

The Fourth Sunday in Advent - *Rorate Coeli*
John 1:19-28

Today, John the Baptist teaches us how to witness Christ to our neighbor. There are two things that he does that we should try to emulate as we talk to other people.

Luther exemplifies the first on his deathbed. You probably have heard about it, but it won't hurt you to hear it again. Luther died February 18, 1546. It was about 30 years after he had nailed the 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg. The Reformation had spread like crazy thanks to Luther's writings, the Small Catechism, and the hymns of the early Lutherans. Even the English Reformation was highly influenced by the Lutheran Reformation. But Prince Charles and the Papists fought back. In the year Luther died and the year after, the Lutheran forces were soundly defeated by Prince Charles and the Papists. The trouble had been brewing awhile and they asked Luther on his deathbed if he still held to his confession that had caused so much trouble and seemed on the brink of military defeat. Luther again and for the last time boldly confessed the Lutheran Faith which was called at the time, the Evangelical Catholic Faith. I sometimes think we should recover this name, but that's a point for another day. After Luther died, they found a slip of paper in his pocket. It said:

Wir sind Bettler. Hoc est verum.

This means, "we are beggars. This is true." Luther understood that all of us come to God as beggars. He had recovered the Gospel.

He had worked tirelessly to promote Grace alone through faith alone for the sake of Christ alone. He had worked tirelessly to promote the Word alone as the authority of the church. He did all this to highlight the glory of God alone. He was a giant of church history. More biographies have been written about Martin Luther than anyone else except for Jesus! Martin Luther King Jr. was named after Martin Luther by his dad when he learned about Martin Luther and saw his statue in Wittenberg! Yet Martin Luther understood that we are beggars before God. And this should be our attitude as well.

We are all sinners. We all receive grace from God based on Jesus' work in His life of perfect obedience and His death on the cross of perfect submission. And that perfect life of obedience and submission is for the salvation of the world. We call this universal atonement. It's exactly what John 3:16 says. God gave His only begotten Son for the salvation of the world. The only difference between Christians and unbelievers is that Christians are covered with Christ's righteousness in their baptismal waters. They are protected in the ark of the church just as Noah and his family were protected in the physical ark. The ark protected them from the judgment waters of God against sin and all wickedness. The ark of the church protects Christians through the final judgment of Christ which is coming.

As Christians we understand that we are no better than the foulest unbeliever. Think of the most wretched, foul-smelling beggar on the side of the street begging you for a handout. In California, we don't have to stretch our imagination too far to picture this! We understand that we are that beggar before God. And this changes the way we relate to people inside and outside the church.

The world always accuses Christians of being “holier-than-thou” hypocrites. That’s okay. We understand there’s always room for more hypocrites in the church. But we don’t let that change how we interact with other people. Every person, no matter how foul or disgusting, has dignity because Christ died for them. Every person, no matter how foul or disgusting, deserves our respect because they were created by God.

John the Baptist understood this. He confessed that he was not the Christ. He was not Elijah. And He was not the Prophet. God’s people were waiting for the Christ to come rescue them. They were waiting for the Prophet who would give them the very Word of God. They were waiting for Elijah who would come before the great and awesome day of God’s judgment. We find out that Jesus is the Messiah and the Prophet. Jesus tells us that John the Baptist actually is the Elijah who was to come even if he didn’t know it. The great and awesome day of judgment happened on the cross where God poured out His judgment against all sin and wickedness so that we don’t have to be judged.

John did confess that he was:

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord!’” (23)

This was John’s official office. But it is also your office as a Christian. You are to cry out the Word of God in the wilderness of this world. John the Baptist proclaimed “a baptism for the repentance of sins.” (Mark 1:4) This is also your proclamation. You proclaim this as one who needs forgiveness and has received that baptism. The church proclaims this boldly to the world as Christ instituted at the end of Matthew:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

But this is also the happy occupation of every Christian. Christian parents baptize their kids and raise them in the Faith by teaching them every Word of Christ. And Christians are always prepared to give a defense for the hope they have in Christ, as St. Peter admonishes in his first letter. (1 Peter 3:15) You will have this opportunity as you live out your life in Christ. You have a stink about you. When you were baptized you were given the Holy Spirit. And He stinks to the world. People will notice that you are a Christian. And sometimes they will ask you about your Faith. And then you have the opportunity to do the second thing John the Baptist did: you point to Jesus.

Right after this passage in our Gospel reading today, John points to Jesus and says:

“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)

We aren't experts at life. We aren't life coaches which seems so popular today. We aren't deserving of God's kindness. No matter how well put-together we look to the world, we know that we are “poor sinful beings” as we confess each Sunday. But we do know the answer to our sin problem. And that solution is the God-Man, Jesus Christ. That's who we tell non-believers about.

We tell them about Jesus who took on human flesh restoring the dignity of humanity that was lost in the fall.

We tell them about Jesus who lived a perfect, sinless, spotless life where we could not.

We tell them about Jesus who bled, suffered, and died for us on the cross to make atonement for sin. My sin, your sin, even the sin of the whole world.

We tell them about Jesus who comes to us in the church through Water, Word, bread, and wine with His amazing gift of forgiveness.

We tell them about Jesus who will come again in glory to make all things new. All wrongs against His children in faith will be righted. Every tear of His children will be wiped away. Sin and death were and will be defeated by Him and will be no more. Our great enemy, the devil, is defeated and will be cast away forever never to plague us again.

And when you tell other people about Jesus the Holy Spirit is their convicting people of their sin and the hope that is found only in Christ. Some will hear and be converted, thanks be to God. And many will hear and reject Jesus, usually mocking you in the process. Don't worry about the mocking. They will one day stand before Jesus and they won't be able to mock. They will only be able to bend their knees to the ruler of the universe before they are cast away into the place of wailing and gnashing of teeth prepared for the devil and his angels. Their mocking will come to an end.

The elders are reading a great book right now called The Fire and the Staff: Lutheran Theology in Practice by Klemet Preus.

The chapter we just finished makes the point that you are not a witness of Christ. John the Baptist, St. Peter, and the other John, St. John were. They saw Jesus in the flesh. Peter and John witnessed Jesus' own baptism, His ministry, His death, and His resurrection. We did not. We are not witnesses, but we are confessors. We confess the Faith. That is, we confess Jesus.

Be like John the Baptist. First confess that you are a beggar. Confess that you are not worthy to be called a son or daughter of God. Confess that it is by grace alone through faith alone for the sake of Christ alone that you are saved. Second, confess Jesus. Confess who Jesus is, both God and Man. Confess what Jesus has done. Confess the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Confess how Jesus comes to you today. Confess that Jesus brings His grace in Word, water, bread, and wine. Confess that Jesus is coming again. Confess that Jesus comes again with His judgment. Today is the day of salvation. Tomorrow is uncertain, but the grace of Jesus today is the only sure and certain thing there is. As you confess, the Holy Spirit will work faith when and where He wills.

And through it all, God will be glorified. To Him be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.