

## What about going to church?

Pentecost Season, Third Sunday

Pentecost season is about being practical. How does it work to be a Christian in daily life with your feet on the ground? How does it work? How to do it? Last Sunday we talked about the basic problem: We try to manipulate God. The basic sin is spiritual pride. We say: But God you have to do it this way. Or: I've done it this way, and that's the way it has to be. The question is: What is God's will?

The first thing we think about when we think of the Christian life is Sunday worship. What is Sunday worship about, and why do we have it? It works very well with the lesson in Genesis 3 today. I'm always nervous about how they cut the text up. It really belongs as a total chapter together. It starts out in 3:2. The snake comes and says: "Has God said?" He raises the question: Did God say that you may not eat or even touch that tree?

And then comes the first big lie because what the serpent then says is: "You will not die." Well, of course, you will not die right away. But that's a half truth. You'll die later if you do this. But, he just says: You will not die. That leads then to going a further step which is: We want to know the difference between good and evil, and we want to be like God. We can sort it out. Then they eat of the tree and by the end of the chapter they are excluded from the garden so they cannot eat of the tree of life.

This is such a perfect way of describing how the evil one works. As you know, the devil has many tricks. The first one is to persuade us that he doesn't exist because then he can do whatever he wants. Having failed that he tries other tricks, other lies.

Here we have a trick that deals with worship. You find worship in all religions. It's not worship by itself. Here we are not talking about worship in general. We're talking about Christian worship and how worship is changed into saying: "I'll scratch God's back, and he'll scratch mine." How does that work? The evil one isn't stupid. What he does is lead us into the common religion of this day and this culture, which is: Love God, love your neighbor, be against evil, and help the needy. Most people who are "religious" today would say this.

But this is a lie. What it says in the Bible is very specific: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). It isn't "loving God"; it's loving God **that way**. And it doesn't say: "Love your neighbor." It says: "Love your neighbor as yourself." And loving your neighbor as yourself isn't first you love yourself and then you love your neighbor. But it is to say: You know how to love yourself, which is always 100%. That tells you how to love your neighbor.

And if you are going to be against evil things, it's against all evil things. And if you are going to help those who are needy, it's helping all those who are needy. It soon becomes clear to you and me that we are lost. It can't be done. But the evil one would have us think that that's what it's about.

What is the will of God? The will of God, according to one way of thinking, is you have to do it all. And since that doesn't work, what hope is there? And the hope as the Christian faith has it is that we are saved by hearing the word of the cross.

Christians are people who put the cross in the center. There are some famous places in Paul where he points out that we are saved by the foolishness of what is preached (I Cor 1:20). Romans 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ."

That's why we have worship. Because we are saved, according to God's plan, by hearing the Word. And no other way because the promise is there.

How can we illustrate that? To begin with, all illustrations fail but we will identify them quickly:

1. Being a Christian is like getting a transplant. We know today about transplants. You get a new heart or a new kidney or something, and if you have that, that is like baptism. A new life is planted in you. But you have to take anti-rejection medicine all the rest of your life. And you have to be checked. It doesn't matter if you say: "I feel fine; I'll skip that medicine today." Or: "I feel fine; I'm don't have to go to that check-up once a month to see how it's working." You don't do that because you know it's fatal. Being a Christian is like that.
2. Being a Christian is like falling in love with a person of the opposite sex. The young man says: "I love you with all my heart. I'd climb the highest mountain. I'd cross the widest river. If it doesn't rain on Saturday night, I'll be over to see you." Then suddenly you wonder: What is this?
3. Being a Christian is like the couple whose child had a rare brain tumor and even the specialists at Mayo Clinic gave them no hope. But they found a specialist in New York City doing experimental surgery, and he agreed to operate. He did it and it was successful, and they took home a healthy, normal child. You can imagine how grateful they felt to him so that if he asked them for anything, they would happily do it. If he asked them to send a Christmas card, they would do it every year for sure. If he came to speak in the area where they live, they would be there to cheer and tell others: Have you heard about this guy?! He did this!

In the New Testament there are parables about the treasure hidden in the field. And the man who found it went and sold everything he had to buy the field. Or the pearl of great price. And how the merchant who found it went and sold everything he had to buy this pearl. That's what it is when we have salvation through the proclamation of the Word. It's through the hearing of the word that we have it. That's the promise.

Now we come back to Genesis 3. Because the evil one comes in and says: Well, it's true that we're called upon to thank the Lord and glorify him, but it won't hurt him if I don't do it this Sunday. It's trivial. He's so big, and what does my glorifying him count for?

Then the evil one sneaks in and says: They say it's this in that church and that in this church. Other pastors in other churches say other things. So who knows, and frankly everybody is saved anyway. And that's the way that God has to do it. This is, of course, the same kind of lie that the evil one told in Genesis 3. There is no such promise. The promise is: In the hearing the Word of the cross is life and salvation.

The second temptation the evil one has is to say: Well, we're so busy. We've got so much to do. It becomes a matter of priorities. I've got to do this; I've got to do that. I don't feel like it. I don't feel good. Some Sunday I would like to hand out \$20 bills to everyone as they leave the sanctuary because the following Sunday the place would be crowded. For \$20. What is important here? Should we have dancing girls? There is something today called entertainment evangelism. We've got to do something to

make it exciting. Suddenly the priorities change. And yet, of course, the treasure in the field is worth everything. And so is the pearl of great price.

The evil one comes and says: There are so many different things to sort out. Just let it slide. It's like the parent who says: I will not raise my child in the faith; I will wait until my child is 18, and then he can decide for himself. Of course, the same parent doesn't say: I will not teach my child to brush his teeth; I will wait until he is 18, and then he can decide for himself.

The parent doesn't do that because by 18, the habit is lost, the teeth are lost. The same with church-going. By 18 the cause is lost, the habit is lost. The need to be there and worship is gone.

The same is true for older adults. In terms of priorities, if you are well enough to go to the clinic, you are well enough to go to church. And what's more important? Is what is important that I am tired or don't feel like it?

Then comes another temptation, which is: Going to church is not exciting. Unless it's doing something to give me something that fulfills me and makes a difference to me and I feel it, I can get along without it. Other people get along without it. And that's the biggest temptation among us today because, of course, there is only one question: What is God's will? And that is what the two texts are about.

What is God's will? God's will is that we hear his Word and this way we come to salvation. But we say: But there has to be some other way! No, we don't have any promise about other ways. And I can't speak to that except by pointing to Luther's famous statement: As you talk about what might be and say God has to do it this way, you're playing with the hidden God and the hidden God is Satan (Smalcald Articles III/III:10; Tappert 313; Kolb/Wengert 323).

The revealed God is: We hear the Word of God in preaching and the Word of the cross is what saves us and gives us life. It's the meaning of life. It's the future. It's the only thing that matters. This amounts to saying that worship on a regular basis is important.

You may protest: You sound like the Roman Catholics! Are we then setting up a new law? No, in the Catholic side of the spectrum there is a law that says you have to be in church unless you're ill or unavoidably caught by an emergency.

But we're not on that side of the spectrum. But what we're saying is: This is the treasure. And if you have the treasure sorted out, there is no way you would say: Well, if it doesn't rain, I'll see you on Saturday night. Or: I'm glad for my transplant, but I won't take my anti-rejection medicine. It's not that important. I'll manage. To do that would be fatal, because you would lose the treasure.

Does worship bore you? Do you not like the preacher? There are all kinds of reasons, this or that.

The only issue is: What is the gospel? Where is life? What is the future? And the future is in the Word of the cross. Otherwise we have no promise. Amen