Bibles to the text he had announced. He would lead us in a study of that text and then call out the next one on his heart.

And then, sometimes, he would end the sermon with an altar call. It was his heartfelt appeal to us that we should repent and turn to Jesus. The altar call was especially meant for people who were not yet Christians or who had been Christians, but had backslid and forsaken their walk with the Lord. Rev. Dukes, then, would appeal to the sinner to come home.

Often Rev. Dukes would ask Sister Jacobs to play the piano quietly in the background while he spoke to the congregation. It would be like me asking Gwen to softly play for us while I speak. So, Sister Jacobs would get up from her pew, sit down at the piano, and begin playing hymns. *Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling* was one of those she often played. Sometimes Rev. Dukes would pause in his preaching and ask Sister Jacobs to sing a verse for us:

“Come home, come home!  
You who are weary, come home.”  
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,  
calling, “O sinner, come home!”

Perhaps a sinner would come home. That meant that the sinner would get up from his pew, from her pew, and come forward to the altar rail, kneel, and begin praying.

If no one came at first or only one or two, Rev. Dukes would ask Sister Jacobs to sing another verse:

Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading,  
pleading for you and for me?  
Why should we linger and heed not his mercies,  
mercies for you and for me?

Tarrying. It has been the downfall of many a good person. The preacher and the prayers of the congregation were bidding the sinner to come to the altar rail, where the pastor and other brothers and sisters in the Lord could kneel with the sinner and help pray the sinner through to victory. Only, the sinner tarried. He or she put off till tomorrow what could have been done today. And in the

process, that person sometimes hardened his heart and never actually came to the altar. The appeal to repent simply lost its influence in that one as the years slipped by.

## **NOT PRIVATE, BUT PERSONAL!**

Here is where my discussion of the altar call is leading: I want us to reckon with the reality that our Christian faith is not private, but it *is* intensely personal.

By “private” I mean that our faith is not our own individual invention, but is more like an ancient world into which we humbly enter and begin to take our place. Our ideas and notions need to fit in with the faith of the church. Our ideas about the Christian faith need somehow to cohere with the convictions of the apostles, saints, and martyrs, with the whole Communion of Saints, with the ecumenical church across the world, and with Him who is Lord of all, even Jesus Christ. To say that our faith is not private means that Christians always remain students. We are forever students of the Bible and of the great tradition of learning and morality in the church.

Besides that, our faith is *not* private in the sense that it is not lonely. We do not need to walk a Christian life as a solitary individual in this world. Instead, we have a right to what Luther called “the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters in the Lord.” We have a right to turn to one another for help in thinking things out and to seek prayer from one another.

And finally, the Christian faith is not private in the sense that the Word of God is always external to us. This is a great Lutheran theme. We do not write the Bible. We simply read and try to learn it. We do not preach to ourselves, but rather come to church and have the preacher preach to us—the preacher in turn bending the knee before the Bible and the Church’s interpretation of the Bible. We do not absolve ourselves, but hear it from the pastor. And we do not invent or imagine the words of Jesus to us, but hear them spoken to us in the sacraments: In Holy Baptism, Jesus says to us, “No longer do I call you a stranger, but rather I call you friend. You are mine.” And in Holy Communion, he says to us, “This is my body, my blood, for you.” We do not make this up. We simply hear it. Our faith is not private, but open to the Word of God.

Nonetheless, while our faith is not private, it *is* personal—as personal as the Prodigal Son getting up from his mud and poverty and corn husks and heading home. It is a decision he must make for himself. His father’s love and the chance for forgiveness are not simply truths that concern other people. They concern him! And he must be the one to take the step.

## BEHOLD THE MAN!

The beloved Scottish Bible scholar William Barclay has an elegant line about the prodigal son's decision to return home. Barclay had a gift for simplicity and clarity in writing. He was wonderful at translating the insights of fancy Bible scholars into lay language—beautiful and profound language, but open to just about anyone. If you remember Barbara Zelenko in our congregation, she used to lead the Monday Evening Bible Studies relying on Barclay's commentaries.

