

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
Sermon for Sunday, August 30, 2009
Rev. Daniel Burhop, Vacancy Pastor

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Isaiah got it right in last week's Old Testament lesson, when he said, "You turn things upside-down." That's all we really do. We look at the Creator and we tell Him He knows nothing. And that we, the creation, are what truly knows everything.

That reading would've been perfect for today's text, and really today's text is an extension of the Gospel reading last week - when the Pharisees came to Jesus and accused His disciples of not obeying the tradition of the elders. We take things and we turn them upside-down. All over the place, we do this. But especially regarding our sin and regarding our salvation, we turn things completely upside-down.

We want to make our sin, our faults, our evil desires someone else's problem. We want to blame somebody else. We want to blame the world. We want to blame those around us. We want to take all of the bad that is in us and blame it on the things that are outside of us.

And in doing that, we also want to take our salvation...and we want to make it ours. We want to make it our "fault" that we're saved. We want to make it our doing that we get to go to heaven. That's the way we convolute things. That's the way we screw things up so much. And everything comes from that error. We really want to make salvation be on our account.

We just sang in the hymn, "Was it because of your own merit that Jesus died your soul to win?" And because the words are on the page, we answered correctly. Because we're good Lutherans, we answer correctly. But really if we think about that question and we think about our own sinful desires in our heart, we want to answer, "Yes. Yes, there is *something* good inside of me that makes Jesus come and die for me. There's some glimmer of hope, glimmer of goodness, glimmer of life inside of me that merits Jesus coming and dying for me."

We want to pretend that our heart, our soul, even our mind, is something that is good. Something that's good to give to Jesus, to give Him our heart, and our soul and our mind - as if it's worth anything at all.

But really, it's not worth anything. We are *dead* in our sins. We are worthless. We are corrupt, and we are purely *evil*. That's how we are born. That's what King David says when he says in the Psalm that he was sinful from the time of his conception, that he's not worth anything to God.

But we want to be worth something. And so we pretend that there's something good in us. To do that, we have to make what's bad in us someone else's fault. And that's where we truly screw up.

We want to blame both the nature *and* the nature for our sins, but we don't want to blame ourselves. We want to blame the world that we live in and say, "Well of course I covet! Have you seen that ad for the new car??" We want to blame all of our sin and all of our evil on the things that are outside of us. "This society is getting horrible, and so we become more and more sinful," is what we like to think.

We like to blame those around us in our vocations for our own faults as well. "Yes, maybe I might not be a good parent, but you should see how evil my daughter is." "I like to think that I'm a good son. And yes, I do bad things...but you should see how evil my parents are and how much they bring it upon themselves that I'm not completely loving and listening to everything they say - because they don't know everything."

We like to blame everything that's evil about us on other things - on those things that are external, that are outside of us. And that inside of us, really, if you went down to it, we're actually pretty good. If we were just given a chance, we would be able to do right. If we lived in a good world, with a good family, we would be able to be that good father or that good son, or that good husband. But there are all these external things that are what drive us to sin and drive us away from living that good life.

It's human nature to think that - to think that there is good inside of us. And that, if given the chance, really what's inside is what matters, and that can blossom and that can grow and that can be good.

I don't tell many stories in my sermons, so if you like that - take joy in this because I'm going to tell a quick one. G.K. Chesterton, an awesome man, a defender of the faith, was walking along with one of his friends. And one of his friends said, "See that man? There is good in him. He believes in himself and he's going to go far."

And Chesterton looked at him and said to him, "Shall I tell you where the men are who really believe most in themselves? For I *can* tell you. I know of men who believe in themselves more colossally than Napoleon or Caesar. I know where flames the fixed star of certainty and success. I can guide you to the thrones of the super-men. The men who really believe in themselves are all in the lunatic asylums."

And he's absolutely right. Those who believe the most in themselves, it is an insane thing, it's a lunatic thing - because really we are completely corrupt. If we think there's anything good in us, that's where we get things upside-down. And that's what Jesus tells everyone around him. He's talking to the Pharisees in last week's lesson. But this point is so important that He calls together everyone that's around Him and He says plainly and clearly that it's not what is outside but what is inside of man that makes him sinful.

