

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

We've had a lot of guests with us this weekend, but not really guests; more family than guests ... family coming home. We're really glad you're here, and, given the response, we should do this more often. Our confirmation reunions were discontinued some years ago because it seemed to us that people were losing interest, but this response shows that our analysis was wrong. There is still interest.

Regardless of the decade you attended Zion and her school, we pray that what you received here — not just the 3 Rs from some fine teachers as some of us were talking about on Friday, but especially the message of discipleship, of following Jesus, a Lord who heals and binds up and revives and raises up, that we might live before Him; a message of a salvation that Jesus won by being "*delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification*"; a message of a righteousness that "*depends on faith*" — that this message of the Gospel has resonated meaningfully in your lives even as you have moved elsewhere.

This message is what Zion's school, her pastors and teachers, were about then, and, even though it's in a different instantiation now — it's a consolidated school that yoked three schools and four congregations together and is now called Lutheran South Unity School — it's still our school, and, whether at school or at church, we're still about this message.

Indeed, isn't that why you are here today at this Divine Service? To hear of Jesus? Others, who have not been trained up at Zion's school, wrongly have the impression that we gather here at church with other smug, self-righteous Christians (said with a bit of a snarl in the voice) to revel in our holiness and to heap scorn on others who are not as righteous as we are.

They could not be more wrong. We're not here every Lord's Day because we are well, because we are strong, because we are vigorous; we're here because we are frail, because we are weak, because we are sick. Sick people go to the doctor, not healthy ones! Jesus is our physician, a physician of the soul, and the Good News He gives us is the medicine we need for the malady that ails us. We are sinners!

It's why Jesus came. That's what St. Paul says: "*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*" (1 Tim. 1:15). And Jesus in the Gospel said, "*I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*" And speaking of Himself a bit later in Matthew, Jesus said, "*the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Matt. 20:28).

Remember how you confessed it as you studied the catechism and learned Luther's explanation to the Second Article of the Creed, that Jesus "redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death"? Jesus' life unto death ... that was the ransom price ... His blood poured out from His head and His hands, His feet and His side.

Everything that happens in the church happens with this truth in mind, that we are wretched sinners, that we need deliverance from our sins and their consequence: death, that Jesus, His cross, His resurrection is that deliverance, that each one receives it by faith. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast"* (Eph. 2:8-9).

That was so for Abraham. He was saved by grace through faith when he believed God's promise: *"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"* (Rom. 4:3). "Counted to him" language shows God's favor; it's grace language, and it doesn't rest on anything except God's own faithfulness ... certainly not on Abraham's obedience. Abraham was accounted righteous by faith, faith *"in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord"* who was promised, faith in Him, *"who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."*

The same was true for St. Paul ... he was saved by grace. When Paul was talking about the trustworthy saying that Christ saves sinners, he did it in the context of himself as *"a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent"* of Christ and of his ignorance. Paul admits it; there was nothing about him that made him acceptable to God. But in an act of grace, Christ Himself appeared to Paul and converted him. So Paul here talks of this grace shown to him *"with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus"* (1 Tim. 1:13-14).

The same was true for St. Matthew — yes, the one that wrote that first Gospel of the New Testament. In our Gospel, Jesus called as one of His closest disciples Matthew, a tax collector, a sinner. Tax collectors were despised and hated for their dishonest ways, for their defrauding of the people. Yet Jesus says to Matthew, *"Follow me."* Become one of my disciples; and he did. Not only that, but Jesus went with Matthew to his home, there to associate and eat with yet more *"tax collectors and sinners."* We don't know who these sinners are exactly, but their sins must have been apparent enough that everyone knew them ... they were sinners. Jesus came also for them.

Yes, whatever else we might say about the Christian church, it is obvious that it was from the beginning made up of sinners, Abraham, Paul, Matthew, you, me

... unless you do think yourself too good, too holy, too righteous to need a Savior. Not a sinner? Then Jesus didn't come for you, for Jesus said, "*I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*" Follow Him; follow His call.

As you heard in our Gospel, Jesus was also being challenged by those who did consider themselves righteous ... the Pharisees. They didn't actually challenge Jesus, but His disciples. But Jesus knew and responded, and He instructs us that following Him means something. "*Bear fruit,*" John the Baptist proclaimed (Matt. 3:8). We are to live lives of service to others. This is our response: to show mercy to others as we have been shown mercy (Luke 6:36). "*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*" (Matt. 5:16). You have been made into a healthy tree. "*Bear good fruit*" (Matt. 7:18).

Thus Jesus said to the Pharisees, "*Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'*" Jesus is quoting from Hosea here ... we heard it in our Old Testament lesson. Professor Jeff Gibbs from Concordia Seminary comments this way, that in those days of old, "the people of Israel thought that their vertical relationship with their God carried no radical implications for their relationships with one another. They were content to offer sacrifice while allowing robbery and murder in their midst (Hos. 6:8-9)" (Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 1:1–11:1*, p. 474).

If that was so then, is it not just as so today? Have we become content with going to church, offering up our sacrifices of praise, but allowing our country to descend into chaos? Have we as church become complicit in the degradation of our culture, hopefully not actively, but because of our passivity in the face of evil? This is something for us to think about. The early church conquered the Roman Empire not with the sword but with hospitals and adoptions, with love and mercy.

Brothers and sisters, we surely come here as sinners, not the righteous. We come seeking forgiveness and life in Jesus. That is good. By grace we have been saved. We must keep that central message in the forefront. But let us also heed Jesus' call for mercy. Let us look for ways to love and show mercy as we follow Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.