

1 Trinity 3/Augsburg Confession – Luke 15

In May of 1521 the Emperor and the electors of the Holy Roman Empire met in the German city of Worms for what was known as an imperial diet. An imperial diet is another word for an official meeting called by the emperor. There was a crisis they needed to address. The pope had declared Martin Luther to be a heretic for his teachings about the gospel. Luther taught that sinners receive the forgiveness of their sins and are declared righteous before God through faith alone in Christ Jesus alone, who alone made satisfaction for our sins. He taught that our own will, our good works, and any virtues within us contribute nothing to our righteousness and salvation before God. It is all by God's grace revealed in the gospel. Our works are a fruit of faith, which we perform in thanksgiving to God, but these works in no way contribute to our salvation. Instead, Jesus graciously receives us poor and miserable sinners into the grace of his Father, and he feeds us with the bread of life in his Word and sacraments.

Luther got this teaching from the Bible, but it challenged the teaching that had been made popular in the church. For this, Luther was condemned as a heretic. He was called before this official meeting of the empire where he was told to reject his teaching of the gospel. Luther refused to take back what he had been teaching. He said that his conscience was held captive by the Word of God. He stood on the biblical confession of the gospel. And for this he was not only condemned as a heretic, but he was also declared by the emperor to be an outlaw. This meant that anyone who captured and killed him would be rewarded.

But God protected Luther, and he caused the true message of the gospel to spread. Several of the princes around Germany became convinced of what Luther was teaching. Just as Luther's conscience was held captive by the Word of God, their consciences were likewise ruled by this precious truth. So on this day, June 25th, in the year of our Lord 1530, these princes and rulers in Germany met with the emperor for another official diet. This time it was in the German city of Augsburg. Here they presented a confession, a list of 28 articles outlining what their churches teach and practice.

To this day, this confession is known as the Augsburg Confession. I would encourage you all to read it. It's published in the Book of Concord, and we have several copies of it on the bookshelf in the conference room. If you have learned the true, Biblical teaching as it is summarized in the Small Catechism, then you should be able to read the Augsburg Confession. It shows that our church's teaching is not just the teachings of Martin Luther. No, our churches teach the plain doctrine of the Bible. We are the church of the Augsburg Confession of 1530. There were later attempts to alter this confession and water it down. But our confession, drawn from the Bible, stands unaltered. You might notice the acronym U.A.C. on the stamps, doors, and cornerstones of our congregations. It stands for Unaltered Augsburg Confession. It is the confession of our church, and we would all do well to read it and learn it.

When Luther discovered the gospel, the good news that sinners are forgiven and justified before God through faith alone, he was not discovering just one of many topics of the Bible. No, he discovered the central topic of all Biblical teaching. As St. Peter says in Acts 10, "To [Christ] all the prophets bear witness, that whoever believes in him receive forgiveness of sins through his name." This central teaching comes up throughout the Augsburg Confession. But it is summarized especially in the fourth article. Allow me to quote it for you:

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3[:21-26] and 4[:5]).

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This is the central teaching of the Christian faith. It is that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. He has taken on himself the sins of the whole world, and in exchange he gives us his own righteousness. Our works and inner movements cannot contribute to this. Only faith receives it, laying hold of God's free promise in Christ. This teaching is central, because it impacts everything we teach and practice from the Bible.

Consider, for example, what we just witnessed this morning. Silas was born and conceived in sin and under the power of the devil, but he was made alive by the power of the Holy Spirit in the washing of water with the Word. St. Paul teaches this very thing in Ephesians chapter 2. We were dead in our sins, by nature children of God's anger, under the power of the ruler whose power is in the air, that is the devil, the spirit who still works through those who disobey. But God loved us. And though we were dead in our sins, he made us alive with Christ, saving us by his grace. Silas is accountable to God, even as a little baby. Sure, he isn't accountable for as much as I am. He hasn't been entrusted with as much as I have. But there is no power or virtue in him, no innocence – not even his cuteness and sweetness – that can save him from the sin he is born with. It is precisely because he cannot be saved by his own works that we have brought him to the font this morning. It is because we know that God's promise to us is also for our children, even the smallest ones. He who welcomes sinners and eats with them also says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them." We don't rely on some apparent purity of children. All our purity, even the most righteous of deeds, are as filthy rags. Instead, we rely on the promise of him who says, "Baptize all nations," and "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved."

Jesus receives sinners. The Pharisees and Bible scholars were right about this. Even though they were complaining about it, their words stand true. Jesus is the friend of sinners, even of the smallest children. He himself walked into the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized by John. And by stepping into the river, our Lord was putting himself in the place of sinners. He himself didn't need to be baptized. He didn't need repentance or forgiveness. But he was baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness. To all who believe the promise given to them in their baptism Jesus gives his own righteousness. Just as a little baby cannot cause himself to be conceived and born, so he cannot make himself righteous before God. He cannot make himself born again. He can only receive. And anyone who would be saved must follow the example of little Silas. Despair of your own works and strengths, and as St. James says, receive with meekness the Word that God himself plants in you to save your soul.

