

*Misericordia Domini*

John 10:11-16

We always need to hear that God works through means. This is actually one of the great recoveries of the Gospel in the Reformation. God works through means. What does that mean? God does not deal with you directly. If He did, you would be burnt to a crisp and consumed. It may be that some of you really don't believe that. You might think, "God loves me, He wouldn't burn me to a crisp." If you think this way, they you don't understand two things as well as you might. First, God is holy. Absolutely holy. Nothing sinful or unclean can stand before Him and *not* be consumed. You've probably heard me tell you a couple times about Isaiah's encounter with God where he says, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." (Is 6:5) This happened in a vision! This isn't an actual encounter in God's holy throne room, but a mere vision of God's mighty throne. Not even Moses, who was the greatest prophet of the Old Testament, was permitted to see God's face! God is absolutely holy. Second, your sin, from the smallest to the largest, is utterly detestable to God. Sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that since our sin's forgiven, it's no big deal. Paul knew this temptation and addresses it in Romans: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means. How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom 6:1-2) The "By no means!" is the strongest possible way to negate Pauls' rhetorical question.

God is utterly holy and hates sin and the sinner. A well-meaning phrase was popular many years ago: "God hates sin but loves the sinner." This is misleading. Like all bumper sticker slogans, it doesn't tell the whole story. What did God do to Pharoah and all his hosts in the Red Sea? They were unashamed pagan sinners standing against the people of God. God destroyed them in the Red Sea. This is a preview of the final judgment when all unrepentant sinners will be thrown into the lake of fire were the worm doesn't die, and the fire is never quenched. (Mark 9:43-48) Now it is true that God loves His creation, even us wicked sinners.

He doesn't leave us in our sin to die an eternal death. Yet God must find a way to save sinners without consuming them in His holy fire.

This is the miracle and mystery of the incarnation. Somehow, in a way that reason cannot comprehend, God joins Himself to His creation by becoming a Man. He hides His full glory so that the people in Jerusalem and Galilee are not consumed by it. When Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep," (v. 11) He is describing the means by which God saves sinners. God doesn't utterly destroy us and start over. I'm really glad this is true. I like being alive. Don't you? God doesn't snap His fingers and make sin go away. That would be unrighteous which is impossible for God. I'm really glad this is true as well. We have a God who is worthy of our praise, honor, and thanksgiving.

And Jesus is the means of salvation in two ways. First, He is the propitiation for our sin. That is, He is the unblemished Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (Jn 1:29). As Hebrews says, "When Christ appeared as a High Priest of the good things that have come... He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption." (Heb 9:11-12) Second, Jesus is our righteousness. If Jesus wasn't righteous, He wouldn't have been the unblemished Lamb of God. By His resurrection, we know that He is perfectly righteous. You know the parable of the wedding feast. (Mt 22:1-14) God prepares His great wedding feast. The people originally invited spurn His invitation, so God's servants go out into the roads and invite everyone they find. They all receive a wedding garment which is symbolic for the righteousness of Christ we receive in our baptism. One guest wore his own garment and without ceremony was thrown out into the outer darkness. Paul puts it this way: "And because of God you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption." (1 Cor 1:30)

So, through the *means* of Christ, God has reconciled the world to Himself. Jesus does what we cannot do. He pays for our sin by His blood and covers us with His righteousness. You must be put into Christ. And God uses means to do this as well. Primarily, God uses the Gospel to redeem us and make us a holy people. This is why Paul says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" (Rom 1:16-17)

The Gospel is the proclamation of what God has done for you in the work of Jesus Christ. Not the work of Joseph or David or Moses or Isaiah, but the work of Jesus. It's not that the work God did *through* Joseph or David or Moses or Isaiah isn't important. There we see God keeping His promises to an unfaithful people. But the work done *through* these saints pointed to the greater work done *by* Jesus. The work done by Jesus is done for you, but it must come to you through God's means. It doesn't just drop down out of the sky and hit you upon the head. It's not found within yourself. As Jeremiah says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9) God is talking to Judah, His chosen people lest you think God was just talking about unbelievers. The grace of God must come to you some other way. And God has established particular means through which His work comes to you so that you repent and believe in the Gospel. And as you already know, this repentance continues in your life until you die!

