

The Third Sunday of Easter
May 1, 2022

The Lessons: Acts 9:1-22
 Psalm 30
 Revelation 5:8-19
 John 21:1-14

The Hymns: # 483 *With High Delight, Let Us Unite*
 # 810 *O God of God, O Light of Light*
 # 482 *This Joyful Eastertide*

The Collect: O God, through the humiliation of Your Son You raised up the fallen world. Grant to Your faithful people, rescued from the peril of everlasting death, perpetual gladness and eternal joys; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 "Lessons from Saul" - Acts 9:1-22

“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” Acts 9:1-2

Dear Friends in Christ,

I. Saul's Missionary Journey

No one questions the zeal of Saul, few will question his motives, and no one wants to get in his way. This is a man who earnestly believes in the mission he is on. He's no reckless vigilante, but one who has gotten the approval and documentation from his superiors.

There's little doubt that much of the population agrees with him; he's on solid ground, there. But Saul isn't real worried about public approval; first and foremost, he is operating on the utter conviction that what he is doing is God's will. If God is for him, who will be against him?

So Saul departs on his first, and last, missionary journey as a Pharisee. His mission is to find anyone who calls on the name of Jesus Christ; and when he finds them, he is to arrest them and haul them back to the chief priests for a trial. If they have to die, so be it, because they're destructive to Saul's religion.

Saul's a great admirer of Moses and the law, and he's based his whole existence on keeping the rules. God spoke to Moses directly on Mt. Sinai from His cloud of glory -- what could be better? How good to be Moses, or at least to follow those same rules. But these followers of the Way, as they're called, have got a different, destructive message. They teach faith in Jesus Christ, who was crucified and supposedly raised from the dead. Rather than insist on perfect obedience, they declare that Christ forgives them for their sin. Saul will not tolerate this, for it threatens the rules he lives by; and Saul

fervently believes that his way is God's way. In the name of the one true God, then, he's going to destroy Christianity. He'll make true disciples out of these Christians, or kill them. How arrogant and narrow of them to call themselves the Way.

It's on the road to Damascus that Saul gets to be like Moses: The glorious Lord speaks to him from the midst of a bright light. But it's no comfort at all: The Lord identifies Himself as "Jesus, whom you are persecuting" -- the very one he's set out to destroy.

When Jesus leaves Saul along the road, Saul is blind and in despair. When he left Jerusalem, he thought he was God's instrument, doing the Lord's will. Before he gets to Damascus, he finds out that he is God's enemy and persecutor. As Saul is led to Damascus, his entire life and creed has crumbled to dust.

Three days later, the Lord speaks to a man named Ananias and sends him to Saul. Ananias is less than enthused to visit a man who has planned his death, but the Lord is insistent: He tells Ananias to go and make a disciple, baptizing and teaching him what the Lord has said. So the reluctant Pastor Ananias, called by God, goes to Saul. He lays his hands on him, speaks God's Word, and Saul can see. He baptizes Saul, and Saul is forgiven.

From that point on, we behold the grace of God at work in Saul. The former persecutor is not one to crawl into a hole, run away from the situation. Rather, by God's grace, he goes into the synagogues and preaches that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Once, he used Moses and the laws as his reason to stamp out Christianity. From now on, time and time again during his life, he will show how Moses pointed to Christ.

And he will go on more missionary journeys as Paul, the Lord's foremost missionary to the Gentiles, to kings, and to the Jews. He will preach to Jews in the synagogue wherever his travels take him. He will debate with the intellectuals of Athens about their many gods, and he'll work with the freewheeling, promiscuous Corinthians, too. He'll testify before rulers like Felix, Festus, Agrippa, even Caesar himself. He'll even set his sights on the far reaches of Spain. He will proclaim Christ to different races and different social classes. And throughout his preaching and his epistles, the message is the same. He proclaims Christ crucified and risen. He emphasizes the importance of pure doctrine and Holy Baptism. He writes about the Lord's Supper and insists that it be kept according to God's Word.

