

SATURDAY, MARCH 2: MARK 8:22-38

REMINISCERE

In verse 29 of our reading St. Peter makes a wonderful confession of who Jesus is. “You are the Christ.” Four verses later Jesus said to him, “Get behind me, Satan!” What happened between these verses? Jesus told them that He was going to Jerusalem to be killed. Peter didn’t want to hear that. He wanted the miracle-working Jesus. The dying Jesus was not his “cup of tea.”

But Jesus explains, “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” Like Peter, you and I don’t want to hear this. We too want the miracle-working Jesus. We want faith to be an easy road. We don’t want to have to bear any crosses because of our faith. Suffering is certainly not our “cup of tea!”

However, as baptized children of God, we must be prepared to suffer with Him. In his explanation of Holy Baptism, Luther asks: “What does such baptizing with water indicate?” The answer: “It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

In this world the followers of Jesus will have suffering for the Word and the troubles of the flesh. But thanks be to God! We have the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord! We are new people in Jesus Christ, now and forever. Amen.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD

**SEXAGESIMA—REMINISCERE
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THE GOSPEL**St. Luke 8:4–14 (NKJV)**

And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from every city, He spoke by a parable:

“A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold.” When He had said these things He cried, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

Then His disciples asked Him, saying, “What does this parable mean?” And He said, “To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that ‘Seeing they may not see, And hearing they may not understand.’

“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.

“Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity.”

“But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.”

THE COLLECT

O God, who seest that we put not our trust in anything that we do, mercifully grant that by Thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In the three accounts in the reading for today there is a theme that is common in the New Testament: Jesus poses a problem; the disciples say, “Wow! That’s a tough one;” then Jesus works it out with a miracle. Next the Church leaders come and say, “That was pretty good, but it wasn’t enough! Can you do another miracle? Then we’ll believe!” The unbelieving Jewish leaders never believed either Jesus’ Words or His miracles. They always wanted something more, something different. Then Jesus warns His disciples not to follow the Church leader’s false thinking, but instead to listen to Him.

This is still going on today. Jesus is still going out through His Church as pastors proclaim God’s Word, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them. Christ has given His Church the Word and Sacraments to create and sustain faith—to give eternal life. These are the means, the only means, by which the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith!

And yet, the question is often asked, “Are these means enough? Don’t we need to make God’s Word more relevant and more attractive to the people? Are those the only way God creates saving faith?”

Jesus warns us just as He did His disciples, “Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod....” God’s Word and the Sacraments are the means the Holy Spirit uses to create a sustain faith. They, and they alone, are more than enough! Thanks be to God! Amen.

In the verses of Mark 7, just before our reading for today, Jesus tells us that out of the hearts of all people proceeds all kinds of evil in thought, word, and deed. You and I and all people are indeed guilty of many sins. We deserve everything we get—even death and damnation. St. Mark 7:21-24 are pure Law. These verses condemn everyone. But as is always true, when God speaks Law the Gospel is not far behind.

In our reading for today we have two people who are unable to help themselves. The Syro-Phoenician woman comes to Jesus and lays her problem of a demon-possessed daughter at His feet. Others bring the deaf man to Jesus for healing. These two people could do nothing. Things were out of their hands and in both of these cases they always had been.

But notice the ease with which Jesus heals these people. He speaks and the demon was driven out. He touched the ears and tongue, spoke, and the ears were opened and the tongue loosed. Satan and nature were both easily overcome by God's spoken Word.

In the same way, Jesus comes to us in the Waters of Holy Baptism, in the Body and Blood of the Supper, and the Words of Absolution and He, through His spoken Word, makes us new people, His own forgiven and redeemed people. He raises us from sin and death to forgiveness and life everlasting. Now we, too, live new lives. Thanks be the God! Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord Sexagesima Sunday

Article VII.

Also, they [the Lutherans] teach, that One holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church, it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: "One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all," etc. [Eph. 4:5, 6]

Article VIII.

