

Oculi
Luke 11:14-28

To understand our Gospel reading today, we really need to understand the idea of original sin. Our confessions define original sin this way:

“Our churches teach that since the fall of Adam, all who are naturally born are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin, called concupiscence. Concupiscence is a disease and original vice that is truly sin. It damns and brings eternal death on those who are not born anew through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.”
(AC II)

To be naturally born means to be born from a mother and father. Only Jesus, Adam, and Eve were *not* naturally born. Adam was formed from the dust, Eve was formed from Adam’s rib, and Jesus “was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.” The rest of us are naturally born and that means we were all born in sin. As St. Paul says, we “were children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” (Eph 2:3) Unless the Holy Spirit intervenes through Baptism, we are damned. And yes, sadly this means that babies who die apart from Christ are damned. This is a hard pill to swallow, but it shows just how corrupted we are from original sin.

Our confession zeroes in on the first commandment. Original sin means we have no fear or trust in God. Without fear in God, we have no inclination to keep the moral law, also known as the Ten Commandments. Without trust in God, we fear His wrath and try to hide from Him. This also means we have no ability to change our condition. We can’t do it through works or will or heritage. Unless God intervenes, we are doomed forever.

Lutherans are the only ones who have this rich understanding of original sin. Most of you know that Erin and I both come from outside Lutheranism. We both had to wrestle with the idea of original sin.

You know that great Lutheran distinction that we are justified by Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone. Christ does all the work, and we receive the benefits as pure gift. If you get original sin wrong, you get justification wrong. Our confessions say it this way. “false teaching [on original sin] nourishes confidence in human strength and suppresses the knowledge of Christ’s grace.” (Ap II.44) This means you put trust in your own works and minimize the work of Jesus. It’s no wonder that works righteousness abounds in Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and American Evangelicalism. We must all continue to struggle with the fact that nothing good resides in us and that we must be saved and continue to be saved by Christ and not our own efforts.

In the gospel reading Jesus says, “when a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe.” (v. 21) Satan is the strong man. Jesus even calls him the ruler of this world. (Jn 12:31) We are all born in his house. That’s another way of saying we are all born with original sin. Original sin manifests in all manner of sins. Some of the men in the Gospel reading show they have original sin by accusing Jesus of using demonic power. Your sin manifests itself in many ways. We all struggle with our own pet sins, but sin is common to us all. And, naturally, there’s not a thing we can do about it.

Thanks be to God, Jesus continues, “when one stronger [than the strong man] attacks [the strong man] and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil.” (v. 22) Jesus is the stronger man who defeats Satan with His perfect life and death upon the cross. Jesus’ death on the cross pays the atonement for our sin. His perfect life gives us a righteousness that isn’t our own.

Christ won the victory over sin, death and the devil on the cross and with His perfect life, but he doesn’t deliver that victory on the cross. He delivers it to us in our Baptism. We can’t go back to the cross of Jesus. Jesus brings us His victory in Baptism. Our Baptism breaks us out of the house of the strong man into the house of the stronger man.

When Peter preaches on Pentecost and the men in Jerusalem are cut to the quick they ask what they must do for salvation and Peter replies:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself.” (Acts 2:38-39)

First, the Lord our God is the one who calls and acts in Baptism. Baptism is not a ceremony we go through to acknowledge to the world that we believe in Jesus. Baptism is the ceremony where Jesus acts on us through the pastor, as through Christ Himself, on the person being baptized. If Baptism is our act, we can never have full confidence it worked. But if Baptism is our Lord’s work, then we have full certainty that we are His. Baptism is the finger of God placed on you directly.

Second, baptism delivers to you the forgiveness of sins and God’s Holy Spirit. The forgiveness of sins wipes our slate with God clean. As far as the east is from the west does He remove our sins away from us. If that weren’t awesome enough, God gives us His very own Holy Spirit so that we begin to fear and love God. Our Confessions put it this way: “The Holy Spirit, given through Baptism, begins to put to death the concupiscence and begins to create new movements within a person.” (Ap II.35) Without the Holy Spirit we wouldn’t be able to live God pleasing lives. But God richly pours out His Spirit on us in Baptism, the hearing of His Word, and the Lord’s Supper.

Third, all these wonderful things are received as a promise. That is, they are received by faith. Which is a blessing. When I look at my own life and see the ugliness of sin or the lack of good works, I can still know that I stand before God righteous. His gift comes through faith and not works. In this way, I can have complete comfort that I belong to the stronger man.

God doesn't wipe out our original sin until we die. Augustine, quoted in our confessions, puts it this way: "sin is forgiven in Baptism, not in such a way that it no longer exists, but so that it is not charged." (Ap II.36) When you examine yourself against the ten commandments, you know this to be true. Paul uses an accounting term when he talks about this in Romans (Ch. 4). We are "counted" righteous. That is our ledger is marked clean. Not because we came up with the debt we owe, but because the blood of Christ covers our debt. Yet we continue to accrue debt through our sin. That's why God continues to apply forgiveness to us in Absolution and His Supper.

I believe this's why Jesus warns us about the return of unclean spirits. The devil is like a horrible abusive husband. He wants us back to possess us and cannot stand to see us with the stronger man. And woe to us if he gets us back. As Jesus says, "the last state of that person is worse than the first." (v. 26) Woe to those who have tasted the richness of God's forgiveness and returns to their evil ways.

Thanks be to God, we don't face the strong man unguarded. God gives us armor through faith and His Word that allows us to stand firm against the devil and his horde of demons. We have no reason to fear. If you do fear, remember the Word of Jesus: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out." (Jn 6:37) But we need to be careful to apply both Law & Promise to our salvation.

Jesus and Paul and the author of Hebrews warns us about the dangers of falling away (Matthew 24, 1 Timothy 4, Hebrews 3, and many other verses). These warnings seem to contradict the Promise we just heard from Jesus. These warnings are for those who feel complacent in their sin. They have an attitude like this "I love to sin, and God loves to forgive, so I can do whatever I want." At some point, they will face the wrath of God instead of His mercy.

Jesus warns us today that the devil and his demons are active against you. He warns you so that you won't take for granted His incredible gifts of Word and Sacraments. And if you get into despair over your sin, He gives you Promise after Promise that He will not let you go. His blood covers all your sin no matter how horrific they are. God truly sees you as His little lamb whom He loves dearly.

Original sin is horrible to meditate upon. It's horrible because it shows us just how ugly we are on the inside. But the clearer you understand original sin, the deeper appreciation you have for how you contribute absolutely nothing to your salvation. You also deeply appreciate the work of Jesus on your behalf. And you have confidence that your salvation is secure. There's nothing that can come between you and Jesus. I'll leave you with two stanzas of a hymn that's become one of my favorites, "God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It:"

God's own child, I gladly say it:
I am baptized into Christ!
He, because I could not pay it,
Gave my full redemption price.
Do I need earth's treasures many?
I have one worth more than any
That brought me salvation free
Lasting to eternity!

There is nothing worth comparing
To this life-long comfort sure!
Open-eyed my grave is staring:
Even there I'll sleep secure.
Though my flesh awaits its raising,
Still my soul continues praising:
I am baptized into Christ;
I'm a child of paradise.