He knows the importance of pure doctrine; when his biblical teaching was impure, he used it to kill Christians, but the pure Word of grace saved him. He knows the importance of the Lord's Gospel and means of grace, because that's where God delivers salvation.

Before the road to Damascus, he knew God's commands inside and out -- and there was no salvation there. Outside of Damascus on the road, the Lord was with him -- a terrifying ordeal without grace. But when the Lord came to Saul by His Word of Absolution and Baptism, then Saul was forgiven for all of his sins.

That's what Saul would be all about: Keep the Lord's Word pure with the focus on Christ and His means of grace; and get that message out to the ends of the earth.

2. Lessons from Saul

Turning to our present time, we note several important lessons from Saul. Several of them have to do with knowing God's will; for if you do not know God's will, how can you proclaim it?

First, the approval of rulers and leaders is no proof that something is God's will. Saul had signed letters from the chief priests that authorized him to persecute Christians, but it was still wicked before the Lord. Whether one has authorization from a leader or supervisor, the more important question is this: What do the Scriptures say?

Second, popular opinion is no measure of God's will, either. This should be obvious enough: If the majority of people advocate immorality, this does not make immorality right. If a song gets a lot of playing time on the radio, it does not make the content correct. Whether or not Saul had the blessing of a lot of people, his mission was still an evil one. Popular opinion will be the opinion of the sinful populace, and will sway with each spirit that blows through town. The question once again is this: What do the Scriptures say?

Third, inner conviction is no proof of God's will. When Saul left for Damascus, he was utterly convicted that he was on a mission from God—that God wanted him to persecute and execute Christians. He warned: The claim that "God told me to do this" is not proof of the Lord's blessing; in fact, it's a good reason to be suspicious of the speaker. Do not let anyone persuade you that some teaching is right because they're personally convinced that it is; and do not try to interpret God's will by what you feel inside. Sometimes, false teaching will seem very sensible; sometimes, God's Word will feel totally alien. Do not rely on convictions that you've constructed inside yourself. What do the Scriptures say?

But this leads us to the fourth lesson, and important one: It is not enough to have the Word -- one must also rightly divide the Word of truth. In other words, one must properly distinguish between Law and Gospel. Saul had God's Word. He knew the Old Testament backwards and forwards far better than you or I ever will. But for him, it was a closed book because he did not have faith. He clung to the laws, but he saw no Gospel until his conversion. He based his life upon the Scriptures; but because he did not properly interpret them, his understanding of the Scriptures led him to kill Christians. This teaches us that, like it or not, Christians must always be vigilant. It is tragic that so many churches have simply dispensed with the Word of God completely. But even when a church still claims the Bible as its authority, it can still preach a wrong message if it does not rightly divide law and Gospel. If I fall from a plane, it's good to have a parachute; but that does me no good if I have one but don't know how to open it properly. Likewise, the Bible remains closed if we do not rightly interpret it.

We add here a related fifth lesson: Just because someone claims to do something in Jesus' name doesn't mean that the Lord approves. Throughout history, many atrocities have been justified and committed in Jesus' name by those who call themselves Christian; this does not make those actions right nor does it make those responsible, believers. Today, many abominations are still committed in Jesus' name, as His name is often abused to justify false teaching.

The sixth lesson, far more comforting, is this: Faithfully, as promised, the Lord makes disciples and forgives sins by His means of grace. He might have knocked Saul over on the road with a bright beam of light, but He forgave Saul's sins by the Word and Holy Baptism. When you strip away the spectacular parts of the story, here it is: Saul was a violent sinner who was forgiven by Jesus, by

means of Word and water. Until the end, people will claim that God is at work in all sorts of supernatural and paranormal ways; but if you want to be forgiven, be baptized. Hear His Word of Absolution. Receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Don't look for God's grace in bright beams of lights or anything else: Go where God has promised to be for you.

