

Right before his death, Jesus teaches us what the church is. Our human reason looks at the church as something that we must sustain with our own efforts and wisdom. This is why so many churches sell out to the popular demands of the godless culture. They figure that the church isn't being the church unless she is recognized by the rest of the world. They conveniently ignore the teachings of Scripture, which are not so popular or appealing. They ordain women to be pastors, even though God's Word directly forbids that women teach and exercise authority over men in the church (1 Tim 2:12). But they do this so that they don't upset those who are offended by what God says about men being the heads of their homes and wives submitting to their husbands. They claim that the many disagreements about Christian doctrine don't really matter. So they give the Lord's Supper to all who call themselves Christians, regardless of what they publicly confess about Jesus and his teaching. They do this even though God expressly tells us through St. Paul that we should agree in doctrine and mind before we partake of the Lord's Supper together (1 Cor 1:10; 11:17ff). Many churches will even say that whether you believe that Jesus was born of a Virgin, performed miracles, or rose from the dead doesn't matter, as long as you can say that you feel the love of God. More and more churches deny that Jesus paid the penalty of our sins and turned God's wrath away, because the concept of God's wrath just doesn't seem very peaceful and loving to the popular opinions of the world.

These churches didn't end up like this overnight. It came from years and generations of listening to their own thoughts and emotions rather than listening to God's Word. Many Lutheran churches once confessed the same Biblical truth that has been preserved among us by God's grace. But they gave into the pressures of the world.

When I was serving in Iowa, I would occasionally preach for a group of Missouri Synod students attending Luther College in Decorah. Decorah, IA was historically a settlement of faithful Norwegian Lutherans. Luther College used to be a faithful college. When my grandpa attended there, every student was required to attend chapel. Many Lutheran churches were planted there over the years by faithful pastors and laymen. But today not one of these congregations stands on the inerrant words of the Scriptures. And the college has gone from a campus of living water to a den of the devil's minions. This is why we had a campus ministry: to serve the remnant of faithful students who wanted to hear the pure Word of God and receive the sacrament on a weekly basis. I, along with a number of other pastors, would take turns meeting these students on campus on Saturday nights, preaching for them and giving them the Sacrament. I was appalled (but I can't say I was very surprised) by what the students told me about their classes. One of the students said that her theology professor didn't even believe in God. In less than a hundred years this conservative Lutheran school has sold out to the lies of this world.

When we hear about things like this, then we should not be smug and proud that we haven't fallen into the same errors. Instead, we should fear God. We should remember that God will not be mocked by those who think they can stop listening to his Word when it doesn't suit them. As St. Paul warns in Romans 1, God gives them up to their debase desires. They are under God's judgment.

It was the same case for the people of Israel and Jerusalem. St. Paul asks what advantage the Jews have. Much in every way, he says. For to them was entrusted the oracles of God (Rom 3). God gave his Word to the children of Israel. He sent them his prophets. He provided them with a place to worship in his temple. He taught them that he would provide the sacrifice to take away their sins. But they were attracted to the false worship of the surrounding nations instead. They sacrificed to Baal. They even sacrificed their own children to Molech, similar to how so many churches today promote the so called

right for a woman to sacrifice her unborn child to her false god of independence. They committed sexual immorality, not much different from how many churches today promote all kinds of sexual perversions. This holy people, set apart by God to be his own, had the very words of the living God. But they sold out to the world just like Esau sold his inheritance for a bowl of soup.

But again, we shouldn't suppose that we are somehow more worthy than they are. St. Paul describes how we should react to the falling away of Israel:

Right! They were broken off because they didn't believe, but you stand by believing. Don't be proud but fear. If God didn't spare the natural branches, He will not spare you. Now see how kind and how severe God is – severe to those who fall but kind to you if you cling to His kindness; otherwise you, too, will be cut off (Rom 11:20-22).

Paul is warning us not to count God's patience and kindness as a little thing. As we heard from the epistle lesson last Sunday, "If anyone thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall." If you think that you are safe because you are not as immoral as the Baal worshipping, fornicating Israelites, or because you are more conservative than the mainline liberal churches of our day, then take heed lest you also fall into the same unbelief.

After all, the leaders of Israel appeared to be very moral and upstanding by the time Jesus came on the scene. The Pharisees were respected citizens. They condemned adultery, strictly followed the Sabbath, and worshiped at the temple. But Jesus says that they did not know the things that made for their peace. They were hidden from their eyes. And because of this, Jesus predicted that they and their families would be destroyed. Jerusalem, the holy city where God dwelt among his people in the temple, would be destroyed less than forty years after Jesus predicted it. It happened just as Jesus said it would. The Jewish historian Josephus recorded it in detail. The Roman general Titus invaded and destroyed the city. All because, as Jesus explains, they did not know the time of their visitation. They didn't know the time when their help, their Savior, had come to them.

