

## **He works outside of us, in spite of us.**

A sermon on the sacraments for the Season of Epiphany

Matt 5:13-20

The gospel lesson is pretty tough. We are to be salt of the earth, light to the peoples, and we're to keep every tiny detail of the law and commandments. It says every jot and tittle. That's the same as saying we must dot every "i" and cross every "t." We must keep every commandment. At the end of Matthew 5:48, it says: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." That's referring to Leviticus 11:44-45. It is also found in 1 Peter 1:15-16: "He who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written: 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"

Note that it doesn't say you are to do the best you can. "After all, we're only human, what can we do?" It says: "Be holy the way God is holy." The Old Testament text, Isaiah 58:1-9, says the same.

Now where do we go? In 1 Cor 2:2 Paul writes: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." That's the Gospel.

In the Smalcald Articles Luther writes that there are the five ways God works. First, through the proclamation of the Gospel; second, through Baptism; third, through the Lord's Supper. Fourth, through the power of the keys, including the proclamation of forgiveness which we have at the beginning of every service; and fifth, through the mutual conversation and consolation of the faithful. (Smalcald III/4; BC Tappert, 310)

God's Word is both audible and visible. St. Augustine points out that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are visible words. There are those things which are visible – water, bread, and wine – and those go with the words.

Throughout this season of Epiphany, we ask: How does this work?

First of all, in terms of the one presiding at the service. One of the things they teach you at seminary is how to correctly make the sign of the cross. You raise your right hand high, hold your first three fingers together in a certain way and then go from top to bottom and then from left to right. And that raises the question, what about somebody who is left-handed? What about somebody who is dyslexic? What if you

happen to do it another way? Does that mean it is not really effectively the sign of the cross?

The same thing happens when we celebrate Communion. What if someone who is distributing the wine says: "The body of Christ broken for you"? Did that mean that it's not truly the Lord's Supper? If we want to do it really right, should we use the Greek words in the text? Or should we be like Jesus and his disciples and use Aramaic?

We celebrate Communion with wafers, and they had bread. Their wheat was different from our wheat. Then what about grape juice? Welch's Grape Juice has .01% alcohol in it. Are we going to be really the way it was? When they had a meal, they had three cups of wine. How can we do it rightly?

Some years ago there was a movement to have what was called "clown communion" because Paul writes that we should be "fools" for Christ (*hilaritas*). Thankfully that movement didn't last long.

Does it make a difference if you use organ music or a guitar? Is watching a church service on TV the same as being there?

Then there are questions about the one doing it, the one officiating or celebrating. A true story: A Catholic family adopted a Lutheran boy. When that boy started confirmation in the Catholic Church, the priest insisted he be baptized again. The family went along, but if someone had called the Catholic Bishops' Office in Washington D.C., they would have said the boy's Lutheran Baptism was valid, that it doesn't depend on the one doing it.

It is a great honor for pastors to be involved with baptisms, but the efficacy of Baptism doesn't depend on the pastor or priest presiding.

Back at the time of Augustine there was a huge battle as to who could conduct Baptisms and the Lord's Supper because at the time of persecution a lot of bishops and priests caved in to the Roman government. After the persecution they said: "We're sorry. We repent and we'd like to be able to act as bishops and priests as we did before." And someone named Donatus said: "How do we know we can trust you? How do we know you are sincere and don't have your fingers crossed behind your back?" The decision of the church, which has been held from that time until now, is: It does not depend on the one doing it. It depends on the Word proclaimed.

Is there anything the pastor could do that would not make it happen? When you come down to it, whatever I do, I cannot truly preside correctly. What's the answer? There is the command and the promise. I am commanded to do it. And in Baptism and the Lord's Supper he does it. He gives life. That's what it's about.

We don't want to talk only about those who are presiding. We also want to talk about those who are receiving. You who come forward for communion, how do you know whether you believe? How do you know whether you're worthy? How do you know whether you have repented? We get caught in thinking: "How can I do it? How can I be part of this?"

Some pastors help out in mental hospitals by providing worship services and celebrating Communion. There are people there whose mental abilities are very limited, and there are those whose mental abilities are all mixed up. They surely don't know, believe, or repent in the ways we think of. But the Lord does it in spite of us.

The same is true for those who are deaf. We proclaim that "faith comes by hearing" (Rom 10:17), but for those who are deaf, the Lord acts anyway.

The same is true for that little infant being baptized who does not decide, does not know, and is not in any way participating consciously, but the Lord does it.

In the Large Catechism Luther writes:

"Even though a Jew should today come deceitfully and with an evil purpose, and we baptized him in all good faith, we should have to admit that his Baptism was valid. For there would be water together with God's Word, even though he had failed to receive it properly. Similarly, those who partake unworthily of the Lord's Supper receive the true sacrament even though they do not believe" (LC, Baptism 4:54; Tappert 443).

The Lord does what he does in spite of us.

We remember the Third Commandment in the Small Catechism: "We should fear, love, and trust God, and so we do not despise his Word and the preaching of the same, but deem it holy and gladly hear and learn it."

We are called upon to hear the command that we be baptized and receive the Lord's Supper. Obviously not despising them. The Lord comes to us in spite of us. It doesn't depend on us.

Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:21: "It pleased God through the folly of what we preach . . . " And then he goes on in 1 Cor 1:28-29: "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." He comes in spite of us. He does it for us. That's his command and his promise. As Paul then writes: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Amen