

Judica (Lent 5)  
John 8:42-59

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

I'm sure you've heard the old saying, that you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. Well, you can give a person the Word, but you can't make him or her believe it. That is the work of the Holy Spirit of God and Jesus tells us in John 3 that He works when and where He wills. Jesus compares the Holy Spirit with the wind, "the wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." (John 3:8) The Holy Spirit works faith in you through the Word or He doesn't!

And there are only two possibilities here. Either you believe Jesus is who He says He is, that is the Son of God, fully divine and fully human, or you do not. There is no in between. You are either "of God" or you are "not of God" (v. 47) to use the language from our Gospel text today. You're either a Christian or not.

Both Roman Catholics and the ELCA church have come out with official statements that you can be a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Hindu and still go to heaven. That is, you can be one of these world religions that deny that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, fully divine and fully human, and still be acceptable to the one Living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a lie from the pit of hell. You're either a Christian or you're doomed to eternal judgment.

Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (Jn 14:6) "Whoever is of God hears the words of God." (v. 47) Do not be fooled. Either you are in Christ or you are not. And being in Christ is not something that you can do on your own.

This is how we confess it in the Small Catechism about the third article of the creed which really talks about the work of the Holy Spirit:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. (SC)

Another way of saying the first sentence is like this, "I believe that I cannot believe." The Holy Spirit calls you through means. That is, the Holy Spirit makes you a child of God through means. You cannot become a child of God through your intellect, or through your deeds, or through your desiring it. You know the means that the Holy Spirit uses:

- God's Word - "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17)
- Holy Baptism - Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (Jn 3:5)
- The Lord's Supper - Jesus says, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." (Jn 6:54)
- Holy Absolution - Jesus says to the Apostles, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (Jn 20:23) The pastors carry out this awesome responsibility in their office as undershepherds of the flock of Christ.

The Holy Spirit heaps grace upon grace as He deals with you in the ways that God the Father has established by the command of Christ.

This brings up an awkward question, of course! How do you know you are one of the elect? How do you know that you are “of God?” The way I like to phrase the question is this: What do you look to for the assurance of your salvation.

Many look at their works. Doesn't James rightly point out: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (James 2:14)

It is certainly true that a living faith produces good works. Jesus says that “every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Mt 7:19)

Don't be fooled.

Don't think that you can live together outside of marriage and be a Christian. You are not “all right” with God. God doesn't hear your prayers. Your soul is in mortal danger.

Don't think that you can actively or passively promote abortion and be a Christian. Actively promoting it is pretty obvious and so called pastors that say God's okay with abortion are wolves in sheep's clothing. There are a couple of ways you can passively promote abortion. One way is to promote extreme feminism where abortion is used as birth control so that women aren't hampered by pregnancy. Another way is to promote the ideas of the Sexual Revolution which promote all kinds of nastiness outside of marriage like free love and pornography. If you promote abortion, you're no Christian. God does not hear your cries for mercy. Your soul is in mortal danger.

Don't think that you can ignore church where God's Word is purely preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered and be a Christian. You have no communion with God. Your soul is in mortal danger.

It's true we're being chastised for a time by not being able to meet together and receive the wonderful gift of the Lord's Supper.

This calls for repentance. From all our sin. We still have God's Word and Holy Baptism and Holy Absolution. Thanks be to God for His wonderful mercies.

Works may show an absence of faith, but works are no guarantee of salvation. On a side note, I've noticed that we are terrible judges of our own good works, but we'll talk about that another time.

Paul tells us what to look to for the assurance of salvation.

"The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and Prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, *whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood*, to be received by faith." (Rm 3:21-25)

The word for propitiation is the word used for the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant. This is where the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled for the remission of sins. God the Father sprinkled His Son's blood on the mercy seat so that you and I have the forgiveness of sins.

You look to Jesus for the assurance of your salvation. You look to His work both in His life and by His death and by His resurrection from the dead.

This is why Paul says elsewhere we can only boast in the work of Christ!

You boast in the work of Christ or you boast in your own work. You're either a Christian or not.

Jesus says that "if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." For the Christian, death becomes a mere portal that you pass through in your life in Christ.

The Jews in the Gospel were offended at this and Jesus ratchets up the offense by making it perfectly clear that He is God. When He says, "Before Abraham was, I AM," (v. 58), He is saying that He is the YahWeh of the Old Testament. That is God's personal name in the Old Testament. Jesus is God the Son's personal name. He is fully God. He knew Abraham, and continues to know Abraham, personally!

What does it mean to keep the Word of God? The Greek word for "keep" means to guard it and treasure it. It means to believe it, love it, meditate upon it, memorize it, and to pray it. Keeping God's Word in this way bears fruit. The fruit of loving God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and the fruit of loving your neighbor as yourself. (Mt 22:37, 39)

Jesus says that He is the vine and we are the branches and that we bear no fruit apart from Him. If you abide in Him you will bear much fruit. And you abide in Him by abiding in His Word. (Jn 15:1-17)

Last year, the Convocation of the Word, put on by the Servants of the Word, was in San Diego. Our guest teacher was Pastor Peter Bender from Sussex Wisconsin. He said something that caught my attention and has stayed with me. He said, "we learn by heart those things we love."

You learn by heart those things you love. You know this to be true. How many statistics do baseball fanatics keep in their head? If you read stories to your little children at night, it's not long when they have the whole thing memorized!

We learn by heart in different ways, don't we. We use mnemonics, imagination, and repetition. I would encourage you to use the same tools for memorizing the Word of God. I would also encourage you to memorize the Small Catechism first, because it is taken straight out of the Word, and it provides a wonderful framework for meditation and memorizing even more Scripture. Furthermore, to my knowledge, Lutehr's Small Catechism is the only catechism that can be prayed. Prayer offers not only repetition which aids in memory, but it also provides great comfort, which is something we all need right now, isn't it. Now if you're like me, you need to memorize it and keep re-memorizing it. I did not learn it as a kid and it has been a joyful struggle to memorize and utilize it as an adult. The fruit that it bears makes the struggle to retain it worthwhile. Any time you struggle with the Word of God, you reap benefits from it.

And once you have the Small Catechism down, use it daily, and then add to it, psalms, canticles, the Gospels, the Epistles, the great hymns of the church, you know the ones that talk about Christ and what He has done and not the one that talk about you. You will never get to a point where you've mastered it all, but you will have much enjoyment and comfort from the process.

Now, I don't want you to get discouraged. A little every day is better than a lot every once and a while. You know like kids trying to cram in the Catechism for tests in catechism class! Cramming doesn't really work in the long run. If you've ever crammed, you know it doesn't stay with you for very long. A little of the Word every day is better than cramming it in once a week. I hope you've enjoyed the daily devotions that Pastor Holm and I have been doing. How long are they? Maybe around 10 minutes? Maybe a

little shorter some days and a little longer other days? So take ten minutes out of your day, preferably in the morning, and spend it with God's Word.

He promises you that if you abide in His Word, you'll never see death. (v. 51)

And Jesus, who was crucified and three days later rose again from the dead, just as He said, will surely keep His Word.

In Jesus Name. Amen.