Although the Church properly is the Congregation of Saints and true believers, nevertheless, since, in this life, many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled therewith, it is lawful to use the Sacraments, which are administered by evil men; according to the saying of Christ: "The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat," etc. [Matt. 23:2]. Both the Sacraments and Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, notwithstanding they be administered by evil men.

They condemn the Donatists, and such like, who denied it to be lawful to use the ministry of evil men in the Church, and who thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and of none effect.

—The Augsburg Confession

XII.

Of the Church.

We do not acknowledge them [the Roman Catholics] as the Church, and they are not; we also will not listen to those things which, under the name of Church, they either enjoin or forbid. For, thank God, today a child seven years old knows what the Church is, viz. saints, believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd. For the children repeat: "I believe in one holy Christian Church." This holiness does not consist in an alb, a tonsure, a long gown and other of their ceremonies devised by them beyond Holy Scripture, but consists in the Word of God and true faith.

—The Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article XII
The Book of Concord

There are two things that the Apostle St. Paul exhorts Bishop Titus with which to concern himself. As is required of all who possess the Office of the Ministry, Titus is to live a life of good works and teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. Quite often, Lutherans are accused of not being concerned about sanctification or good works. This is simply not true.

The Augsburg Confession states, “It is also taught among us that good works should and must be done, not that we are to rely on them to earn grace but that we may do God’s will and glorify him. It is always faith alone that apprehends grace and forgiveness of sin. When through faith the Holy Spirit is given, the heart is moved to do good works.... Consequently this teaching concerning faith is not to be accused of forbidding good works but is rather to be praised for teaching that good works are to be done and for offering help as to how they may be done. For without faith and without Christ, human nature and human strength are much too weak to do good works...” (Augsburg Confession, XX).

Our emphasis on the pure teaching of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, which produces true faith, actually gives help in producing the good works, which God commands. Through the washing of Holy Baptism our merciful God saved us and we become sons of God. As sons of God with the hope of eternal life, we are able to live lives of good works out of thankfulness.

The words of Jesus in our text for today are very upsetting to the human heart. Jesus says that we sin because we are sinful. We are not sinful because we sin. He says, “What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts.... All these evil things come from within and defile a man.” Our hearts are full of sin!

That’s why in most Lutheran services we begin with the Confession of Sins. There we admit that we can’t win God’s favor or please Him. We admit that sin is offensive to God and it should be offensive to us, too! We also confess that we are sorry for our sin and we call on God’s mercy in Christ to be gracious and merciful to us poor, sinful beings.

For the believer in Jesus Christ, God uses His Law to show us our sin and to bring us to repentance. Then in His mercy the Lord Jesus comes to us in His Word of Absolution and He forgives us our sins as He says to us through the Pastor, “Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Indeed, by the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have been forgiven! Amen.

In our reading for today Jesus does three miracles: He feeds 5,000 plus people, He walks on water, and He heals many sick people. In these miracles Jesus is teaching that He alone is the True God, the Promised One.

The feeding of the 5,000 shows us that He gives daily bread in abundance. There is no shortage—twelve baskets were left over. Jesus is a good provider, but the crowd and the disciples misunderstood. Everybody thought He was only a provider of earthly goods and blessings.

When He walks on the water Jesus shows that He has authority over creation and nature. And with His miracles of healing He shows He has authority over disease and illness.

In the Gospels Jesus reveals that He is indeed the Lord of Heaven and Earth, but we act as though we are the lords of our lives. Instead of trusting Him with our problems and concerns, we worry about many things, most of which we can do nothing about. We worry and plan and then, when all our plans fail, in desperation we finally turn to the Lord.

In His Word he invites us to “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me” (Ps 50:15). He promises to hear and answer our prayers!

Lord, teach us to call on You and remind us that You have promised to deliver us from every evil of body and soul, and finally, when our last hour has come, You will give us a blessed end, and take us to Yourself in heaven. Amen.

The Law is divine, but it has its limits. When the Ten Commandments were given on Mt. Sinai, a fence was set up around the mountain to limit the Israelites from going up the mountain. The Law can reveal sins, but then it must stop. It cannot do anything more. It is the Gospel which must take over.

