

A Life Stronger Than Death

Text: John 8:46-59

Hymn: "My Song Is Love Unknown" (*LSB* 430)

In a religious magazine a few years ago, a Christian pastor encouraged his clergy readers to be brave and not preach the Gospel readings every Sunday but mix in the epistle texts, the letters of Paul in particular. Why? Because, he said, if you preach the Gospel readings, you're always preaching the lovely, gracious Jesus. But the people also need to hear the cantankerous, grumpy Paul. Well, so much for the always lovely, gracious Jesus. In this morning's Gospel, He pulls no punches. He calls the people he's talking to liars. He tells them they're of their father, the devil. A far cry from the Messiah who wouldn't break a bruised reed or snuff out a burning wick. Here He's insulting and hurling names at those opposed to Him. What has got into Jesus?

For that matter, why did the Apostle Paul sometimes get grumpy? At times he is incredibly patient with the people he's writing; other times he seems to lose his temper completely. He writes the Christians at Corinth a very long letter. Now the Corinthians were a hot mess. There were petty divisions among them. There was flagrant sexual immorality. The church services were chaotic, to say the least. And some were still taking part in pagan worship and worse. But Paul gently and patiently reminds them they shouldn't do such things. At no point does he get cross. Then he writes to the Galatians, who, as far as we know, are guilty of none of that stuff. No idol worship, no divisions, no sexual immorality. They just have what seems to be a theological disagreement. But Paul tells them that if they carry on like that, they're not going to be saved. In fact, of all the letters we have of Paul, Galatians is the only one he doesn't

start off or end politely. Even with the wretched Corinthians, Paul begins with half a chapter of thanksgiving to God for them. But the clean-living Galatians? He just goes right to telling them they've lost the Gospel.

Jesus dined with prostitutes and tax collectors and public sinners and was happy to be their friend. But when it came to the Pharisees, who really cared about the Bible, who dedicated their lives to living as closely according to God's Word as they could, them He calls children of Satan. If I were to put money on it, given the choice between going to the Galatian or the Corinthian church, I'd bet most of us would choose Galatia. And between the Pharisees and the prostitutes, we'd all be drawn to the Pharisees.

You see, the problem with the Pharisees and the Galatians was not their sincerity. They were sincere. It wasn't that they didn't focus on what was important. They did. It wasn't that they weren't spiritual enough. They were. Or that they weren't sufficiently dedicated to doing God's will. They really were. There was just one thing that was wrong. And very unfortunately for them it was the one thing that mattered.

By this point in His ministry, Jesus had by both His words and actions revealed that He had been sent by God to bring salvation into the world. And for all His troubles He was now being attacked, all because He seemed to be saying too much of Himself. If He had said, "I, like you, Pharisees, am a teacher of the law, here to inform you of a more pious way," they would have been quite happy to work with Him. Instead, what Jesus said was, "None of that is any good to you unless you have Me." Which is either incredibly arrogant or the most important fact in the world. It's arrogant, if it's not true. But if true, nothing else matters beside it.

Jesus claimed in His words and proved by His actions that He had been sent by God. He goes further than that. At the end of this reading, they pick up some stones to throw at him. Those weren't pebbles. He had said, "Before Abraham was, I am." Jesus, in other words, was claiming to be God Himself. Either that is blasphemy or crazy talk or it's a truth without which we cannot be saved.

That question, Is it true what Jesus said? is the most important question in the whole world. It would be nice to cure cancer. It would be nice to bring about world peace and end poverty. All of that is nice and we should do our best to make sure the world is as good a place as we can make it. But none of that is even a quarter as important as what Jesus claims about Himself. Because what Jesus claimed is that He is the way, the truth, and the life and that no one can go to God the Father except through Him. There is no other way of knowing God. There is no other forgiveness of sins. There is no other way of surviving our death except through Jesus.

