

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2024

Isaiah 29:11-19

Ephesians 5:22-33

Mark 7:1-13

Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, was a dramatic figure. Mary Stuart inherited the throne of Scotland in 1542 when her father died. Mary was six days old. She was beheaded in 1587 for supposedly plotting to assassinate her cousin, Queen Elizabeth I. Dramatic birth, dramatic death, and more than enough drama in between; Mary Stuart was a memorable figure. She went to her death a remarkably composed woman. The night before her rendezvous with the executioner Mary embroidered this phrase on her kerchief: In my end is my beginning. That is a statement of faith. That is a Christian woman who puts her life entirely in Christ's hands, His resurrected hands. Mary's earthly life was terminated by three swings of an axe upon her neck. The end of her earthly life was her beginning of eternal life, the life which Jesus purchased for her. It is certainly true – death is a beginning. To live is Christ. To die is gain (Philippians 1:21). In my end is my beginning. Job captures this truth with resurrection language. "And after my skin has thus been destroyed yet in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:26).

Christianity involves dying to self. Jesus said this: "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, was prepared to die; she saw her death aright. "In my end is my beginning." That perspective, that strength of soul, that soaring fortitude in the face of calamity doesn't come out of thin air. Christianity is death to self. It is rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed. One of the ways that hypocrisy can be defined is that it is living a life that pretends. Religious hypocrisy is to honor Christ with lip-service but remaining determined to live for self. Hypocrisy adopts the veneer of fidelity, the veneer of trust and obedience, the veneer of humility and devotion but inside there is nothing but self. Inside; the Lord Christ is interested in the inside. Hypocrites are interested in the outside. Are you a veneer kind of person or are you interested in what is on the inside?

A group of Pharisaical fact-finders come down to investigate Jesus, to put Him under their works-righteous microscope, their veneer-loving microscope. What do they focus on? They focus on the fact that Jesus' disciples don't ceremonially wash their hands before they eat. "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" (Mark 7:5). This washing that they refer to is nowhere in the Torah. God had not prescribed it. Yet they held it up like it was the most important thing ever. The Pharisees were baptizing everything. That's the Greek word for washing that is used. They were baptizing cups and pots and copper vessels and even their dining couches. They were baptizing everything in sight... except themselves. This is what St. Luke writes about how people responded to John the Baptist: "When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by John" (Luke 7:29-30).

If you're concerned about the inside then you're baptized by John in the Jordan River. If you're concerned about the veneer then you wash your hands ceremonially before you eat. Jesus knows the difference. On another occasion, the Lord completely laid into these posers. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside

they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean” (Matthew 23:25-26). Jesus sees the heart. He didn’t come because we have a minor problem on the outside. Death is on the inside. Hypocrisy doesn’t stand a chance against death. Death will smash through the veneer of religiosity. What then? After death smashes through the hypocrites thin veneer of fake righteousness, what then? I’m going to die. I don’t want to die a hypocrite’s death. I want to die like Mary Stuart – in my end is my beginning. But I’ve got a problem. Jesus diagnoses my problem: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone” (Matthew 15:19-20).

Did you hear that? Out of the heart; my problem is on the inside. I can’t wash the inside. In my end is my beginning. I am powerless to do what needs to be done. God alone can address the core issue. God alone can save me. I can’t make myself righteous before God. In my end is my beginning. I’m dead in trespasses and sins and God alone makes me alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:5). We rely on the only thing that can be relied on – Christ and His righteousness. Grace; that’s what the hypocrites were denying. Grace; it’s the only thing we have, the only thing that matters, the fullness of Christ’s righteousness given to us as a gift. In my end is my beginning. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). We die to self daily. When you were baptized you were crucified with Christ and He took up residence in you. In my end is my beginning. That beginning is a new life that is characterized by loving God above all things and loving your neighbor as yourself.

You have tasted the beauty of Christ’s life. You know the beauty of Christ’s life in your bones. You know what it is to sacrifice yourself for others. You know what it is to pray “Thy will be done.” You know the humility that honors God and shines a light for your brothers and sisters – Christ’s light. In your end is your beginning, a new life, a greater life, a life that is born of death and resurrection, a life that is born of blood and cross and tomb, a glorious life that is waiting in full for you in heaven. The Gospel is so important to us – the truth of how Jesus died for sinners and rose to establish His reign and rule of grace and love and forgiveness – the Gospel is so important to us that we gladly die to self every day. Living for self, living like a hypocrite does not honor God and it will eat at your soul. Dying to self makes you strong. In my end is my beginning. Loving your neighbor honors God and makes you strong. Honoring God means learning the Ten Commandments and endeavoring to keep them. We honor Christ’s cross actively when we protect our neighbor’s reputation, to provide just one example. We stand for the Gospel lesson because we actively honor His Word. That makes us strong. Carry that strength with you out there, into your vocation. We forgive others who sin against us because we actively honor Him, because He actively forgave us, because in my end is my beginning.

It’s ironic. It’s beautifully ironic. It is the most astounding irony. Jesus told them that they were hypocrites. “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men’” (Mark 7:6-7). That divine, just, convicting word led them to crucify the King of kings. Christ came to be defiled with our lust, our hate, our thievery, our deceit, our hypocrisy and our death. His hands were defiled. His feet were defiled. Every part

of this Savior was defiled because He took our sin. When Jesus was arrested, everyone was on trial except the prisoner. It's great irony but it gets better.

They killed Him. But that is how God cleanses the hearts of hypocrites. They killed the Messiah because He called them hypocrites and the Messiah gives Himself to them so that they might be cleansed of their hypocrisy. His end is our beginning. His blood is our beginning. His tomb is our beginning. His resurrection is our beginning. We participate in His life. He washed us of every spot, every blemish, every wrinkle. The church is the bride of Christ and we are bonded to Him, one flesh. God's love, God's grace is greater than hypocrisy. Our Father resolves everything in Christ. He washes us on the inside, giving us a new heart and a new spirit (Ezekiel 36:25-27). He is our end and our beginning. It is finished (John 19:30). And His love continues. In this world, in this congregation, and in you – His love continues and it grows and it defines who we are. In my end is my beginning.