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Fifth Sunday in Lent (Judica)
April 7, 2019
John 8:46-59
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

“Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?”

These Jews are not children of God. Rather, they are children of the devil. Jesus condemns them, “Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

They couldn't stand for this. They're indignant, thinking themselves God's children and people. Yet their words and lives betray them as they attack Christ's life and Word. They rage against His Word: “You have a demon.” They slander His life: “You are a Samaritan”—a crime worse than any other to the Jews.

This is what happens to Christians and Christ's Word. Both our life and doctrine must be condemned and reviled by the most prominent, the wisest, the noblest, and the greatest this world has to offer. This is because the truth will not tolerate lies. And when this world's lies and deceit are rejected, those who hold to them become bitter, angry, impatient, cruel, and mad. They condemn and judge, claiming both victimhood and moral superiority—when they have neither. This happened to Christ. This happens to Christ's people.

How does Christ respond? His life He abandons to shame and dishonor. Christ is silent and suffers them calling Him a Samaritan—a charge still made today, by the way. But Christ isn't silent about His Word and teaching. The Word isn't Christ's, but the Father's. Jesus was given to speak only that which the Father had given Him. Same with the Holy Spirit. He only speaks what the Father had given to the Son. So too with us. God dare not suffer in the least slander against His Word. His patience end when the Word is maligned. God desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Jesus came and taught and His Word was written down so that we may believe and by believing have eternal life in His name. If the Word is harmed, so is salvation. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ. Therefore, we cannot suffer any attack against God's Word and must honor God and it. Thus we pray, “Hallowed be Thy name.” Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven!

If we suffer attacks, losing our goods, fame, child, and wife—if all these be gone—no great harm is done. But if God's Word perishes and we remain silent, great and terrible

harm befalls God and the whole world. God loses those He would save as the world goes literally to hell. Therefore, we can't shut up our mouths. The world's greatest and best will try to shut us up—charges of hate speech and triggering and laws that seek to curb free speech in the name of tolerance and inclusivity and safe spaces. How are we to respond to such attempts? How does Jesus respond? He doesn't shut these Jews up; but He doesn't stay silent either. Jesus speaks the truth, knowing it will win out in the end. The truth never silences lies by force. Rather it speaks truth and the lies are exposed as the devil's schemes. It's the lie and liars that seek to forcibly silence the truth. They can succeed in no other way. That's what these Jews are trying to do in our lesson. Later, when they can't get Jesus to shut up with their words, they'll pick up stones to kill Him.

Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me." "My Word is not of the devil's lies. I preach the grace of God to His honor. Because He is gracious and merciful, those who believe in Him praise, love, and cherish Him. But you call Me the devil's liar. You thereby revile and dishonor God."

To dishonor Jesus is to dishonor God. Moreover, to dishonor Christianity, the Church, the preaching of the Gospel—to dishonor those things is to dishonor Christ and His Father. We suffer attacks against God's Word and His ministers both within and without. The scandals of the Roman clergy serve to dishonor Christ. Rejection of the Church with "I believe in God but not organized religion" dishonors Christ. The majority of American Millennials think the Church is obsolete and provided and continues to provide no benefit to society. They are dishonoring Christ. When Christians live lives contrary to Christ's Word, they dishonor Christ. We must suffer such attacks to Christ's honor. But we know that there is One who seeks Christ's honor and judges. As Christ says, "Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge." Although the whole world reviles and dishonors us, Christ and His people will be vindicated by the Father. "Vengeance is mine, declares the Lord." We leave it to the Father.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

Here we have it: the reason why Christ's Word is of the highest value and worth, and the reason we dare not let His Word suffer dishonor. Christ's Word is glory in the highest. It is a powerful victor over Satan, death, and sin. It bestows and sustains eternal life.

How can a Word do such a thing? Divine wisdom and human reason meet head on. Human reason is incapable of conceiving how an oral, spoken Word can create or redeem, bring about or restore life. Human reason rejects the idea that God created everything with but a Word, rather inventing convoluted and impossible and unverifiable schemes of human imagination. But we—we shall consider this beautiful saying: “If anyone keeps My Word, he will never see death.”