The Gospel does not have any limits for it is founded upon the person of God Himself. The Law was delivered by a finite, sinful Moses, but when the Gospel came God didn't send a limited servant. Our God came Himself. The heavenly Father sent us God, the One and Only, who is at His side. The blessings of Jesus Christ have no limits. Jesus Christ is the eternal Alpha and Omega. To say that Jesus was “full of grace and truth” is not to set a limit, but to speak of infinite blessings. As wave follows wave upon the seashore, so God's grace for sinners continues to flow over us. Like a stream which flows constantly and yet its banks are never empty, so God's grace, His loving, smiling favor is always there to receive us.

We did not need God to send us another rule book. We needed someone to help and to save. We needed a person and thus “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” This Jesus Christ did give us help by His perfect keeping of the Law. All other men, John the Baptist included, were simply witness of the Light. They were dark in themselves, but God used these prophets to reflect Jesus, to be a witness to the true Light.

St. John the Baptist, whom we consider to be “more than a prophet,” is content to confess that he is only an instrument in the hand of His Savior. John simply preaches and applies water. If faith is created and sins are forgiven, that is not John’s doing, but Jesus’. It is God who uses the waters of baptism in order to create faith and give out forgiveness of sins. It is our God who uses bread and wine to give us Christ’s Body and Blood. It is our God who uses the pastoral office to deliver His gifts. Our God works through means—Word and Sacraments.

Don’t be so caught up in the person of the minister that you don’t listen to his words of Law and Gospel. Don’t get so caught up in the rubrics of the liturgy, that you don’t listen to the Christ-centered words of forgiveness for troubled sinners. Don’t get so caught up in the gathering of the two or three worshipers that you miss Jesus Christ, who promised to be “in the midst” (Matthew 18:20).

We can be so concerned about the instruments that we ignore that which the instruments deliver. Those men sent by the Jews want to know all about the instrument (John), but John simply wants to talk about Jesus. John finally tells them to consider himself a “voice.” What do you do with a voice? You listen to it. John is telling them about the Christ, the anointed Savior of the world. With Jesus’ incarnation, the kingdom of God is near. Listen to John’s voice, “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.”

The sixth chapter of Mark reveals much about the sinfulness of mankind, but it also reveals much about the love and the majesty of God. The people in Jesus’ hometown knew He was the son of Mary. They knew His brothers and sisters. They also knew that He had performed mighty works and had much wisdom. And yet, they were offended at Him.

Then Jesus sent out the twelve, who went out preaching that people should repent. They cast out demons and healed the sick. But these same apostles had no clue how Jesus could feed the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish.

King Herod had heard of Jesus and His miracles, but he thought that Jesus was John the Baptist, come back to life. Herod had put John the Baptist to death because of a selfish promise he had made to a beautiful woman.

Yes, Mark 6 reveals much about the sinfulness of mankind. It even reveals our own sinfulness. We react in much the same way to God and His mighty acts. Even knowing of His love and power, we still doubt that He can or will help us.

But even more, Mark 6 shows the great love and mercy of God, as even in the midst of the rejection of Him and His Word, Jesus still goes around feeding and healing and teaching the love of God in Christ.

Yes, in Mark 6 we see what poor, miserable sinners we are, but more importantly, we see what a patient and loving God we have, who saved us and made us whole in Christ. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

Reminiscere Sunday

Article XIII. How Man is Justified before God, and of Good Works.

What I have hitherto and constantly taught concerning this I cannot in the least change, viz. that by faith (as St. Peter says) we acquire a new and clean heart, and God accounts, and will account us righteous and holy, for the sake of Christ, our Mediator. And although sin in the flesh has not been altogether removed and become dead, yet He will not punish or regard this.

For good works follow this faith, renewal and forgiveness of sins. And that in them which is still sinful and imperfect is not accounted as sin and defect, even for Christ's sake; but the entire man, both as to his person and his works, is and is called just and holy, from pure grace and mercy, shed upon us and displayed in Christ. Wherefore we cannot boast of our many merits and works, if they be viewed apart from grace and mercy, but as it is written, (1 Cor. 1:31): "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord," viz. that he has a gracious God. For thus all is well. We say besides that if good works do not follow, faith is false and not true.

