



Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 13)

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

3 August 2003

Exodus 16.2-4; 9-15

Psalms 78

Ephesians 4.1-16

St. John 6.24-35

Last week we heard about Jesus feeding of the 5,000. This week we hear that some of those people have followed him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee seeking, what else—more food. Jesus tells them not to desire food that perishes, but food that endures for eternity—which only he, Jesus, can and will give to the people. Apparently the people didn't hear Jesus—he says that he will *give* them that which endures for all eternity. *Give*, he says. But the people then ask, “What must we do—what works must we perform—in order to have that which endures for eternity?”

There are two ways of answering that question of what we must do. We'll start with the most common way of approaching the question of “what must we do.” It goes like this: The Bible reveals the will of God. The Bible is the answer book. It informs us of what God wants us to believe, how God wants us to behave, how God wants us to worship, and so on and so forth. Having that which endures for eternity is a matter of obeying every word stated in Scripture, of behaving as God instructs us to behave—in scripture. In this view, the Gospel of Jesus is one more thing, albeit the most important thing, revealed by God. When you believe what the Bible tells you to believe about Jesus, you are righteous—you believe what you are supposed to believe in order to receive that which endures for eternal life. And the same then holds true to the moral laws. When you behave as God tells you to behave in the Bible, you are moral; when you don't, you are immoral. All of the Bible, both the older and the newer parts, is revelation from God and it is all authoritative—all equally authoritative—to be believed and practised without much distinction. As pious as that may sound, it is pretty much the piety of those who opposed Jesus from the beginning.

This first answer is called legalistic Biblicism. It is, however, not THE Gospel. As St. Paul designates it in Galatians, it is a different gospel, one that perverts the Gospel centered in Christ and Christ alone. It was Martin Luther, his comrade Philip Melancthon, and the other Lutheran reformers who, building on the words of Christ and Paul pointed out the difference between THE Gospel and that different gospel.

According to THE Gospel, sinners are *given* as a sheer gift of grace that which endures for eternal life through their connection to Christ, or as Jesus says in this morning's reading: “by trusting in the one whom God has sent.”

Trust in Christ the *only* criterion for receiving that which endures for eternal life. Trust in Christ—faith—is the only thing that counts for what's righteous. And trust in Christ is the only criterion for what sin is. Jesus says later on in John's Gospel, “Sin is that they do not believe—trust—in me.” (16.9) And as St. Paul says in Romans 14, “whatever does not proceed from faith/trust [in Christ] is sin.” Have faith, have trust, in one thing: The Son of Humanity, Jesus Christ, is the one who gives—who *gives* you—the food that endures for eternal life—himself. Trust that and that alone, and you are righteous, do not trust that and that alone and we are in sin. Period. That simple. And it's all a gift—all grace, unmerited, unwarranted, and totally unearnable. All we have to do is open our hands and receive it. And *even that* is a gift from God—we cannot by our own reason or strength get up the gumption to open our hands.

So then, what becomes of the law of Moses—or any other statements about morals in scripture? The answer to that is at the very heart of the Augsburg Confession of 1530, the Declaration of Independence, if you will, of the Lutheran Reformation. Summarized, it's a matter of law and gospel. It goes like this: Scripture's laws serve as God's diagnostic agent—a diagnosis of our malady—that we are hopelessly turned in upon ourselves. The law is never the prescription for our healing. God's law is x-ray, not ethics. The healing for patients diagnosed by the law is God's promise: Christ and Christ's righteousness alone. The law's purpose is to push sinners to Christ.

Now, once sinners become connected to Christ through Baptism and are sustained in that connection through the Eucharist, sinners are reborn in Christ, having the mind of Christ—and it really is new life, not life lived under some refurbished “old” commandment, nor, nor is life in the mind of Christ, as Luther put it life under “Moses rehabilitated.” Christ now supersedes Moses—not only for salvation, but for ethics. In Paul's language to have the “mind of Christ” means “being led by, walking by, the Holy Spirit.” And all of that is *given* to us, not something we work to achieve through adherence to the law. Over and over, the apostle Paul makes it “perfectly clear” that this is a new “law-free” way of life; as he says in Galatians, “But since you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” This new law-free life, this life in the mind of Christ, this life under the leading of the Spirit is one lived with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The preeminence of this Gospel language puts all other language of Paul and the New Testament into perspective. The Lutheran Reformers clearly saw that some New Testament language is of the “rules and regulations” sort. And so Melancthon writes, “Even the apostles ordained things that have been changed by time, and they did not set them down as though they could not be changed . . . The apostles did not wish to burden consciences . . . In connection with the apostles' decrees one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is.” Indeed, Paul himself said it well: For those in Christ, all things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. Do things that will help people trust in Christ alone; do not do things that will turn people away from Christ. And as the Reformers recognized, those things change with time and culture.

This, of course, is what is at the heart of what our sisters and brothers in the Episcopal Church in the USA are grappling with this weekend. In case you haven't been reading the papers or listening to the news, the Episcopalians will be voting today and tomorrow on whether there will be an official rite to bless the unions of same-sex couples and whether or not to ratify the election of a gay bishop in a committed same-sex relationship. From the standpoint of the Gospel and the Lutheran confession the question must be, “will affirming these moves serve the Gospel of Christ?” The answer is likely yes—and no. In many places and for many Christians and for many who do not yet believe or for those whose faith has been shattered by centuries of church-sanctioned hatred, the answer will be yes—by all means. Bless Christ-committed same-sex relationships. Ordain and consecrate Christ-centered candidates in Christ-centered same-sex relationships who are recognized by fellow-believers as having the gifts of the Spirit to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ. There these moves will bear witness to the Gospel. In other places, where people's trust in the grace of Christ alone is not yet strong—where people are yet “weak in faith” as Paul and Luther put it—the answer, for now, is likely a “no.” There will be places where people are still much in bondage to fear, who will not be able to hear the Gospel spoken by a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person. Those are places where the predominant question is still, “What must *we DO?*” Those are places where people cannot yet hear, as *you in this place do hear* so very well—that the only thing we can do is trust in Christ alone, the one whom God has sent. The only thing we can or need do is trust these words of Jesus and *these words alone*: “I am the bread of life. *Whoever* comes to me will never be hungry, and *whoever* trusts in me will never be thirsty.”