He says, “Hear me all of you, and understand. There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him. But the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” This is a hard saying. The Pharisees wanted to think that it was those things that are outside, and that’s why they set up those different traditions about washing your hands, and that by doing all of these things you could make yourself clean of all the evil that is outside of you and bring yourself back to the purity of who you really are.

And Jesus says, “No. You can do all of that and it doesn’t really change a thing, because it’s not those s that are outside that defile you. It’s who you are inside.”

This is a hard saying. He goes into a room with the disciples and they ask Him, “What did you mean by that parable?”

And He says, “Even you don’t understand.” And He explains it, “What comes out of a person,” Jesus says, “is what defiles him.” For from within, out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within. And they *defile* a person.

That’s what Jesus says to them. That’s what Jesus says to us. All of these things that we just listed are the things we like to blame on outside circumstances. Coveting, evil thoughts, theft, murder, anger, wickedness, deceit...we like to think that it’s just, “Well, I was in this situation, and so I had to act to act that way.” Or, “I had to act that way for the good of the person next to me.”

Jesus says, “No, it’s not these external things that bring these things into your heart. It’s because you are a sinner. Because you’re born in sin. Because you *are* a worthless piece of nothing.”

And that hits hard at us. We don’t like to be told that. We don’t like to be told that we don’t have any good inside of us. We don’t like to be told that there isn’t even a glimmer of small hope - especially in the little, tiny, infant baby that there’s something pure and innocent there. And Jesus says, “No. There isn’t.”

But then Jesus turns things upside down. He comes into our world, and actually in turning things upside-down, He makes them right-side-up again. He comes and He brings us grace and forgiveness. No, it was not because of our own merit that Jesus comes our soul to win. But it’s grace alone that brings Him down from heaven for us.

And knowing of that we come to Jesus and we say, “Lord, have mercy.” As we do every Sunday when we sing the Kyrie. As we do every Sunday when we sing the Gloria. “Lord have mercy. For You alone are holy. You only are the Lord. We are not. We are not holy at all. But we need Your forgiveness.”

And Jesus says, “You already have it.” By grace alone He comes to save us. Our sin *does* become someone else’s problem. It becomes Christ’s problem on the Cross where the

world is truly turned upside-down. Where all of our evilness, all of our sin, all of our corruption is put on Christ. And He pays for our sin. When He hangs on the Cross, the world is turned upside-down. The sun is blackened, and it goes completely dark. The earth quakes and the dead rise from the graves. That's how Matthew accounts for what happens at the death of Christ.

The world is turned upside-down...and you have forgiveness. God looks at you differently. Yes, if we look at ourself, we know that we are a worthless thing, that our hearts, our minds, and our soul is something that is not worthy to be given to God. But He looks at it as if it's the most precious thing in the world.

And that's why He comes and He gives up everything for that priceless treasure that is you. Not because of who you are, but because of His love for you. It's not because of your own merit that Jesus comes to win your soul, it's because of His grace.

It's not what is inside of us, it's what is outside of us. That's where we pin our hopes of forgiveness. If we pin them on ourselves, then we're always going to come back and say, "Was I sincere when I gave my heart? Was I sincere when I told Jesus that I truly believed in Him?" But if we pin it on those things that are outside of us, that have nothing to do with us, then we know we have salvation.

Our baptism is something that's completely outside of us. Most of us can't even remember that day that our sins were washed away in the baptismal font. When it's Jesus Word, the Word of God, that comes to us and forgives us. It's the things that are external, outside of us, the Body and Blood of Christ that comes and is placed on our lips and comes into our stomach that makes us pure and holy. It's that Word of God that comes from outside of us that tells you, "You are forgiven because of what Christ has done. Because of His grace, because of His mercy."

That's where we find our salvation, that's where we find our solidarity. Not in us, but in Christ. Christ is the Fortress that protects us, that keeps us safe and saved. That gives us that forgiveness. And when we do look at our hearts and we see the evil that is inside of it, when we truly look at our actions and our deeds, we know that Christ has paid for it all. Something completely outside of us, that comes and wins our salvation and makes us clean and pure in His eyes.

That is what gives us peace in this world. And now may these peace of God that surpasses all our understanding, may it guard and keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.