In the foolishness of God, He decreed that preaching Christ crucified is the way that He makes converts and keeps converts. As Paul says, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." (Rom 10:17) And "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor 1:23-24)

This primarily happens in the official preaching of God's Word. This is meant "to equip the saints, for the ministry [of Word and Sacrament], for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried along by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes." (Eph 4:12-14) Don't fall for the deceitful scheme of "every man a minister" that perverts what Jesus is doing with preaching and the office of the ministry. Saints don't do the ministry. You are equipped and built up *by* the ministry of pastors. This doesn't mean that pastors are Old Testament priests through whom you must go for access to God. You have access to God by virtue of your baptism. You have unfettered access. Pastors aren't better than you or your masters. That's not the way of the kingdom of God. Pastors are servants who serve to you the grace of God in the means that He has established, namely Word and Sacrament ministry. When pastors forget they are servants and stewards, and it is the Good Shepherd's church, and many "Herr" Pastors do this, they do a lot of damage to Christ's church. Pastors are to proclaim God's Word and not their own.

And this doesn't mean that you don't proclaim the Word of God to your neighbor where God has placed you. Peter teaches you to "always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you." (1 Peter 3:15) And Moses teaches you about the Word of God: "You shall teach [it] diligently to your children, and shall talk of [it] when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." (Deut 6:7) You are to be so consumed by the Word of God that it wells up out of you to anyone who will listen. New believers are made two ways. The first is by having babies and rearing them in the fear and admonition of the Lord. The second is by proclaiming God's Word as you have opportunity to those around you so that they are brought to font, pulpit, and altar to receive God's good gifts of grace upon grace.

The declining numbers in the church, especially the LCMS, is of concern to all of us. The answer to this is *not* evangelistic programs or programs in the church, but the means that God has established. The church is not a self-help center or social programs place. It is the place where God places Himself to pour out His grace on a sick and dying people. The Church is more akin to a hospital than anything else.

The Divine Service is not a place where we serve God, but it is a place where God serves us. *Gottesdienst* is the German word for the Divine Service, and it means “God’s service” or where God serves man. By bringing our children, grandchildren, and neighbors to the Divine Service, we are taking them to the place, in fact, the only place, where God places His gracious presence where sinners receive grace. Jesus says His sheep will “listen to His voice” in our Gospel reading today. The Divine Service is where the voice of our Shepherd rings out to His sheep.

And when the sheep stray, Jesus pursues them with His word. He brings them back to His sheepfold, the church. This word goes out through his sheep that remain in the sheepfold. I’ve meditated upon this a lot recently. Does anyone besides us know that Grace Lutheran Church exists in Rialto? How do we make our presence known in Rialto? There are roughly 100,000 lost sheep in Rialto! Is there a way we can go into the “streets and lanes and highways and hedges” of Rialto and invite them to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd? (Lk 14:21, 23) I don’t have any easy answers to these questions. But it is good for all of us to think about these things. Regardless of what ideas we come up with to engage Rialto, one thing I do know is that God converts people in the way that He has established: the preaching of Christ crucified, the Baptism of the lost, and the feeding of Christ’s Body and Blood to His flock.

We must keep the main thing the main thing. But the main thing happens in community. Building community is an earthly business. It’s messy. It does involve things outside of Word and Sacrament ministry.

It involves the mutual consolation of the brotherhood which includes time spent together, forgiving each other when we sin against each other, and sharing God's Word with each other. Are there ways we can involve the people of Rialto in our community. Let us continue to think about ways we can build our community and be daring enough to try some ideas out. We may fail or look foolish, but who knows, God my work through all of us to build a bigger community here at Grace.

And "Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." (Gal 6:9) The parable of the Sower teaches us that when we sow the Word of God, some will not understand it because of Satan, some will fall away because of tribulation, some will fall away because of the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches, but some, thanks be to God, will be saved unto eternal life. And these few are worthy of our efforts.

So let us continue to be about the business of God's Word. First in receiving the voice of our Good Shepherd. And second in sharing that wonderful word of salvation. God, the Holy Spirit, will work faith when and where He wills for His glory. The Word of the Good Shepherd is indeed an obstacle to the Jew and foolish to the Gentile, but it is the most precious thing to us who are being saved by it.

In Jesus' name. Amen.