—The Smalcald Articles, Part III

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 7: JOHN 1:35-51

SEXAGESIMA

“The” – There were many lambs in the Old Testament, which were used for sacrifices of all kinds. Each and every one of them was to point forward to THE Lamb of God, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9). The early Christian church was described as “The Way” (Acts 9:2), because they proclaimed Jesus as “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Jesus is, to the exclusion of all others, the one and only Way. “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

“Lamb” – The title “Lamb” designates Jesus as the one sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 10:12)! Jesus is going to suffer and die. “Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (Ephesians 5:2).

“of” – This small preposition teaches that Jesus is the heavenly Father's answer to the fall. Jesus belongs to the heavenly Father, and is sent out by Himself. We didn't give God something that belonged to us. He initiated this action by His gracious love and sent us HIS Son.

“God” – This one sacrifice for sin not only comes from the heavenly Father and is of the Father, but He also has the qualities of the heavenly Father. Jesus is sinless. From 1 Peter 1:18-19, know “that you were not redeemed with corruptible things... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” Furthermore, Jesus is more than just possessing the qualities of God, He is true God, that He might be a sufficient ransom for all mankind (Psalm 49:7).

The six stone water jars at the entrance to the marriage feast were reminders of sin. This water was used to perform a ceremonial washing upon the arriving guests. The Old Testament required this washing because of the sinfulness of all mankind. Not unlike today, the washing of hands is necessary, but not celebrated. No one talks about the joy of hand washing. The important thing is the festival, the feasting, the banquet, not the hand washing.

Jesus changes the water into wine. Jesus turns the receptacles of sinfulness into containers of joyfulness. Jesus takes what was obedience to the law and now makes it a toast to God's Gospel goodness. Jesus takes the reminder of earthly sinfulness and makes it a gift of heavenly bliss.

When Jesus said, "My hour has not yet come," He was saying that it was not yet time for Him to receive divine glory and shower upon His children eternal blessings (John 12:23, 27). It is through Christ's suffering, death and resurrection that we receive the forgiveness of sins and every other blessing. Nevertheless, our Lord mercifully answers Mary's prayer and provides blessings in view of His sacrifice to come. There is rejoicing over feasting.

That same merciful Lord who changed the water into wine is answering our prayers and changing us. Through faith we receive the eternal benefits of Jesus' hour. Furthermore, all believers are being "transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we confess our sins daily and receive absolution, "a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

THE GOSPEL**St. Matthew 15:21–28 (NKJV)**

Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed."

But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us."

But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!"

But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs."

And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

THE COLLECT

O God, who seest that of ourselves we have no strength, keep us both outwardly and inwardly that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Today's reading from St. Mark is about a miracle that was interrupted by a miracle resulting in a miracle. Now, if you only count two miracles, the healing of the women and the raising of the young girl, you missed the first miracle.

In an earlier reading, we heard of Church leaders plotting to destroy Jesus. Now "one of the rulers of the synagogue" comes to Jesus and falls at His feet; the first miracle. One who is associated with those who want to destroy Jesus now says, "Come lay Your hands on her, that she may be healed, and she will live."

Then comes the interruption by the woman with "the flow of blood." She touches Jesus. Jesus knew who touched Him but He gives her the opportunity to confess the truth that she was the one who touched Him, the One who healed her.

By the time the incident with this woman had ended, so had the life of Jairus' daughter. Now what? "Do not be afraid; only believe." What appears to be a failure on God's part is only setting the stage for a more vivid demonstration of God's power. This would not be just another sickness-to-health miracle; this one is a death-to-life miracle. Jesus bids the young girl, "Arise." Though she was dead, yet she lives.

That is God's clear message to all His people. How many times don't we think God has failed us because death has taken a fellow Christian? But the truth is God is just setting the stage for the great day when He will bring to life all who have died with Christ.

When Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the Temple and overturned their tables, He acted as if He owned the place and could do whatever He pleased. When Jesus declared that the Temple was "My Father's house," Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the promised messianic Son of God. Those who had control of the Temple questioned Jesus' authority to do these things. They wanted to know His messianic credentials.

Jesus' answer was literally, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The authorization which Jesus provides is His resurrection from the dead, which quite obviously includes His preceding suffering and death. The Old Testament made clear that when the Messiah would come, He would provide proof by His miracles. Having denied the efficacy of Jesus' miracles, He gave them the final and ultimate proof: His resurrection. "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He..." (John 8:28). The Scriptures say that Jesus was "declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4).

The resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation of our faith. 1 Corinthians 15:17 states, "And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!" With faith in the resurrection, we know that Christ "was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification" (Romans 4:25).

THE GOSPEL**St. Luke 18:31-43 (NKJV)**

Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again." But they understood none of these things; this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken.

Then it happened, as He was coming near Jericho, that a certain blind man sat by the road begging. And hearing a multitude passing by, he asked what it meant. So they told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. And he cried out, saying, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Then those who went before warned him that he should be quiet; but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be brought to Him. And when he had come near, He asked him, saying, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

He said, "Lord, that I may receive my sight."

Then Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has made you well." And immediately he received his sight, and followed Him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

THE COLLECT

O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully hear our prayers and, having set us free from the bonds of sin, defend us from all evil; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Savior, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

"Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!" The disciples weren't quite sure who Jesus was, but the "man with an unclean spirit" knew full well: "What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" Not only do "the wind and the sea obey Him," so do the demons. When Jesus tells them "come out," they must. Then they must even ask Jesus' permission to enter the swine.

So it is with life in this world. God still controls all things, even the devil. One theologian described the devil much like a junkyard dog on a chain. He barks and growls and shows his teeth, but God is holding his chain. He is God's devil.

There is no equilibrium between good and evil, between God and Satan, unlike the ethics taught by Confucianism as depicted by the popular black and white symbols known as "yin-yang." God and Satan are not opposites that must counterbalance each other. Christ defeated sin, death, and the power of the devil on the Cross of Calvary.

That victory has been delivered to you in Holy Baptism. "Depart unclean spirit and make room for the Holy Spirit." Though the unclean spirit that possessed you may not have had you enraged and breaking shackles and chains, you were still the devil's possession. In Holy Baptism Christ came and broke the spiritual bonds that held you. Now, even though the devil may still nip at your heels, God holds his chain so that he can never inflict eternal harm to you.

Yesterday's parable of the sower was spoken to the multitude that had followed Jesus, but only explained to His disciples. It is important for us to remember with today's reading that Jesus is continuing to teach His disciples. By way of three more parables, Jesus is teaching the disciples what it means to be a preacher of God's Word.

First, a preacher of God's Word must preach God's Word. It is not to be hidden, that is, the Word must be preached in all its truth and purity and not covered over so as to not have it be offensive.

Second, the growth of God's Word is God's work while the preacher himself "does not know how" it grows.

Third, the kingdom of God does grow as the result of preaching. The preacher may only see the "mustard seed" but the faithful preacher has God's promise the seed will grow. It was important for the disciples to understand their role in the kingdom as preachers of the Word.

Today's reading now shifts from Jesus teaching to later that evening when He and His disciples were on the boat crossing to the other side of the sea. After seeing Jesus perform countless miracles of healing and casting out demons, and having been taught by Him, they still don't get it. Jesus calms the storm and they proclaim to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!" Thankfully, Jesus does not abandon those whom He calls to be His own and He continues to teach them what it is to be a follower of Christ.

Lesson from the Book of Concord Quinquagesima Sunday

Chapter II, Article IV.

[B. What is Justifying Faith?]

