

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Again a special welcome to our confirmation reunion attendees. Some of you I know; some not so much. But all of you are important to us, and it's especially gratifying to see you here receiving the gifts of God's grace, meaning that, if you're not a member of Zion, you're probably receiving the gifts in another congregation. That's a good thing. Your confirmation promises don't bind you to a particular congregation. Your promises bind you to a confession.

However many years ago that was for you, you made *“the good confession.”* You said — and you other confirmed members said it too — that you confessed *“the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, drawn from the Scriptures, as you have learned to know it from the Small Catechism, to be faithful and true.”* You said that you intended *“to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord's Supper faithfully?”* You said that you intended *“to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it.”*

Do you remember that word, *“all”*? It is so small, and yet so big in this confession. *“I will suffer **all** ... rather than fall away from it.”* The word is big with God, too, and important. It shapes much of our theology.

Now our Gospel text follows on the heels of last week's Gospel. You'll recall that Jesus had a conversation with a rich young man. He wanted to gain eternal life, and that's good. But after the conversation, he walked off disheartened because he was rich. He had great possessions, and Jesus had called upon him to give up **all** that he had and follow Him. The young man couldn't do it.

Jesus' answer to the young man exposed his idolatry. And this was no little transgression. He was transgressing the first and greatest commandment. Yet even the transgression of a *“little commandment”* — and admit it, we all want to think that the sins we commit are insignificant — any little transgression brings the weight of **all** the law down upon us, as St. James says: the person failing in one point of the law *“has become accountable for **all** of it.”*

This is why St. Paul tells us, *“that **all**, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.”* And again, *“**all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* And again a bit later, St. Paul says, *“death spread to **all** men because **all** sinned.”* St. Paul proves his point quoting the exclusive language in the Psalms: *“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. **All** have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”*

God's word exposes our wretchedness. We will stand one day naked before Him from whom nothing is hidden. And even our thoughts and the intentions of our hearts (that are often far from our stated intentions verbalized in confirmation promises, like that we *“intend to live according to the Word of God”*), even these are *“exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”*

That’s why Jesus said to His disciples, first with reference to the rich young man, but then in reference to mankind in general, *“how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!”* How difficult is it? Again in picturesque language, He said with reference to the rich, *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”* But explaining to the disciples, He said it plainly, *“With man it is impossible”* to be saved.

For Jesus is not just talking about rich people. And the disciples thought of the rich, with all their advantages if they could not attain heaven on their own, *“Who then can be saved?”* The answer is, *“No one can by their own doing.”* Thus when Luther wrote, and you learned it in your catechism classes, *“I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, ...”* he was just expressing Jesus’ own teaching about our salvation.

But despair not, for there are more all’s for us, for what is impossible for man is not impossible for God, Jesus says, and here it is, *“for **all** things are possible with God.”* From our creation to our redemption to our sanctification, God has done it all. And He has done it through the Son.

St. John says, *“**All** things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.”* The Psalmist says, *“It is He who made us, and not we ourselves.”* The Psalmist again says, *“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.”* The Word of God called into existence things that did not exist, so that visible things came from what was not.

But more than that, through the prophet, the Lord, *“he who created you, ... he who formed you”* reminds you, *“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”* For He has *“blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist.”* You have been redeemed, not with money, says the prophet, ransomed, says the apostle, *“not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”* Yes, the Son *“appeared once for **all** at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”* There’s that little word again, “all.” He did it all for our redemption: *“he entered once for **all** into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.”* And, of course, we hear the thoroughly Biblical Luther echoing those teachings about the Son, yet going from the universal to the personal, applying it to me, saying, He has *“redeemed **me** a lost and condemned person, purchased and won **me** from all sin, 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, that **I** may be His own.”* From virgin birth to perfect life to perfect sacrifice, God in Jesus did the impossible to save sinners like me.

And this is a saying that *“is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance.”* And there’s that word “all” again, though a bit hidden in the English word *“**full**”*—

“full acceptance.” Jesus reminds us that the greatest commandment is to *“love the Lord your God with **all** your heart and with **all** your soul and with **all** your mind and with **all** your strength.”* But this full acceptance, this total love of God, this faith too is not the work of man. It is something that flows from the word of the cross, a word filled with the wisdom and power of God. Your faith, therefore, is by the power of God, who being *“rich in mercy,”* took us *“dead in our trespasses”* people and *“made us alive together with Christ.”* *“God, our Savior, saved us ... according to His mercy,”* by giving us *“the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.”*

For some works God has completed: *“on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from **all** his work that he had done.”* And the whole world was redeemed by the once for **all** sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. But His work of sanctification is ongoing: individual persons are saved as they come to faith in Jesus, and are preserved in this faith. And this is also God’s work through the Spirit. Again, Luther: *“But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith, even as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”*

And so God is still at work in us—calling us to faith and keeping us in that faith. It’s by His grace, for even Peter’s bold statement that *“we have left everything [all] and followed you”* could only happen by God’s grace. It’s hard to remember a confirmation that happened years ago, but then you affirmed that God’s work began in you in Holy Baptism. And your confirmation promises: *“to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord’s Supper faithfully,”* *“to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death,”* *“to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer **all**, even death, rather than fall away from it?”* Do you remember your answer? It was then as, I pray, now, *“I do, by the grace of God,”* by His work in me. And we prayed that *“He who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”*

That little word “all” looms so big for us, and can seem so frightening for sinners who fall short of the glory of God. But knowing that the God, who *“desires **all** to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth,”* has also done all the things necessary for your salvation, and is yet working in you, doing what is impossible on your own, makes that word “all” a big Gospel word of comfort and hope. May the Lord continue to call, gather, enlighten and sanctify you by His grace: His word of Christ, His daily reminder with contrition and repentance of your baptism, and by the regular reception of His Holy Supper, that you may be kept with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

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