So, Barclay says this about the prodigal son's decision to go home:

Jesus paid sinning humanity the greatest compliment it has ever been paid. 'When he came *to himself*', he said. Jesus believed that being away from God prevented people from being truly themselves.<sup>1</sup>

I have wanted to say that for years. I have *tried* to say it, because it is such an important idea for me, but I've never been able to say it quite so well as this. When Jesus said that the young man's decision to repent and head home was his "coming to himself," that is indeed humanity's "greatest compliment." It means that we were meant for something better than the mud and the pigs and the corn husks. We were meant for something better than riotous living and wasting our substance. We were meant for something better than straying from God and that we are at our best, when we turn around and start heading home. Indeed, we become most "human" when we turn around and start heading home to God. That is when we "come to ourselves": when we repent and head home.

It is as Pontius Pilate said so long ago. He dragged the beaten and bruised Jesus out before the crowd and he said: Behold the man!

<sup>5</sup>Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man! (John 19:5, KJV)

And Pilate was exactly right—more right than he knew: In beholding Jesus, at last we are beholding a true man. And we ourselves become most true men and most true women when we turn and start heading home to him.

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<sup>1</sup> William BARCLAY (2012-06-25). The Gospel of Luke (Daily Study Bible Series) (p. 243). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

## JUST AS I AM

The second pietist hymn we will sing today is *Just As I Am, without One Plea*. It is the sinner's great hymn of laying down of arms. The sinner surrenders any attempt at self-justification, at comparing himself or herself to other people and claiming "I'm not so bad." Indeed, the one for whom this hymn truly expresses the heart is no longer gazing at himself or herself—at either virtues or failings—but rather gazing at Jesus... gazing at him with hope.

- 2 Just as I am, and waiting not  
to rid my soul of one dark blot,  
to thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.
- 3 Just as I am, though tossed about  
with many a conflict, many a doubt,  
fightings and fears within, without,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

This too is part of the deeply personal side of our faith.

Imagine the situation of the prodigal son when he is starving, feeding the pigs off in that far country. He must wonder to himself, "Will my father receive me again? I have offended him. I have wasted, wasted so many opportunities, so many blessings. They are now gone, and he has reason to be angry with me. If I were to go home, I would be going home without honor. Just as I am, a miserable sinner, I would be coming home. I wonder how he will receive me."

This is no joke. The young man has lived a terrible life. But the beauty of the story is that if *you* have lived a terrible life, or if *I* have wandered astray into awful sin, nonetheless we can come home, because our God is like the loving father in the parable. His mercy is great, and with him is forgiveness.

The question is, Will we head home? It is a profoundly personal one, probably the most important one we will face in this life. No one else can head home for us. We must get up and do the good deed ourselves.

## LUTHER

I end by speaking of Luther. There is one way in which Luther substantially improves upon the altar call, in my opinion. The way he improves upon it is that he more seriously reckons with the reality of sin and with how sin clings so very closely to us, even to longtime Christians. And so Luther teaches us that answering just one altar call in life is probably not going to be enough.

What is the daily life of a Christian like? For Luther, the answer is clear: The daily life of a Christian amounts to repentance begun at Baptism and renewed daily. That is, for Luther the Christian life is a matter of daily altar calls, of daily repentance. This is how he puts it in his *Small Catechism*:

What does such baptizing with water signify?

Answer: It signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God's presence. (Tappert Edition)

The story of the prodigal son, for example, gives us a brief snapshot of that young man at his best, when he repents and heads home to his father. But who knows? That young man might have fallen back into sin a couple years later. He might have broken his poor old father's heart all over again. And he might have stood in need of repenting all over again and heading back home.

If so, if you are that prodigal son or daughter sitting in this congregation, then come home. Come just as you are, without one plea, except that you have heard of Jesus, you have heard that he is a good Shepherd and a good Saviour, and you would like to be part of his flock. Simply come. Do not delay. Do not think the invitation is meant for others, but not for you. Come to him who will in no wise turn you away, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.