The adversaries [Roman Catholics] feign that faith is only a knowledge of history, and, therefore, [they] teach that it can coexist with mortal sin. Hence, they say nothing concerning faith, by which Paul so frequently says that men are justified, because those who are accounted righteous before God do not live in mortal sin. But that faith which justifies, is not merely a knowledge of history, but it is to assent to the promise of God, in which, for Christ's sake, the remission of sins and justification are freely offered. [It is certainty or the certain trust in the heart, when, with my whole heart, I regard the promises of God as certain and true, through which there are offered me, without my merit, the forgiveness of sins, grace and all salvation, through Christ the Mediator.] And, that no one may suppose that it is mere knowledge, we will add further: it is to wish and to receive the offered promise of the remission of sins and of justification. And the distinction between this faith and the righteousness of the Law, can be easily discerned. Faith is the divine service, which receives the benefits offered by God; the righteousness of the Law is the divine service which offers to God our merits. By faith, God wishes Himself so to be honored, that we may receive from Him those things which He promises and offers.

But that faith signifies, not only a knowledge of history, but the faith which assents to the promise, Paul openly testifies, when he says (Rom. 4:16): "Therefore it is of faith, to the end the promise might be sure." For he judges, that the promise cannot be received, unless by faith. Wherefore, he compares them correlatively, and connects promise and faith. Although it will be easy to decide what faith is, if we consider the Creed, where this article certainly stands: "The forgiveness of sins." Therefore, it is not enough to believe that Christ was born, suffered, was raised again, unless we add also this article, which is the final cause of the history: "The forgiveness of sins." To this article, the rest must be referred, viz. that, for Christ's sake, and not for the sake of our merits, forgiveness of sins is given us. For what need would there be, that Christ be given for our sins, if for our sins our merits can give satisfaction?

—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, §48–52

There were prophets before St. John the Baptist, great ones who were counted worthy of God's calling, who foretold the Savior and bore witness to the Truth. Yet, of none was it said, as was of him, "Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist." Why does our Lord ascribe to him such greatness? It is a witness to John's humility: he was so great that his disciples think *he* was the Christ. John could have taken advantage of their mistake, because his disciples had already thought this without his saying it. There was no need for him to sow the seeds of error; all he would have had to do was confirm it.

John, however, as the Bridegroom's friend, does not put himself in the Bridegroom's place, but bears witness to Jesus, who really is the Bridegroom to the Bride. John wants to be loved *in* Him and not be loved *instead* of Him. "He who has the bride," he says, "is the bridegroom." Therefore, to his disciples he responds, "but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice."

Disciples hear their master. Because they hear, they stand; but, if they do not hear, they fall. It is here that St. John the Baptist's greatness is brought to light, for when he could be thought to be the Christ, he preferred to bear witness to the Christ. The temptation still exists to think yourself greater than you ought, but true friends of the Bridegroom preach Him alone, and do not set themselves up as a person to be worshipped.

"And again He began to teach..." starts today reading from the Gospel of St. Mark. In today and in tomorrow's readings from the Gospel of St. Mark, we will hear Jesus teaching us by way of parables. We, His disciples today, are given to understand the kingdom.

Jesus' explanation of today's parable is quite clear. As God's Word is preached to people, the results vary. In one case it is snatched away by Satan. In another case, when faced with persecution as a result of believing the Word, people reject the Word rather than clinging to it. In another case, the desire for a life free from the cares of this world lead people to reject the Word.

So is the rejection of God's Word the fault of God's Word? The parable clearly shows that it is not. Yet, there have been many people throughout the centuries, and even yet today, who say we must change the message so we can have better results. Which is just another way of saying, "We know how to do this better than God."

St. Paul wrote to a young pastor named Timothy and told Timothy to preach the Word "in season and out of season." That is, just preach the Word. Beyond that, either man will reject it or God will open hearts to believe His Word, but one must never assume that the one preaching the pure Word of God can affect the outcome.

So, Jesus is just crazy, or worse He is possessed by demons, at least that is what the scribes want the people to believe. Even Jesus' own family is troubled by His actions. But, as Jesus points out, "How can Satan cast out Satan?" Satan cannot win if he is fighting against himself. The truism, "if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand," is rather obvious. What is not so obvious from Jesus speaking these words is the fact that the scribes and Pharisees could not do what Jesus did. Nor could they do what Jesus' disciples could in that Jesus had given His disciples power to "heal sicknesses" and "cast out demons."

