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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Midweek Lent 1, March 8, 2017
Keynote sermon on the Doctrine of Justification

APOSTOLIC GREETING

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Lent 1A)

☞ Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

BIBLE LESSON Philipians 2:12-13, RSV

¹²Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

HYMN 479

My Faith Looks Up To Thee

OLIVET

SERMON

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

This evening I want to begin preaching on the great and holy doctrine of Justification by Faith. This doctrine will be our chief theme for our upcoming midweek Lent series.

It has been on my heart to speak of the doctrine of Justification by Faith. I am especially drawn to that doctrine *this year*, for this year is the five-hundredth anniversary of our Lutheran Reformation. With joy, I dare to suggest this: We have won, in a specific way! We have won in the sense that we have accomplished what we set out to do. The good goal on the hearts of the Lutheran Reformers has been accomplished: We have lifted up for Christ's whole church on earth the great doctrine of Justification by Faith. Martin Luther and the other early Reformers wanted to be a blessing for their brother and sister Christians everywhere on earth. No man is an island, as John Donne said. Even less should any part of Christ's divided church rest content with being an island until itself. The church is "one," as the Creed

says. Each part of the church should try to prove a blessing for the rest of the church too. And I believe that over the past five hundred years, we Lutherans have been a blessing for Christ's whole church.

We have done that through our ecumenical dialogues and relationships. As the centuries have gone by, Lutherans and Catholics have listened to and learned from one another, and bit by bit, our teaching on Justification by Faith has converged. Now, we have reached a kind of triumph. It has happened during *our* lifetimes. Lutherans and Catholics have arrived at a *shared* understanding of the great doctrine of justification. That shared understanding is contained in the document "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (JD).¹ That word "joint" – in Joint Declaration" – could well cause us to weep with joy. Fifty years ago, this might not have been possible. It would have been untrue, it would have been wishful thinking, to have issued a "joint" declaration on Justification. But a lot has happened since I was a boy. Since Vatican II there has been intense ecumenical conversation between Catholics and Lutherans, and we have learned from each other. We have learned so much that nowadays we can issue a *joint* statement on justification. This is a statement that we *both* believe. When we stop to think that it was because of disagreements about justification that the churches split apart five hundred years ago, it is quite an amazing thing to think that now, in our generation, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church have issued joint teaching on justification. In fact, this joint teaching is so splendid that the United Methodist Church has also signed the JD – the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.²

Our midweek Lent series, then, is meant to explore this joint understanding of justification. I mean to lift up various paragraphs from the JD, so that we can see for ourselves whether this joint teaching seems true. My method will be to lift up a paragraph from the JD and then to preach on a Bible passage that in my mind seems important for that paragraph.

This time let me lift up two paragraphs. The first one is from the Preamble to the JD. I lift this one up because I think it confirms to some degree the joy I have been trying to express about the idea of a "joint" statement between Catholics and Lutherans. The paragraph goes this way:

5. The present Joint Declaration has this intention:
namely, to show that on the basis of their dialogue the

¹http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html

² On July 18, 2006, delegates to the World Methodist Council voted unanimously to adopt the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification", which was approved in 1999 by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joint_Declaration_on_the_Doctrine_of_Justification

subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church³ are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.

I summarize things this way: Whatever the disagreements of the sixteenth century between Lutherans and Catholics, current teaching on justification by faith is so similar that if there are any remaining differences, they are no longer worthy of dividing the churches. This is why I hope that someday, maybe during our lifetime, Lutherans and Catholics will be able to commune at each other's Table.

Now, let me lift up the particular paragraph and Bible passage I want to preach on this evening. The paragraph is one that discusses two ideas that recur throughout the document: grace and renewal of life. The paragraph goes this way:

15. In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.⁴

The traditional emphasis for Lutherans has been on grace "and not because of any merit on our part." The Catholic Church certainly believes in grace too but is careful to lift up the part about renewal of our hearts: "the

³The word "church" is used in this Declaration to reflect the self-understandings of the participating churches, without intending to resolve all the ecclesiological issues related to this term.

⁴"All Under One Christ," para. 14, in *Growth in Agreement*, 241-247.

Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.”

So each church has its traditional emphases, but *together* they issue this Joint Declaration because each believes the whole thing. Each side agrees with the emphasis of the other. I agree with this paragraph 15 and so I mean now to preach on it for a few minutes.

The Bible text that comes to my mind is from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians, from Chapter 2. That chapter is famous for its hymn to Jesus Christ – the hymn that starts off this way:

⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Philippians 2:5-7, RSV)

After the hymn, a few verses later, we come to my passage -- the passage I want to lift up for you. St. Paul writes this:

¹²Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13, RSV)

Perhaps you can see why I have chosen this passage. In my mind, it is a passages that speaks both of grace and of renewal of life. It speaks of grace with the words, “for God is at work in you,” and it speaks of renewal of life with the words “work out your own salvation.”

This combination of grace and work is not unusual for us. Ordinary Christians speak of it quite often. Let me give you an example from a recent Pastor’s Booth. One of my regulars is an elderly lady who has become dear to me. She is a Baptist, if I remember right, from the Bronx. She always stands ready to praise the Lord and to give her testimony, in her beautiful island accents. Recently she spoke both of the *grace of God* and of the *good work* she stands ready to do. She spoke of them most naturally and easily, as if there is no real conflict between God’s grace in her and her willingness to work out her own salvation with fear and trembling.

Her words of grace went like this. She held open her hand for me and said, “God holds me in the palm of his hand.” Then she added, “My hand is old and has arthritis, but I can trust *his* good hand.” And she does. Life has its uncertainties – for her too – but she trusts the grace and goodness of God, who loved her even before she loved him and who will love her continually.

And then, she spoke of the good work in the Lord's name that she is willing to do. She was marveling at the story of Moses and the exodus. She was rehearsing the crossing of the Red Sea, telling the story in her dramatic way of the waters opening and the Israelites escaping from slavery. She spoke of Moses and of his faith, his patience, and his long ministry. And when she was done, she said this, "These things make me want to go farther, to draw closer to Jesus." That's a good way to talk about St. Paul's "work out your salvation with fear and trembling." I want to go farther in faith. Here she is, an elderly Christian. Been a Christian all her life, as far back as she can remember. But she reads the stories of the Bible and they make her want to go farther.

Now, she is not saying that she wants to go farther *in order to merit salvation*. What she wants is just about the reverse of works righteousness. She *does not* want to set Jesus aside as if her good deeds were sufficient for her salvation. Rather, she wants to draw closer to Jesus.

Why? Because she knows that Jesus has drawn close to her and to each of us in his holy incarnation and especially in his death on the cross. Indeed, Jesus has drawn so close to us that he can look us each one in the eye and truly say, "This is my body, this is my blood, given for you!"

When St. Paul says, "work out your own salvation," he is talking about an important topic, now isn't he? Your salvation! What can be more important than that? It is a word that speaks of eternity. It is a word that speaks of your everlasting soul. And as Jesus puts it,

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:26, KJV)

The angels above care about your salvation. And so we read of them:

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:7, RSV)

Our Triune God cares about your salvation – cares enough to create you, to redeem you at great cost, and to fit you for heaven. Why should not we care about our salvation too?

So, St. Paul says, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," and the elderly lady says, "I want to go farther in faith." They do not mean that they want to earn heaven by their own good works and merit. They simply mean that God has given them grace to go forward in faith and they mean to do so.

May we mean to do so too, to the glory of our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.