

His Ways Are Not Our Ways

Pentecost 7

In this series of what it means to be a Christian with our feet on ground, we've seen that we don't worship correctly, we don't pray correctly, we don't use the Bible correctly, and we don't keep the Ten Commandments.

We know that Luther frequently cited 2 Cor 11:14: "The devil appears as an angel of light." But, of course, we say to ourselves: "Only to other people, not to me." Then the evil one's got us. You and me both.

The basic point of the Gospel is: It doesn't matter. Salvation does not depend on whether we worship correctly, whether we pray correctly, whether we understand the Bible correctly, or whether we keep the Ten Commandments, which we don't, unless, of course, we lie to ourselves.

We ask ourselves: What does it mean to be in "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:31), as it says in the Reformation gospel of John 8:36: "If the Son has made you free, then you will be free indeed." What does it look like with our feet on the ground?

Scripture is very clear about this:

- Gal 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God."
- Col 3:3-4: "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."
- 1 Cor 6:19b-20: "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

Now two images. One from Paul. Another from Luther.

First: Romans 6:16: "Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?"

Second: Luther says we are like a horse who is ridden either by one rider or the other.

You and I are caught in slavery by a brutal master who beats us and every so often kills off a few slaves to see how it looks, and along comes somebody who buys us so we become his slaves. He not only buys us, but frees us, and then he also adopts us. He says: "You're my son. You're my daughter. I free you from sin, death, and the devil and you have life forever."

After that, what are you going to do? You would think that we, having been freed and made sons and daughters of God, heirs of his kingdom, that we would be overwhelmed with gratitude

and our lives would change. As you and I know, what happens is people say: "That's nice. Now I can get on with my life the way I want to."

Let's look at two historical characters. First, Hezekiah. He lived about 720 BC. The ruling power of the day was Assyria. But, lo and behold, a delegation came from a little place called Babylon. This is all in Isaiah 39. Hezekiah showed them the treasury, showed them the Temple covered with gold, showed them the palace that Solomon had built. And then the prophet Isaiah came to him and said: "You fool! What have you done!? You've showed them everything!" He said, "The time will come when Babylon will rule, and they will come and take everything." That finally happened in 597 B.C.

The fun thing is the closing verse of Isaiah 39. Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah: "The word which the Lord has spoken is good because it won't happen in my time. There will be peace in my day." In other words: "It won't hurt me. I can do what I want. It won't be my life that pays the price. Who knows, things may get better."

The second historical figure to consider is a famous German writer in the nineteenth century, Heinrich Heine. He lived a very dissolute life. At his deathbed in 1856 people were standing around and he said: "God will forgive me; he has to; it's his nature." In other words: "I know how to manipulate God."

This is precisely what we mentioned last week, the sin of spiritual pride, and it is basic to all of us. I know how God works. I know what's good and evil. Because God is great and gracious and has made me his own in baptism, I've got a license to sin. It's the same-old problem of indulgences that Luther took on at the Reformation.

You think you can trifle with God? With the Lord? It's as if a young couple got married, went off on their honeymoon and came back and the next weekend the husband said: "By the way, I'm going off camping with my secretary for three days, see you later."

And what his wife would say is: "You don't get it. You can't trifle with me. It's not the way it works."

In 1517 Luther nailed the Ninety-five Theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg. About twenty-five years later, in 1542, when he was speaking to a group of people, he said: "It never worked. The people are the same as they were. They're just the same old sinners. They're making the same mistakes. The whole thing was a loss."

Wouldn't we say the same today about ourselves? How much has really changed? We're largely the same as we used to be. Over against this reality, pastors at Easter sometimes state that that first group of believers grew in number, went out and changed the world in a couple of centuries. They even overcame the Roman Empire.

But all of this is false. It's a legend. Christians did not go out and conquer the world in any simple way. They were fragmented. They betrayed each other. They betrayed the Lord; it was a

mess. For example, consider Peter; he was the spokesman. Luke 24:34 says that the Lord appeared first and separately to Peter among the Twelve. Fifteen or eighteen years later, Paul, in his Letter to the Galatians 2:11-14, points out he had to correct Peter and not on some detail or unimportant thing. He said: "Peter had betrayed the truth of the gospel, and I had to face him down." Which he did.

It is not true that the Reformation was a mistake and a failure. "The truth of the Gospel" (Gal 1:8-9; 2:5, 14) which Luther preached, and others of course with him, a rediscovery of Paul, has changed and reformed and renewed the church.

At times we think nothing has happened, nothing is working. What is the Lord doing? First of all, the way the Lord works is in his hiddenness. That's what it means to live by faith alone. It's hidden. Let's repeat Col 3:3-4: "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

In the same vein, when his apostleship is under attack, Paul writes: "With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Cor 4:3-4).

How God is working in others and even in ourselves is hidden because it's the Lord's doing. We keep being tempted into thinking: "It's us." We can measure ourselves. We have a litmus test that can tell how we're doing." Not at all.

Along with the hiddenness is the totality of salvation. When the Lord makes us his own, it's not as if he gives us a kickstart and then it's up to us to make it happen, to show that we are doing it, making it.

No, when the Lord makes us his own, he makes us his own 100%. At the same time because we are still in this life, we are caught in sin and death. On the one hand, we are totally saved, outside of us, in spite of us. On the other hand, when we look away from Christ, we're sinners and lost.

The situation is described most directly in Galatians 5:17: "The flesh battles against the spirit and the spirit battles against the flesh." In this verse, "the flesh" is not our flesh. What Paul means by "the flesh" is the evil one. And the spirit is not our spirit, but the Holy Spirit. The battle is going on.

The situation is described most perfectly in terms of the World Soccer Cup. We are like that ball that's being kicked around. We're not determining. Rather, the battle is going on between the Lord and the evil one. We know that the victory is his because of what he did on the cross, and that he does all things well, and all at the end comes out being his.

In the meantime one cannot manipulate God, or trifle with God, but we can rejoice in the fact that he has made us his own, and therefore we are in him. Amen