

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion (Series C)

March 20, 2016

Text: Philippians 2:5–11

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

During the sermon I preached this past Wednesday at Zion Lutheran Church in Grover, CO, I made a statement that provoked a curious reaction; at least, to a member in my family. I had said in that sermon, “Any preaching about a cross-less Jesus pleases the devil. Big toothy, smiling preachers promising salvation in this world and in the world to come without the bitterness of God’s Lamb being numbered with transgressors are prophets of deception and damnation. Do not listen to them! Do not watch their television programs or buy their books!”

The point I was making then is powerfully proclaimed in today’s appointed Scripture readings. You cannot have the forgiveness of sins, the in-dwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, a holy Christian Church, the hope of resurrection unto eternal life, or any of God’s promised gifts without the bitterness of Christ’s death on the cross. Before the joy of Easter resurrection, there must—of necessity—be the suffering of Good Friday. Jesus’ exaltation and glory follow only after His humiliation. That is the pattern of Christian salvation and discipleship that continues until Christ’s comes again in glory on the Last Day.

Consider the apostle Paul’s remarkable admonition beginning in Philippians 2:5–7, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (vs. 5–7). We are called to demonstrate and live by the humility exemplified by Jesus.

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus....” Notice that Paul doesn’t say to be more humble or to act more humble as if this Christian virtue were an act of will power and discipline. Instead, we are called to live according to this spiritual gift already given to us in our baptism into Christ. Everything that belongs to Jesus belongs to you! It’s yours already! We are called by God to live according to it by the Lord’s grace.

Humility is the virtue that allows a person to see him or herself as they truly are in relation to their fellow human beings, to this created world, and to God. With this cardinal virtue, we are able to see rightly that we are created by God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. We just didn't spontaneously come into existence out of thin air. Every natural and spiritual gift we possess comes from His loving hand as pure gifts of grace. That knowledge allows you to think rightly of yourself and to live rightly with God and man; in other words, to live in humility.

Again, the humility given to us and by which we are to live is defined according to Jesus. Look at vs. 6. "Jesus was in the form of God but did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." The word "grasp" carries the sense of holding onto something forcibly, even by means of violence. Jesus is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity. God from God. Light from light. Equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit in every respect yet Jesus did not cling to and grasp violently upon His divine equality. The eternal Son of God did not reject His Father's will for Him to become man, to live as flesh and blood among this fallen, rebellious world. Jesus did not grasp violently to the dignity of His divine nature. Instead, He humbled Himself to the will of His Father for the good of the universe and for the glory of His Father.

How different we sinful human beings tend to be. Do we not grasp and strain for every bit of power and advancement? It needs to be my way or else. I want what's coming to me or there will be no peace. But that is not the way of Jesus nor is it to be our way as Christians. Remember Paul's admonition, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus..." Our way is to follow and live according to this great gift of humility given to us in and through the Lord Jesus. The way of faith and virtue seeks God's glory and the good of our neighbor.

In vs. 6-7, the apostle Paul continues to describe how our Lord Jesus brought about the salvation of the world through humility, "though he (Jesus) was in the form of God, (he) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant..."

The eternal Son of God willingly submits to His Father's will of taking on the form of a servant. You can rightly understand this to mean that Jesus emptied Himself in loving obedience to His Father and loving service to this fallen, corrupted world. The glorious Son of God, the 2nd Person of the Holy Trinity, set aside His divine majesty and entered the virgin womb of Mary in order to become man, the God-man. And He became the servant of all.

Jesus did this and more. For He emptied Himself of His divine majesty so that He might save the world from its corruption and bondage to Satan, death, and misery. This humble service was and is not self-serving in any regard. What He does, He does only for the good of those who receive His humility. The apostle Paul describes it most beautifully in vs. 8, “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Maybe you can see better why Holy Week is so important for the Church. Jesus comes to His people on Palm Sunday “humble and mounted on a donkey” as the prophet Zechariah foretold. Five days later, the divine but humble Son of God dies a suffering death. That long reading from Luke’s gospel is giving testimony to Christ’s love for you and me. He would not be parted from His people. His love, for His Father and for this world, moved Him to empty Himself to such an extent that He set aside His glory, borrows a donkey to ride into Jerusalem for the purpose of submitting to mockery, beating, and death by crucifixion. This is the depth of God’s love, His commitment, His passion to make you His own, to free you from sin and death.

To ignore Christ’s crucifixion or set it aside as some past event, important as far as it goes, but irrelevant to your day-to-day Christian life is sever yourself from God’s perfect love. There can be no Christian faith and life without Christ’s cross for that would be to live without God’s love and grace.

And yet, the bitterness of Christ’s humiliation leads to exaltation. We continue with vs. 9–11, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” The self-emptying of Jesus continued until the ransom price for the world’s salvation was paid. Upon our Lord’s descend into hell, He entered into His exaltation. And on Easter morning, His exaltation is made known to the world! That humble name of the crucified yet resurrected Jesus is now exalted.

But note even here. Jesus does not grasp this exaltation. It is given to Him by His heavenly Father. Even in exaltation, Jesus remains the humble Son of God. His name is exalted precisely because He humbled Himself unto crucifixion. There is no exaltation without self-emptying. That glorious name of Lord Jesus Christ is powerful and saving. For He is the One who humbled Himself in love and service. And now, the Father exalts Jesus to the highest place of honor, worship, and glory. Through this Jesus, crucified yet resurrected, God the Father is glorified.

This is the way of thinking we are to have among ourselves. Through humility we rightly see ourselves as God's beloved and redeemed people who are called to love and serve the world as did our Lord Jesus. We are not a grasping, scheming people trying to consume every inch of glory and prestige. We look forward to a day of exaltation that will be given to us by God in the resurrection of the Last Day. Our great hope is that our physical bodies will be resurrected in the glory of Christ. And we shall be like Jesus.

In the meantime, our spiritual mindset is that we follow Jesus in the humble power of His cross and resurrection. The glory and honor will be given to us by the Father in His time. Until then, we live in the love and grace and mercy of the crucified yet resurrected Jesus.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.