

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – 2024

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-44

There's an argument being had in Lutheran circles. Arguments, debates can be very productive. A good argument is about discerning the truth. A good argument is when both sides are submissive to the Word of God. Some debates are all heat and very little light. Those are bad arguments. Wisdom enjoys debating issues that matter. It's a curious argument that is being had in Lutheran circles because this argument has been settled for 500 years (Formula of Concord). As you might suspect, I have a particular point of view in this debate much like I have a particular point of view on what the sum of $2+2$ is. *That* debate is over, isn't it? How astonished would you be if some folks in the world of mathematics began to undermine the veracity of $2+2=4$? We're not talking $E=mc^2$ but $2+2=4$. Energy equaling mass x the speed of light squared is Einstein's theory of relativity and that idea is tough for my little mind to grasp. $2+2=4$ is what Mrs. Anderson taught me in kindergarten and my little mind totally gets it; I trust it; I rely on it daily.

The argument of which I speak has to do with the law. When I say "law" what I'm referring to is that part of God's Word which tells us what we are to do and not to do. Law, in the narrow sense, is God's revelation of how He wants us to behave – in thought, word, and deed (νομος). The Ten Commandments are in this category. A summary of the law is this statement which our Lord made when He was asked which commandment is the most important of all: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mark 12:29-31). God tells us what we are to do. It's totally great that He tells us what to do. We call this the Law, in distinction from the Gospel which tells us what Christ has done for us. We are saved by the Gospel. The Gospel creates faith. The law functions in three ways: 1. it functions as a curb, keeping people from engaging in destructive behavior against themselves and their neighbors. 2. It functions as a mirror to reveal sin and awaken the awareness of our need for a Savior. 3. It functions as a guide, that is, how we are to live a life that is pleasing to God.

Curb, mirror and guide – all pretty standard stuff. Here's where the argument comes to a boil. The law always accuses. How many of y'all had a grumpy P.E. teacher in Jr. High? Yellow teeth, an unkempt five-day-beard, a sweat-stained ball cap, a whistle around his neck, bad breath, and an endless desire to call into question a boy's masculinity – that was Mr. Young. He accused us of being slow. He accused us of running like girls. He demanded that we climb the rope until our hands bled. He demanded that we do endless push-ups, and he demanded that we thank him at the end of the period for the abuse. The law always accuses. Theologically, it is absolutely true. We fail. None of you love God with all your heart mostly because you love yourself so much. That's what sinners do, they love themselves. None of you perfectly love your neighbor as yourself. You fail in this no matter how devout you are, no matter how sincere you may be, no matter how long you have been a Christian. Your sinful nature is the body of death that you cart around with you wherever you go, whatever you do (Romans 7:24).

So one side in this argument is saying this: “Since the law always accuses, since the law is ‘bad news,’ since the law is always Mr. Young we’re not going to speak it.” Exhorting or encouraging people to behave in a way that pleases God is not helpful, they say. Besides, Christians automatically do this on their own, they say. “Better to totally saturate them with the Gospel and just assume that they’ll behave properly, that faith will lead them to behave in a sanctified manner and we can just dispense with the third use of the law, the guide that encourages Christians to behave according to God’s will.” Nope; that’s totally unbiblical. It’s called the Antinomian position and it’s wrong. Here’s why: The bible is chock-full of statements of this sort. Here’s one: “For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12). Christians need to be taught what pleases God. All Christians, regularly, need to hear what God’s will is and be exhorted to do it. Here’s another: “I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

Jesus looked upon the crowd that followed Him and He was moved with compassion. Why? Because they were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). The sheep were vulnerable to attack because the shepherds, the religious leaders in Israel, had essentially abandoned God’s Word. They weren’t discharging the duties of their vocation. The law was not being presented properly but as a means for them to obtain their righteousness before God. The truth of God’s grace, the divine mercy that was at the heart of their worship life was radically distorted. Jesus looked at the people and was moved with compassion. And He taught them (Mark 6:34). The full council of God, Jesus taught them (Acts 20:27). Rightly dividing God’s Word, Jesus taught them (2 Timothy 2:15). He fed their soul and it was time to feed their bodies (Mark 6:36). The disciples were dumbfounded when the Lord said to them: “You give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37). It’s humanly impossible, they thought. And so it was. Five loaves and two fish and Jesus fed five thousand men. A miracle; born of Christ’s compassion, a miracle to testify to Jesus’ divinity, Jesus’ provision, to testify as to the bounty that is found in the Lord’s teaching.

God’s Word speaks to your situation in life. Like no other word you have ever heard or could hear, God’s Word addresses you in a triumphant, definitive, and all encompassing way. The Lord God is your Creator, the Ruler of heaven and earth. Your life is tied to His action. He speaks to you of Himself, of His salvation, of His church, and your place within it all. By this Word He Himself shepherds you (Ezekiel 34:1-16). God watches over your soul. God sees your life in this world and the many factors at play in this broken creation and He addresses you. In His Word, He addresses us all. Our sin and its remedy – it’s in His Word. The forces of evil that are at work around us and how He has confronted them – it’s in His Word. Genuine love, genuine forgiveness, genuine hope – it’s in His Word. Hope is born of this Word. Hope that finds its genesis in knowing that God is a very present help, that the eternal Son of God was made man to establish an eternal solidarity with people like us, with us! How God works – it is magnificently described in His Word. He has told us and we, in turn, act like people who *have been* told, not pretending that He hasn’t told us, but acting on His promises. The blood of Christ’s sacrifice – it’s in His Word. The glory of His resurrection – it’s in His Word. And you

hear it. God shares what is His with you through the Word and you are strengthened in this life. God shares His holiness with you through this Word and you *are* holy.

“You give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37). That’s what Jesus told His disciples. That’s what He tells pastors. Christ’s teaching is precisely what I’m supposed to give you. The full council of God is precisely what any pastor is supposed to give you (Acts 20:27). Law and Gospel in all of their splendor – that is what we preach. We preach Christ crucified. “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). Christ’s compassion is over us at all times. He gives us something to eat that is a very present mark of His compassion. In His body and blood are His once-for-all sacrifice, His eternal love, and your very present redemption. We have a Shepherd, a very good Shepherd. Christ the King is our Shepherd and we are His sheep.