Sure, they were conservative. They paid their dues. They gave their sacrifices. They followed the rules. But they didn't know what made for their peace. They thought that their religion depended on them keeping it going. So they would do anything to make sure that their religious organization would continue. They relied on the temple rather than on their Lord who came to them as the true temple. Jesus taught them that his body was the true temple, and he promised that though they would destroy it he would raise it up on the third day. Jesus taught them not to trust in their own planning and their own programs. He taught them to trust in the promise of God to send his Son into the world to save sinners. And this is why they saw Jesus as a threat to their religious organization. They would even go so far as to say to Pilate that their only king was Caesar, rather than the Lord God, if that meant getting rid of Jesus. They were blind. They thought that they could accomplish peace if only they could keep the outward structure of the temple.

So we should be careful that we do not serve the tent rather than the Maker of the tent. Many Christians have very conservative opinions. They believe that the Bible has no errors in it, and they take a stand against abortion, homosexuality, and other social evils. But they imagine that the church's existence relies on all their busy work. Some of them will stick with the traditions of the church more than others. But they lose their focus on what the church truly is. And while the preaching of God's Word becomes more and more watered down, they just keep on coming, because this is their church.

So they strive and fight for the building, the corporate entity, and the brand of their church rather than the Word of God who redeemed them and visited them in the flesh of his Son.

The church loses her identity when the people forget what it is that makes for their peace. They avoid talking about unpopular things. They don't address errors and sins that are too close to home. And they think that they are thereby keeping the peace. Yet, like the buyers and sellers in the temple, they have only sold out to the devil, the world, and their own sinful flesh.

But Jesus teaches us what makes for peace. And he does this with tears. Of course, God doesn't change. And yet, God became a man. And as a man, God did cry. He shed tears. But why? Because his feelings were hurt? Because he wasn't popular? No. He shed tears over his people, because he earnestly desired their redemption. His tears flowed over his people because of his eternal, divine compassion for them. He desired to gather his people Israel like a hen gathers her chicks. Here is the expression of true peace. It is in the tears of God wanting nothing more than to make peace with poor sinners and gather them around his Word. Some might say that our Lord looks helpless, weak, and pathetic. If he is God, they say, then why doesn't he just force everyone to believe? But God doesn't give us faith by forcing us into submission. Of course, we don't have the ability by our own natural will, reason, or strength, to come to him. But he desires to draw near to us and visit us in his Word, just as he drew near and visited his people in the flesh. He desires to call us, gather us, and enlighten us with his Spirit of truth. He desires to speak to us with his gentle and faithful voice. He desires to soften our hardened hearts and give us true faith in his Word.

Jesus wept because he took seriously God's judgment against unbelief and false doctrine. This is also why he went into the temple and kicked out those who were buying and selling. You see, Jesus didn't weep because he had given up. He wasn't like a pathetic boy who just got dumped by a girl he thought he was in love with. No, Jesus' tears gave way to a true zeal for the truth of God's salvation. He saw how people were perverting the temple of God from a place of prayer into a den of thieves. He saw how his poor sheep were being led away from calling out to God in true faith to relying instead on money and the idea that our buying and selling is going to keep the church afloat. He saw how his little flock was being led into greed and unbelief. So with the zeal of God himself, he cleansed his house from all worldliness. And then what did he do? St. Luke records that he was teaching daily in the temple.

You see, this is what Jesus does right before he suffers and dies for our sins. He reestablishes his church. The church is not in buildings and programs constructed and planned by men. The church is built by God. As Psalm 127 says, "Unless the Lord builds the house those who build it labor in vain." And if the church is built by God, then it follows that the church is nothing other than the saints of God gathered around his pure Word. It is the sheep hearing the voice of their Shepherd, learning from his instruction. Jesus teaches. His Christians listen. And this teaching is what identifies his church as she confidently prays to her Lord.

And what did he teach? He taught what makes for our peace. He went to the cross to declare us righteous by his blood. And since we have been justified by faith in him, we have peace with God (Rom 5:1).

The world doesn't want to talk about God's wrath, because the world doesn't think it should be condemned. And because of this they lose the peace, which Christ accomplished for them by bearing the wrath of God. But the church of Christ does not ignore the wrath of God. We take it seriously. And

with repentant hearts, we listen to the Scriptures, even when they make us uncomfortable. We can do this because we know what makes for our peace. Christ is our peace. He is our righteousness before God. He is the assurance that God does not count our sins against us. We don't have this peace from the world. Instead, we have it in the Word, body, and blood of our crucified Savior. We have it in our baptism where we were claimed as Christ's beloved bride, freed from sin and condemnation. And while we mourn over our own sinful hearts and our tendency to wander from his Word, we find rest and peace in the blood and tears of our Lord. Let us pray:

In Jesus I find rest and peace. The world is full of sorrow.  
His wounds are my abiding place. Let the unknown tomorrow  
Bring what it may. There I can stay.  
I will not trouble borrow. Amen.