



“Simply Lutheran: Only Faith”

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday and Sunday, October 7-8, 2017

All Services

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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 5:1-7; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

We are now in the second week of our Simply Lutheran sermon series, one of the many ways we are celebrating the Reformation here at Trinity. If you remember, we are taking a look at Luther's 5 "sola's" or "only's"... Only Christ, Only Faith, Only Grace, Only God's Glory, and Only Word or Scripture. This week we are focusing on Only Faith as we hear this passage from a letter the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, which was one of the most faithful early church communities.

The Philippian church began with encounters between Paul and small groups of people that led to deep and dedicated relationships. Do you remember the story of Paul and Lydia? Paul found Lydia, a purple cloth dealer down by the river with a group of women. Paul told them about Jesus, and they were baptized and became leaders and supporters of the emerging church in Philippi. Or how about Paul and Silas? They were imprisoned and there was an earthquake that freed them; however, they stayed to talk to the jailor and his family about Jesus. They were also baptized and became part of this emerging church. Paul left this infant church to continue traveling and telling people about Jesus, and would communicate by letters or messengers back to Philippi to keep in touch.

In the part of the letter we read today, Paul is making a pretty dramatic point to the church in Philippi. Paul's world was all about achieving high status and honor. People believed that their status was directly linked with God's favor or lack of favor toward them. And so initially, Paul feeds into this idea, giving a list of 7 really good reasons why he is a most excellent human being in God's eyes. These are kind of like boy scout or girl scout badges that Paul has attached to his person.

Paul is circumcised, from the people Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, a zealot for God and for Torah, and blameless or irreproachable, having followed all parts of the law. Paul is bragging about his pedigree, his high status in Jewish culture, going on about those things that bring him status in his society.

I wonder what those things are in our society? What do we see as giving a person status? What makes a person a winner? Being on a sports team? Having a professional high-paying job? How about a nice car? The newest iPhone? (Name brand clothing or shoes? The ability to go on vacations to exotic places? Expensive watches or jewelry?) You and I live in a materialistic society, don't we, where money and consumption of things are valued.

And so, after Paul puffs himself up in front of everyone with all of these qualifications. He gets really dramatic with his language. You all know how much I like ancient Greek, and how I like to ask you during sermons to repeat ancient Greek words. Well, I can't do that today, because Paul used vulgar language in this passage. Yep, Paul lists all of these qualifications of his high status and then calls them... well, think poop, but more colorful. I kind of feel bad for the messenger Epaphroditus who had to read this letter out loud to the church community.

So, after Paul gets everyone's attention with this colorful language, he then continues to redirect the church toward the goal, the prize of Christ. Paul encourages the community to stop pursuing righteousness based on the law or works, because Christ already accomplished righteousness through his faithfulness. Instead Paul encourages the community to share in Christ's suffering, which brings resurrection power and hope.

One of the communities I spend time with gathers for worship in a parking lot in Harrisburg. Most of the people who participate are from the community experiencing homelessness. In fact, some of you are already participating in this ministry by providing a folding table for me to use as an altar and beautiful altar linens, which bring dignity to the population we serve. And so, thank you for that.

On one Sunday last year on a chilly afternoon, when I reached the Holy Communion part of worship, I was really focused on paying more attention to the piece of paper that I had the liturgy printed on and to preparing the bread and cup than on the gathered group of people. What I had not realized is that the crowd had shifted such that some of the men had inched closer and closer to the makeshift altar. And so, when I finally looked away from my paper and held the bread up in front of me, I was immediately confronted with a man who was not more than a foot from my hands, two feet from my face. He was right smack in front of me and the bread. He was dingy with a brown knit hat on his head and layers of dirty clothing. I couldn't see his eyes, because they were looking downward, but what I could see CLEARLY were his hands, because they were at my eye level. His hands were worn and cracked, with dirt under his fingernails, and shaking slightly. He was ready to receive communion, no really, he was begging, pleading to receive communion.

That man... he had his eyes on the prize... Christ present in the bread and wine. He knew viscerally that it was only through Christ's faithfulness on the cross that we are forgiven and made saints who hope in resurrection life.

Keep your eyes on the prize... anyone recognize that phrase? It's an African-American folk song that became popular in the 50's and 60's during the Civil Rights Movement. The refrain of this song is: "*Hold on, hold on; Keep your eyes on the prize; Hold on, hold on.*" What do we hold onto? We are reminded as people of faith, to hold onto our prize, Christ. And in holding onto Christ, we can act in faith, as Martin Luther King Jr. suggested: "*Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.*"

AND Martin Luther of the Reformation had a lot to say about faith too. He was challenging a system that was making people fear that they could never quite do

enough or be good enough to get into heaven. Luther claimed that we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus. Instead the Holy Spirit calls us, enlightens us, makes us holy, and keeps us in true faith. And our sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion grow and nurture our faith continually. And how do we know we have faith? Well, Luther had a lot to say about that too... He said: *"Oh, faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good. Likewise, faith does not ask if good works are to be done, but before one can ask, faith has already done them and is constantly active."* Luther focused on how we have been given an abundance of faith by God, and with that abundance, we are free to serve the neighbor without any hope of reward. What does that look like for us today?

An abundance of faith frees us to cling onto our prize, Christ, when all goes wrong in the world as we have experienced this past week in Las Vegas. Our faith brings us into prayer and support for families of loved ones suffering loss and violence.

An abundance of faith also frees us here at Trinity to give freely and support all kinds of ministries. We can think of Trinity Lutheran Church as a director of mission traffic, as there are tons of local and global ministries that Trinity is able to direct and be a part of because of your support. And your support of Trinity also supports the work of the Synod and our Churchwide body to multiply mission as well.

Luther summarizes this relationship between faith and service in this way:

"In conclusion, as Christians we do not live in ourselves but in Christ and the neighbor. Otherwise, we are not Christian. As Christians we live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. Through faith we are caught up beyond ourselves into God. Likewise, through love we descend beneath ourselves through love to serve our neighbor."

May we live in Christ and may we get caught up beyond ourselves. May we take that first step without seeing the whole staircase. And may we keep our eyes on our prize, Christ, the one who is our ultimate hope. Amen.

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