Therefore, who Jesus is is the life-and-death question. Who do *you* say that Jesus is? What and who is Jesus to you? And, please, whatever else you say, don't say, "I don't care," or "it doesn't matter," because this matters more than life itself. Without receiving the grace of God and His gifts, we will live our lives and we will die and the next stop will be God's eternal judgment and we will have to stand before God and give an account of our lives to Him. For everything we have done we will have to give an explanation—every word, every thought, every action. And God will judge us justly. He will judge us according to what is right, which means that all of our sins will cry out for punishment. That, dear friends, is a serious matter.

But God is not only just; He is full of grace and mercy and love towards us. And in His love He sent Jesus to be our Savior. He sent Jesus to come into this world full of grace and truth not only to tell us that God loves us but to put that love into effect. So that we might not have to face the judgment of God alone. So that we wouldn't have to stand naked before God, every secret laid bare. So that we would not have to feel that shame and so that we would not have to be judged for our sins, Jesus came into the world. He came to take those sins away.

When Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, he said to Isaac, "God himself will provide a lamb." Jesus was that Lamb. Jesus died so that Isaac might live. Jesus died so that you might live. Not just now but eternally. And anything that detracts from that detracts from salvation. Any teaching that teaches us that there is another way to God leads us away from Jesus and away from salvation. If you have a ship full of people and that ship is sinking and you deliberately lead the people away from the lifeboats and life jackets, you are leading them away from the one thing that will save them from a certain death. The life boat, that salvation, is Jesus. And so it is the one truth about which we cannot politely agree to disagree. We cannot disagree about who God is and how we can know Him. If we accept wrong answers, we are left dead in our trespasses. We are left without hope, facing God's judgment alone.

That's why Jesus and his apostles are entirely devoid of any patience with teaching that takes away from that truth. If people are mired in sinful lifestyles because of ignorance, laziness, or folly; if they haven't put one and one together to make two yet; if they mix sinful, unchristian choices with their trust in Christ; if they are guilty of bickering or immorality or halfheartedness in their worship; if their church services are

chaotic or full of unhelpful practices, but they continue to hold fast to the Jesus who saves, there is hope. If each of us was subjected to an in-depth interview that teased out of us all the ways in which we fail to live in a way that honors God's name and is consistent with our Christian calling, I'm sure we'd all deserve a very long letter from an apostle addressing our problems. Yet we have Jesus. And so long as we have Jesus, those sins can be and will be forgiven. We have hope!

Tax collectors, prostitutes, and other public sinners who came to Jesus looking for mercy received mercy and patient and tender care, because they had come to the Physician who could and did heal them from their sins. The Corinthians and other Christians who needed correction still clung to the Jesus who forgives sin and so the apostles were patient about instructing them in a better way. But the Pharisees and the Galatian Christians replaced Jesus with something else. Instead of taking people to a lifeboat they were telling them how to swim better, putting false confidence in their own actions. But when the Titanic went down, whether you were barely able to dog paddle or could out-swim Tarzan, if you weren't on a lifeboat, you were going to go down, too. We've been given something better than a lifeboat. We've been placed in the ark of the Christian church, in which we are being carried through the flood and which cannot be sunk. Our only danger is that we refuse to get on board or jump off.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who died for the sins of the world. He shed His blood as a perfect payment for every sin ever committed. That blood is not only a price that He paid; it's also a cleansing agent. When we are baptized, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all unrighteousness, makes us fit to share in the eternal life that is uniquely God's own. As Jesus Himself promised, If anyone keeps His Word, He will

never see death. That doesn't mean our bodies will never decay and die. It means something better. Even though our bodies decay and die, we still won't see death. We live in Christ and Christ in us. Even in death we live. There is eternal hope for us.

Jesus has made that promise and backed it up with his own body given and blood shed. And although our last hour is coming—one of us in this room will be the next to be talked about at his own funeral, and then another, each of us in turn—there is life beyond that moment. And Christ will raise us on the Last Day. Do not let anyone or anything rob you of that comfort and that hope. Do not allow people to mislead you. Do not allow your own lifestyle and habits drag you away and take your eyes off the prize. Today Jesus comes to you, offering that eternal life in His life. Every other offer is a lie from the father of lies. But Jesus has given us the truth. And by that truth we shall live.

A life stronger than death.

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