The Church leaders of Jesus' day could not "heal sicknesses" and "cast out demons" because they were of their father, the devil. The devil would never allow tormented people to be freed. It would be self-defeating. Instead, the Church leaders were working in consort with Satan. They did so by leading people away from God's grace to trying to satisfy God through works of the Law. In fact, anyone who teaches and preaches salvation by works is working for the devil and not for Jesus.

So, is Jesus crazy? In a way, He is. We might say He is crazy about us. He so loves us that He gives up His life for us. That kind of "crazy" Jesus is just fine with me.

Sunday we heard of our Lord healing a blind man. In that Gospel lesson the physically blind man was an image of the spiritual blindness that exists in sinful mankind. The spiritually blind receive their spiritual sight—faith—through the Word of the Lord Jesus.

The woman at the well of Samaria also is a picture of someone who receives faith through the preaching of our Lord Jesus. Both of these pericopes relate to Holy Baptism, wherein our Lord washes away unbelief and plants in our hearts faith. He is the One Who does the action. It is His Word, His preaching that converts our sinful hearts into hearts that trust in Him alone for salvation from sin, death and the devil.

In today's text our Lord asks the woman for a drink of water in order that He might give her something greater—living water. He does not ask the woman for a work so that she might prove her worthiness of the gift, but He freely gives her the water of life. This water of life is faith which comes through the gift of Holy Baptism, and the Church enjoys this gift that brings eternal life and salvation.

On account of Holy Baptism we now worship God in spirit and in truth. This means that God is no longer worshipped in Jerusalem at the Temple, because He is now worshipped wherever His Son Jesus Christ is present with His Holy Ghost to give forgiveness, life and salvation. He is worshipped around the Means of Grace where our Lord comes to us to remove our spiritual blindness and give us faith.

There is a connection between the Old and New Testaments being shown by St. Mark. This is clearly seen in the Old Testament prophecies from Malachi and Isaiah. But there is another connection that is not so easily seen, and that is that St. John the Baptist stands as the bridge between the Old Testament sacrifices and the New Testament ministry of grace. Let us remember who John's father was. It was Zacharias, who was a priest, who was offering up incense on behalf of the people when the announcement of his son's birth was made.

What this means is that St. John the Baptist, by virtue of his heritage, is a Levitical priest. However, he doesn't act like one. He doesn't serve in Jerusalem at the Temple offering up daily sacrifices for the cleansing away of the sins of the people of Israel. He doesn't wear the priestly garb prescribed by Moses.

But as St. Mark says, this is "the *beginning* of the gospel of Jesus Christ." The old is therefore beginning to be exchanged for the new. St. John the Baptist begins to wear new priestly garments—camel's hair and a leather belt. He begins to cleanse and forgive people of their sins in a new way, through his baptism.

What St. John the Baptist begins, our Lord Jesus completes through His perfect obedience to the Law of God and by His suffering and death on our behalf on the holy Cross. The rewards won by His death are offered to us by the Holy Ghost in the new ministry of the means of grace, where forgiveness, life and salvation are gifted to us.

How often don't we Christians hear some like this: "You know, if God would just do something about _____ (fill in the blank), then people would see that He really cared and would believe in Him."

Well, I don't know about you but watching a guy's withered hand being restored would be quite a sight! Yet, even such a miracle was not enough to convince the leaders of the "Church" of Jesus' day to believe in Him. In fact, they quickly came to agreement that Jesus must be destroyed.

What on earth would provoke such a sentiment?! Quite simply, it was "the hardness of their hearts." The hearts of the Pharisees were hardened to the idea of a gracious and giving God. Instead, they taught that God's goodness was something to be earned. Thus, one was to follow all the Sabbath rules and regulations as given out by Church officials in order to curry God's favor. As a result, observing Sabbath rules became more important than helping those in need. After all, according to the Pharisees if those in need would just live better lives, God would bless them.

There are many so-called Christians, today, who espouse the same sentiment. Just get your life in order and God will bless you so you can have "Your Best Life Now."