The seventh lesson is this: Saul's life would only get harder when he preached Christ crucified and pointed to the means of grace. As the Lord told Ananias, Saul would suffer much for the name of Jesus. This would not be some sort of payback to a persecutor: Jesus would not afflict Saul for earlier sins, because that would go against His promise of complete forgiveness. Rather, Saul would suffer because the world and the old sinful nature always scorn Christ and His means of grace.

This has proven true throughout history. In looking back at the need for the Reformation, the first Lutherans wrote, "Experience shows the kind of tyrants who rule the church. Under the pretext of religion they take up a worldly way of ruling, and, having cast aside any concern for religion and the teaching of the Gospel, they dominate, wage war like kings of the world, and institute new acts of worship in the church." (Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV:41) In other words, church leaders had replaced the Gospel and the means of grace with new, different acts of worship and enforced them-with violence when necessary. These leaders had done so in the name of Jesus, with their wrong interpretation of His Word. What was the result of the Reformation? The first Lutherans wrote that their pastors "...attend to the ministry of the Word. They teach the gospel about the blessings of Christ, and they show that the forgiveness of sins takes place on account of Christ. This teaching offers solid consolation to consciences. In addition they teach about the good works that God commands, and they speak about the value and use of the sacraments." (AP XXIV: 48) In other words, the Reformation was a return to the proclamation of salvation in Christ alone, and the giving of that forgiveness through the means of grace.

The same challenge remains today, as do the same temptations. We are continually reminded within our synod of the importance of missions, of reaching out to the millions who are lost. Indeed, this ought to concern each one of us. However, with that emphasis comes temptation. I heard rather recently that membership numbers in Lutheran Church Canada have been decreasing over the past fifty years; this statistic is used as an argument that we must innovate in order to build the church. I have also heard it said that the synod fails to grow because of pastors who refuse to innovate.

However, let us examine this for a moment. In the past fifty years, the historical critical method took root in our synod, teaching the innovative idea that Scripture does not have authority. Then a charismatic movement sprang up, insisting we must renew the church through Pentecostal practices. The Church Growth Movement then swept through, maintaining that we must downplay the means of grace in order to make disciples. The contemporary worship phenomenon arrived, saying we should sound more like the world and less like a church. And the meta-church movement inserted itself, saying that the church will grow if we de-emphasize worship in favor of small groups. That's a lot of innovation for a church body in fifty years' time -- the same fifty years that numbers have plateaued or decreased. If we wish to play the numbers game, then one might make the unpopular suggestion that the problem in the church is not the **lack** of innovation, but in fact all the innovations that **have** taken place. Perhaps it is time to jettison all of these and return to an emphasis on Christ and cross, Law and Gospel, Word and Sacrament and the pure administration thereof.

In response, let us remain faithful to our Lord's Word, proclaim Christ and Him crucified, and point people to the means of grace where the Lord has promised to be found with forgiveness. If we suffer criticism, it is not reason to be dismayed, as long as we have the Lord's favor.

And make no mistake: You do have the Lord's favor. This is the eighth and final lesson for today. Behold the great mercy of God that He would forgive the likes of Saul the Persecutor for his sins of false doctrine and violent practice. He extends the same mercy to you.

You have the Lord's favor because Christ has died in your place and risen again. You have the Lord's favor because, just as He did for Saul, the Lord has made you His in Holy Baptism. You have the Lord's favor because, as He did for Saul, the Lord continues to forgive your sins, continues to proclaim, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." You know the Lord is with you because the Lord comes to be with you: He gives you His very body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

Saul's past and circumstances and life experiences might be far different from you and me, but the Lord treats him the same way He treats us. He calls us to repentance with His Law. Then He makes and keeps you His own for the sake of Jesus Christ. Yes, for the sake of God's only Son, the Father says to you that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.