Only God can cause you to be reborn. Only God can turn your mind and give you faith. He does it through the power of Christ's resurrection. He does it through the water and the Spirit, the water with the Word. This is why St. Peter says that baptism saves us. It isn't our own work of repenting. We can't make ourselves repent. Even as Christians we still have our sinful nature. Repentance, which is nothing other than a good conscience, is a gift. Baptism is God's gracious act working through the Word in the water to give us a good conscience by the power of Christ's resurrection. So as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:11, "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

Consider another example from what we are doing today. We are going to receive the body and blood of Jesus with our mouths. Jesus doesn't speak figuratively when he calls the bread his body and the wine his blood. His words are true, and we cannot rely on our own reason or strength. Everyone who receives in his mouth the bread from this altar receives the very body of Jesus. Even if you don't believe, this is what you are receiving. But only faith can grasp the words and promises of Jesus. Only faith can receive the blessing of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, which Jesus gives with his body and blood in this sacrament.

This is why we don't parade the body and blood of Jesus around. We don't offer it up to God as if it is our good work earning God's grace. We don't contribute in any way to Jesus' body and blood being

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present on this altar, just as we don't contribute to Christ's atonement. It is only his pure Word, which he speaks through the mouth of an unworthy and sinful man, that delivers to us this blessed pledge of God's favor in his body and blood. We eat and drink in remembrance of him, holding onto his Word and promise, and confessing his death, which alone has made satisfaction for our sins.

Finally, consider why we teach about good works. Why do we defend the office of husband and wife, father and mother, servants, workers, and all godly duties? Why do we speak out against fornication, murder, drunkenness, idol worship, greed, and all other sins? It is because Christ is our faithful Bridegroom who has given himself up for us. By his obedience in our place, he has washed us with his own blood, cleansing us from all evil things. By the washing of water with the Word, he presents us blameless and without any spot before his Father. We therefore also bear whatever crosses and afflictions God places upon us, because we have confidence that Christ has justified us and made peace with God by the blood of his cross. And we know that no one can bring any charge against us, because God has justified us and forgiven us for Christ's sake.

The tax collectors and sinners did not come to Jesus because they liked his style or thought that he was culturally hip. Jesus didn't affirm them in their sins or accept them the way they were. Instead, he came to bear their sins in his own body and declare them righteous by his grace. His Word created faith in their hearts. He gave them a good conscience. He gave them repentance unto life. He sought them out, carried their guilt, called them by his Spirit and Word, and made them his own. This is the central teaching of our faith.

The emperor was grumbling over this supposed new teaching of justification through faith alone. He was afraid that unruly peasants would get the idea that they don't need to obey authority because they aren't saved by their works. He was afraid that the pope would lose his power and influence if people came to believe that they didn't need him or any of the saints to get them into heaven. He was afraid that the whole institution would crumble. And maybe it would. In fact, some of it should. The pope has no right to claim the keys to heaven for himself when Jesus has given them to his whole church. The Pharisees had no right to refuse entry into God's kingdom to those who sought forgiveness in God's grace. Those who think they are already righteous have no right to look down on those who claim only Christ and his righteousness as their own. It's true that people will abuse the gospel. They'll get their kids baptized and then stay away from church, teaching their children that God's grace gives them a license to sin. God will judge them for this. But if we try to put conditions on the gospel just because we are afraid people will abuse it, then we are only robbing ourselves of joy.

By receiving tax collectors and sinners, Jesus teaches us this central article of our faith. He also teaches us to confess it. When the Pharisees and Bible scholars were grumbling at him, Jesus turned to them and invited them to rejoice with him. Just as the shepherd rejoices over finding that one lost sheep, the woman rejoices over finding her one lost coin, and the father rejoices over finding his one lost son, so Jesus invites those uptight religious leaders to rejoice with him that God has given repentance and faith to sinners. Rejoice that Christ, by his obedience and death, has won righteousness and life for all lost and condemned people. Rejoice that God declares the ungodly righteous freely by his grace in Christ. This is exactly what the Augsburg Confession was. Even though the emperor didn't want to hear it and even fell asleep while it was being presented, the entire confession was an act of praise and thanksgiving to God. So this is our confession of God's truth. It is a rejoicing in God's good promises, a rejoicing that Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. The angels and all the company of heaven join in this rejoicing of God, lauding and magnifying his glorious name. Therefore, we will, with joy, speak of his testimonies even before governors, congressmen, presidents, emperors, and kings. And we will not be put to shame (Ps. 119:46). Amen.