

Lenten Midweek – 2025
The Death of Christ and Love
(The Antithesis of Selfish Pride)
Hebrews 2:5-18
John 19:28-37

I have a pastor friend who once told me, “We know that God loves us because He’s given us beer.” He was half-serious. I could furnish over 100 alternatives to the commodity in that sentence with other things that God has given us that are indicators of His love, His blessing. Dark chocolate comes to mind. Mostly because I’ve given it up for Lent. Martin Luther, in the explanation to the First Article of the Creed, writes words that have divine love in them. “I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.”

Does God’s love soften your heart? Does knowing how much God loves you and what He has done as an indicator of that love, does that love soften your heart when it comes to your neighbor? Is one who knows the depth and contour of God’s love more likely to love his neighbor truly, graciously, steadfastly? What is the opposite of a tender heart? What is the antithesis of a heart softened by the grace of God? I would suggest to you that it is pride. Biblically speaking, pride is that unhappy trait where we are self-occupied. Pride is an exalted state of self-regard, self-importance leading to arrogance or a lack of humility, ultimately placing oneself above God, above others. Are you familiar with pride – in yourself, in others? It is ubiquitous. One doesn’t have to look far to find it. We hide it, and that’s good. Hiding pride is a form of self-awareness, a form of repentance. Wouldn’t it be better to bring it out in the open and take a hard look at it and then crucify it?

Bring it out in the open. Christ was crucified out in the open. My pride was placed on Him, in Him when He was crucified. Boy, that’s a thought! As He was crucified, Jesus embodied all that which is unholy. His love for me, for you, took that burden. And He died. Nails went through my pride as they went through Jesus’ flesh because my pride was put on Him. A crown of thorns was put on your loveless self-interest as Jesus wore that emblem of brutal derision – Hail, the King of Pride! It’s hard to defend your pride when it’s put in terms of our Lord’s suffering and death. I interact with children regularly. Chapel is one of my favorite activities – twice a week. Upon being asked by His disciples who the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is, Jesus replied this way: “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3-4). The children that I teach are innocent and eager and trusting and delightfully unassuming. One of my favorite teaching tools is a crucifix.

I ask them: Does God love you? “Oh, yes!” they reply. “God does indeed love you!” I tell them. But how do you know? This is how you know – and I’m holding a crucifix. Who’s this? Jesus!

What's He doing? He's dying. Yes, He's dying. A crucifix is a great object with which to teach. It is a physical object to pair with our *raison d'être* (French for reason for being). "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 1:23). If you missed the point, St. Paul reiterates it: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Does God love you? Food, shelter, good government, shoes and clothing, your reason and all your senses, marriage, children, doctors – your Father does indeed love you, takes care of you. But above all – God sent His Son, the Lord Jesus, who kept the law in all of its parts for you (Romans 10:4). He took your sin and died on the wretched cross (Galatians 3:13). Christ the King extends His righteousness to you through His Word and Spirit, through the Word and the sacraments. You are loved.

A crucifix is static. A crucifix is silent. God's Word is living and active (Hebrews 4:12). God's Word is a dynamic that brings His love to bear on you. The reason that we preach Christ crucified is that His love is embedded in that Word and you come to know Him, know His love, through this Word. Here's what the Word says: "For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8). Paul describes us in negative terms – weak, ungodly. Jesus died for those who *weren't* on His side. It is a "demonstrated" love. Out in the open, even now, as the Word is preached and you hear it – you are being loved, demonstrably. God shows, God demonstrates, God exhibits His love, enacts His love for us in this – when we were powerless, caught in death's grip, sick in sin and twisted with pride – when we were gross and defiled and thoroughly opposed to what is holy and good and true and lovely – He gave His complete and total love to us, dying to reclaim us as His own.

Does that soften your heart toward your fellow man? Your fellow man may hate you. Does your heart remain soft? Your fellow man may curse your God. Does your heart remain soft with God's unmerited love? They may intentionally slander you and, to be sure, that hurts. Does your heart remain soft with God's abundant love? They may cold-heartedly take advantage of you. Does your heart remain soft, knowing your Father's love was given to you when you were weak, ungodly, forlorn, and mired in death? Pride would have kept Jesus from washing His disciples' feet. Pride would have kept Him from enduring Pilate's unjust sentence. Pride would have kept Jesus from submitting to the soldiers' mockery. Pride would have kept Jesus from enduring the Pharisee's religious scorn. Love endured all those things. Love saves you. Christ's love has made you holy. Christ's love opens heaven. You were once in the darkness of pride and the Word of Christ and Him crucified liberated you from pride (Ephesians 5:8; 1 Peter 2:9). Why go back there? Why dwell in that loveless place?

Our Lord calls us to turn the other cheek. You do know that that is a reference to more than just your physical cheek, right? It is a reference to pride. When someone strikes you with their pride, we turn the face of love to them. That is what the Lord has done for each and every one of us. A soldier came and pierced the side of the Messiah. Out came blood and water (John 19:34). Out of the side of Christ, in death, came the bounty of forgiveness which is brought to you in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. That's how you know that God loves you – He has washed you in Christ's blood and He nurtures that holiness every time you partake of the fruit of Christ's

work of sacrifice in the sacrament of the altar. The Death of Christ and love – they are inseparable, they are present, and they are at work in you. May your love, the Love that God has placed in you, so shine so that others may see Christ and glorify your Father who is in heaven.