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Christ came in such a fashion so that all may have Him. Christ preached and taught and healed, not hiding Himself away in secret, so that all may see Him. We hear of it by eyewitness testimony. He died, publicly, raised on a cross, so that His sacrifice would be known, and we could trust in it. This Word made flesh has been inscripturated, that is, recorded for us by the Holy Spirit in the Holy Scripture. It places before us Christ, the One who has triumphed over death, sin, and Satan. Because He has triumphed, those who believe in Him have victory over death, sin, and Satan.

This Word of Christ we keep. We’re not talking about following it as a rulebook or a law of good works—though we are indeed commanded to live holy lives. Rather, this Word of Christ must be kept in the heart by faith, trusting in the One it proclaims, firmly relying on the One it gives to us. The Jews turned the Old Testament Scriptures into a set of rules—613 to be exact—having a slavish fear of God, who would rather have them as children. Instead, they reveal themselves as children of the devil, fearfully raging against Christ. They shout that Abraham and the prophets are dead. They know nothing of what it is “to keep,” “to die,” or “to live.” But when we are faced with death and the consequences of sin, when the devil accuses us and threatens hell and damnation, then we cling to and hold fast and keep Christ’s Word. He praises His Word because in it is the promise of life and forgiveness, heaven and salvation. “You say My Word is of the devil,” Jesus says, “and you wish to cast it to the bottom of hell. But I say that My Word has divine power in it, and I exalt it higher than the heaven of heavens, above all creatures.”

We must understand what Christ is saying here. Because the Jews are right that Abraham and the prophets died (excepting Enoch and Elijah, of course). And Jesus says that they taste not death. It may be that we can make a distinction between death itself and what it means to see or to taste death. After all, we must all face death and die, unless Jesus comes back beforehand. Come, Lord Jesus! But a Christian neither tastes nor sees death,

that is, he does not feel it, he is not terrified before it, and he enters death calmly and quietly. Dr. Luther taught us to go to our bed as if we are going to our death. In that way, when we go to our death, we may go to it as if we are going to our bed. All men go to sleep, confident that they shall awaken in the morning. Likewise, Christians, trusting in the promises of Christ's Word, die confident that they shall awaken in the resurrection.

Truly, the taste of death is the power and bitterness of eternal death and hell. Christ's Word takes death's power and victory away and grants Christ's victory to the believer. Abraham and the prophets and all who have died in the faith have no such bitterness or torment. They are held in Christ's embrace, awaiting the resurrection and eternal life. The Christian's eyes are filled with the life and the Christ in that Word.

"I am the resurrection and the life," says the Lord. "He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die" (Jn 11:25-26). Thus man triumphs over death through the Word of Christ, of Life, if he keeps it and believes.

So, Jesus can reply to the Jews that Abraham and the prophets still live and that they never died but have life even in the midst of death: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." Abraham saw it with the sight of faith in the heart, that is, he trusted God's Word in our Genesis reading. Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"—or, a better translation says, "The LORD will see"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD He will be seen." Christ our Lord promised Abraham that very day, for the second time, "In your offspring [who is Christ] shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gn 22:18).

Abraham saw and understood that Christ, born of his seed through a pure virgin, would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. By a Word, Abraham trusted that the promised One would be his descendant. He would be born of a virgin—so as not to be cursed with Adam's children. He would suffer for the whole world, cause this Good News to be preached, and overwhelm the whole world with blessing. Now is the Day of Salvation! With the sight of faith in the heart we behold Christ as the sun of righteousness, who shines and illuminates the whole world.

But Jesus' enemies, both yesterday and today, understand none of this. Because of their carnal minds, they revile Christ as a liar.

Jesus declares that He is the Lord God with His “before Abraham was, I am.” He speaks not of His human nature—He was merely 30 years old or so, not 50 as His detractors rightly ascertain. Instead, Jesus speaks of His divine nature, the nature by which He can secure blessing and victory for us sinners. We confess with all believers in Christ that He is both God and man. As the Creed says, begotten of the Father from eternity and born of the Virgin Mary. He is the eternal God, without beginning or ending. As Hebrews 13[:8] says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever”; Revelation 13[:8] also says, “The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”

When Christ returns, and we shall all be raised, the liars’ mouths will be shut and all shall see Christ upon the mount, vindicated. This is the Word of Christ. It is true because He is true. It promises life. Therefore, let us keep it.

In Jesus’ name.