

February 9, 2020

I Corinthians 2:1-5; Matthew 5:14-16:

“Lift High the Cross”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

During the time of the Reformation, Martin of Basle was convinced of the truth of the good news of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. However, Martin was afraid to make his confession known for fear of persecution. Instead, he wrote down his confession of faith on a piece of parchment. He wrote: "O most merciful Christ, I know that I can be saved only by the merit of your blood. Holy Jesus, I acknowledge your sufferings for me. I love you! I love you!" After writing these words, he then removed a stone from the wall of his room and hid the parchment behind the stone. One hundred years later, after his death, the piece of parchment was discovered.

This account was printed in an old periodical called the *Sunday School Times*. While I am not sure where they got their information, I found it to be a hard hitting illustration of the way in which many treat the gospel. It is quite a contrast to Luther's confession of faith: "My Lord has confessed me before men; I will not shrink from confessing him before kings." The words of Luther call to mind the words of one of the Psalms and a statement from Jesus. First, Psalm 119:46, "I will also speak of your testimonies before kings and shall not be put to shame, for I find my delight in your commandments, which I love." Secondly, the words of Jesus (Matthew 10:32-33): "Whoever confesses me before men, I will also confess him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven."

Our Gospel lesson for this morning says: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16)." Light hidden under a basket doesn't make any sense does it? Confessing Christ and writing it on a piece of parchment and placing behind a stone in a wall also doesn't make any sense, unless of course one is hoping to convert the stone wall. I don't mean to sound flippant - we are bid to shine before others. It's something that we can't help but to be doing.

Having said that, no one is contending that we should purposely place ourselves into situations where it is obvious that we are needlessly leaping into the mouths of lions - as Jesus says, to "give to the dogs what is holy, or throw our pearls to the pigs so that they may have the opportunity to trample them underfoot and attack us (Matthew 7:6)." However, we also need to be careful that we do not allow the threat of persecution to keep us from letting our light shine before others. The fear of persecution can be so overwhelming that we end up like Peter in the courtyard when Jesus was on trial. May we never deny him. The truth is that terror can shut the mouth and overshadow a life lived in shining light. In regard to our Gospel lesson and the words of Jesus when he says, "you are the light of the world," I really appreciate the comments of G. J. Albrecht when he writes in his commentary:

It is the nature of light to shine. There is no such thing as light that does not shine. That would be impossible, like cold heat or dry water. But light can be covered up so that no one can see it. Jesus tells us not to do that. He tells us to live our Christian lives in such a way that the world may be able to see the difference Christ makes in us. Then unbelievers, who

know what is right and what is wrong, will be compelled to glorify our heavenly Father for the good he works through us.

Faith in the gospel of forgiveness shines in the words that we say as well as in the life we live. We need to remember our Baptismal identity in Christ - our daily dying and rising - which causes us to **Lift High the Cross**. His death and resurrection in us cannot be hidden. Faith in the forgiveness of sins transforms us, and creates within us a desire to "have mercy on those who doubt;" as Jude writes, and to "save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh." We know that Jesus is the light of the world. He came to overcome the darkness of sin and death. Christians are the light of the world insofar as they reflect Jesus. Like the moon reflects the sun, so we too reflect the Light of Life. We are bid by the apostle Peter to live such good lives among the unbelievers that even though they accuse us of doing wrong, they may see works of light from him who is light and glorify God on the day of his coming (1 Peter 2:12).

Luther writes: "The noblest and greatest work and the most important service we can perform for God on earth is bringing other people, and especially those who are entrusted to us, to the knowledge of God by the holy Gospel." Yes! The greatest gift that we can give is the death and resurrection of Jesus that has been given to each and everyone of us. We are bid to **Lift High the Cross** "till all the world adore His sacred name." The sacred name is the only name that saves us. As Peter preaches, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12)." And as the apostle John writes:

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:9-13).

To **Lift High the Cross** is, first of all, to be immersed in the name of Jesus - to believe in him. Secondly, having died to sin and now born of God - raised in Christ - we proclaim the name so that others die and are born again and saved. It all starts with a real change in us and zeal to give to others what has been so graciously given. You might recall what I said in my last Sunday sermon. I said that if one would experience the power of God in the word of the cross, it will require the emptying - the death - the denial of oneself - our own crucifixion with Jesus. I said that in the grace and mercy at the cross, we find an astonishing power. It is there in the life that Jesus lived for us, in the sufferings that he suffered for us, in the death he died for us - it is there, that we find the death of sin and the rising of a new us in the forgiveness of sins and life to be lived in true love forever.

Our epistle lesson shows us the result of dying and rising with Jesus. It is such a glorious, eternal gift that we want others to have it as well. Paul, who was divinely called to be an apostle and a preacher of Christ crucified states it in this way:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

While you have not been called to be a preacher like Paul, you are nevertheless given the glorious task of proclaiming the same message of salvation in your everyday lives. Jesus makes it plain about all of his followers when he says that “you are the light of the world.” The message that all disciples live and proclaim in their respective lives is Christ crucified. Like Paul, we do not speak in lofty speech or wisdom, but in weakness and in fear and much trembling - the Law and Gospel - which always is a demonstration of the Spirit and of power. After all, faith must rest on that which is God’s promise, not on human fantasies. The Lord bids us to make connections with those who are in our lives to demonstrate God’s care for us and for them by what we say and do. Sometimes we forget that.

The disciples were often dim in reflecting the love of Jesus, and so are we. Thank God he is patient and does not quickly discard us when we fail. He leads us to repent, to renounce the ways of sin and darkness, to be forgiven for the sake of Jesus’ cross, and to strive anew to follow him. When we love, because he first loved us, people will take notice. The life we live in what we say and do may be used to lead others to see the light of hope in the midst of such overwhelming darkness. That light is Jesus, and we should be overjoyed that he shines in us. May someone this week, or this day, see the light of Jesus in you. For when they do, Jesus has visited them. And that’s simply wonderful! That’s what it means to **Lift High the Cross**.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott