

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/15/2017, the Second Wednesday in Lent
Joint Vespers with the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, at Immanuel

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

My dear brothers and sisters in the Lord: What I wrote in my greetings in this evening's worship folder is what I really believe: You and I have lived to see some good days — days of increasing unity between Catholics and Lutherans.

Let me take you back in time — say, fifty years ago. I will speak of my boyhood experience of the relationship between Catholics and Protestants. I will be speaking, then, of my experience back in those days, but I am mindful that you have your own stories you could tell. And I bet that many of your stories are more remarkable than mine. Still, I hope that mine will be recognizable to you as typical of that earlier generation. The growing affection that Catholics and Lutherans have for one another in our generation was not so true fifty years ago. Not so true!

So a brief story from back then. I had a happy childhood, growing up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, but probably the happiest of my years were what we called the years of “junior high school” — grades six through eight. When I was in junior high, my family lived in a small brick house with a lake, down the road a few houses, on one side of our house and a farm on the other. My best friend Jesse lived on that farm. Jesse and I worked together on the farm and we played together on the lake. We almost lived on that lake. We had a small rowboat, with boards for paddles. We were both strong swimmers. If our old boat were to sink, we were confident that we could swim to the other shore, no matter where we were on that lake. We would lean back in the boat and watch the sunset. Life was really good.

But behind the scenes, I suspect our mothers were praying for us, for each boy — praying for our salvation. Salvation! — that is my theme for this evening. Jesse and his family were devout Catholics, and my family were mostly devout Protestants. But Jesse's mother loved me too, as well as her own children. And my mother, Rachel, loved Jesse too, as well as her own children. So, the mothers prayed for the neighbor child, and they prayed most earnestly, because each feared that the child was going to be lost, for eternity!

It was love – Christian love – that led our mothers to pray for their son's best friend. And God bless our mothers for such love and for such prayers.

We are not dealing with a small matter when we speak of salvation. When our mothers prayed, they were trying to save us from hell. Our chief failure was that we belonged to the wrong church. It is not that we were murderers or bank robbers or pirates. It was that we belonged to the wrong church. And

the way at least some mothers and fathers thought of things back then, being part of the wrong church meant hell in the end. It meant the unwinding of our lives, the insignificance of what we had accomplished, the divine judgment: Lost! I am not speaking of the theologians. I am not reporting on what careful Catholic and Lutheran theologians thought fifty years ago. I am speaking of what many ordinary Catholics and Protestants thought about each other: Lost! We figured that our neighbors were lost because they were in the wrong church.

But now we come to our own generation. The JD – the Joint Declaration on Justification – has something to say about salvation. We say it together. Catholics and Lutherans *jointly* speak of salvation. And what we say now has the tones of hope for *both* sides. What we say now chimes with the longing of the Good Shepherd that not a single one of his sheep should be lost. He leaves the ninety-and-nine behind, you know, and goes out in search of that lost one. It is as if the mighty heart of Jesus can hardly bear the thought that any of his sheep should be lost. He does not stop to enquire whether that lost sheep is of the Lutheran flock or the Catholic flock, he simply heads out to fetch that lost one. And when he finds it, there is rejoicing in heaven.

So let me lift up for you Paragraph 19 in the Joint Declaration. It speaks of salvation. It speaks of *shared* convictions about salvation. The paragraph expresses what Catholics and Lutherans can jointly say about this ultimate topic: salvation. That opening sentence goes this way:

We confess *together* that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation.

This is a happy conviction for both Catholics and Lutherans: We depend *completely* on the saving *grace* of God for our salvation. We do not depend on our own accomplishments, not even in the slightest degree, which is good because if something so important as our salvation depend on us, I fear that some of us would fumble it. In fact, we would all fumble it, for none of us is righteous in ourselves — no not one.

You can see by my handout that there are important qualifications and distinctions in the JD about this matter of salvation. The documents clarify that when Catholics speak of *cooperating* with God's grace, they do not mean to suggest that such cooperation is not itself a gift of God's grace. And the Lutherans clarify that when we speak of depending entirely on God's grace, we do not mean that we are but sticks and stones, who lie around inert, waiting for God's grace to move us. No, we Lutherans clarify that we "are fully involved personally in [our] faith." We are accountable for our faith, for our neglecting our faith, for straying from our faith, for denying our faith. We are personally accountable for such things.

So, Catholics and Lutherans make these distinctions for one another, which I think is a good thing to do. But let us not let the distinctions obscure for us our common conviction: When it comes to the salvation of our souls, neither Catholics nor Lutherans have it wrong! Both sides agree in pointing to God as our Saviour and not to we ourselves.

So, up there in heaven, I suspect that Jesse's mother is not praying quite so desperately for me these days, and my mother is not praying quite so desperately for Catholics she loves. Both mothers, I do believe, place their trust where you and I should place our trust too: in the grace of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.