But the truth is that we, as Christians, share in Christ's suffering. "The servant is not above his Master." The life of the Christian in this world, no matter how dismal it may be from our perspective, is always a life of blessing for we are forgiven all our sins for Jesus' sake and have the assurance of life eternal.

The HOLY GOSPEL St. Matthew 4:1–11 (NKJV)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you,’ and, ‘In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “It is written again, ‘You shall not tempt the LORD your God.’” Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’” Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.

THE COLLECT

O Lord, mercifully hear our prayer and stretch forth the right hand of Thy majesty to defend us from them that rise up against us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In his Gospel, one of St. Mark the Evangelist’s favorite words is “immediately.” In the fifteen verses of today’s reading it occurs four times. That is about once for every four verses. You will notice the word “immediately” a lot as you read through the Gospel of St. Mark the Evangelist.

Even the events of this Gospel seem to occur without break or pause. It was only yesterday in which we heard of the preaching and baptism of St. John the Baptist; now we are transported to after his imprisonment, the calling of the Apostles, and the preaching of our Lord Jesus Christ throughout the synagogues of Israel.

The question is, “Why does he use this word so much?” And, “Why does he seem to be in such a hurry in this Gospel?” The answer is that it seems St. Mark is driving us ever faster toward the suffering and crucifixion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. There is urgency whenever we hear that word “immediately” in St. Mark’s Gospel for our Lord to hurry up and complete His work of perfect obedience to God’s Law and will, and for Him to get to the tree of the holy Cross to suffer and die in our place and for our redemption.

Throughout this Lenten season our eyes will ever be on our sinfulness and the reason for our Lord’s suffering and death, and upon those means by which He redeemed us from sin, death and the devil. And, on account of the weight of our sin, we ever look forward to hearing the comforting words of our Lord’s forgiveness.

Our Lord is approached in today's reading by a leper who requests that the Lord would heal him of his leprosy, saying, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." However, our Lord does something that is contrary to the Law of Moses. He "stretched out His hand and touched him." It was forbidden to touch anything that was unclean. And this wasn't one of those "traditions of man" sort thing. It appears on the surface that our Lord Jesus Christ broke the Law.

So the question arises, "Why did He touch him, since the Law forbade the touching of a leper?" The answer is He touched him to show that all things are clean to the clean. External uncleanness does not defile the cleanness of the heart. Our Lord, Who is pure and holy, can make that which is unclean and unholy pure. This is the reason why He put on our flesh and was born man, so that He might purify us and make our flesh clean and drive all sin from our flesh. His cleanness and purity drives away all impurity and uncleanness of sin. He does this through His Holy Ghost, Who works through the means of grace to purify us of sin, and thereby give us forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation.

Therefore, our Lord stretching forth His hand by the means of grace removes the leprous sin from us. And the hand of the Lord is found to have touched not a sinner, but a person free from sin. Let us who struggle daily with sin say, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

Today's reading seems like two different events. But, upon further examination, one can see a connection. In both narratives, the Lord healing the paralytic and the calling St. Matthew, our Lord acts as a physician. Not just a physician of the body, but a physician of the soul. For in the first narrative our Lord certainly physically heals the paralytic, because after commanding Him to take up his bed and walk he is able to do just that.

But before that physical healing our Lord heals the man's real disease: the disease of sin. It is clear from the actions of the man's friends that he was not there to have his sins forgiven. However, our Lord is a skilled physician and knows how to diagnose a man's true ailment. He is able to look into this man's heart and know that what truly troubled him was his guilt and shame of sin.

St. Matthew, too, is called as a sinner in need of God's grace, and our Lord grants him just that. The indignation of the self-righteous does not negate this fact. The accusations of blasphemy and acting contrary to the Law of Moses does not change the intention of the Physician, for He sees what the ailing paralytic and tax collector truly need—forgiveness of sins.

We also, on account of original sin, are diagnosed with a disease, the terminal disease of sin. On account of which, we deserve God's eternal wrath and condemnation. However, our Lord has come in the flesh to fulfill the Law perfectly for us, and suffer and die in our stead, that we might be healed through forgiveness.