

What people really believe vs. the gospel

Matthew 14:13-21

A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

A few years ago, a survey was taken of what Lutherans today believe. This survey revealed that 56% of confirmed Lutherans hold that the main thing that God wants is that you live a good life. 60% hold that the gospel is mainly about rules for how to live a good life. 67% of Lutherans hold that one can be saved in all religions, and 66% hold that one is not necessarily saved by Jesus alone.

Contrast that with what is said in Romans 8:31-39 (from last week). In these verses Paul is summarizing the whole business of what he has said in chapters 1-8. He writes: “What shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us: He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all [good] things with him?” (Romans 8:31-33)

Then Paul, in a typical fashion, has a couple of lists. He liked to make lists. We see this elsewhere. Here he writes that tribulation and famine and sword are not able to separate us from God’s love. Then at the end, in verses 37-39, there is this fantastic passage which says we are more than conquerors through him.

How can anyone be more than conquerors? That’s redundant! Paul here creates a new word meaning: “We are more than conquerors.” Then comes this list: “Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, no depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

All we can say is: “Wow.”

We use this passage often at funerals. But it’s sometimes good to look at a passage in another situation so that we see it what it says. It starts out: “Neither death, nor life.” That’s obvious.

“Nor angels, nor principalities.” That is, whatever forces or powers that you are caught up in thinking about.

“Nor things present, nor things to come.” If you’re worried about the present or worried about the future.

“Nor powers.” Whatever the powers might be.

“Nor height, nor depth.” Those are technical terms for astrology. And they refer to the common idea among us that there is some kind of fate.

“Nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Anything.

Contrast that with that survey about what people today really believe.

This passage, Romans 8:31-39, is the most glorious statement about what God is really about.

But what do people really believe?

First of all, they believe: “Well, it really depends on how good you are.”

At funerals people will say: “He was a good man.” Or: “She was a good woman”— as if that had something to do with it because there really is no free lunch. Someone has to pay. You get what you give. A tooth for a tooth. That’s what it’s really about. So, how do you live? That’s what it’s really about. That’s what people really believe.

And then to go to the flip side of it, if once it is pointed out that God has taken care of things, then people start to play games with that.

They play games by saying: “Ah, ha. Everybody is going to be saved anyway. As long as I go through the rituals, I’ve got it made. It doesn’t matter.”

That’s why the text about the feeding of the 5,000 is so important. Out there they didn’t have food trucks, so, what were they going to eat?

What do you know, there was a free lunch. The Lord provided for them out of nowhere.

We need to know what happened. What happened is that they said: “Let’s get a hold of this guy. We can get a free lunch every day. We also can make him into the one who can free us from the Roman government, those oppressors.” So, they tried to capture him, to hold him, thinking: “We can make this work; we can maneuver this situation.” Of course, they got it all wrong.

We pray: “Thy kingdom come,” but in our hearts, we pray: “My kingdom come.” As soon as we hear the Lord is good to us, we say: “OK, Lord, this is how I want you to build my kingdom.”

And the difficulty we have as we look at life is that we judge, or we presume, that is, we make use of the situation. Judging and presuming are the same here.

We do this in three ways.

First, we judge others as far as their salvation is concerned. In Matthew 7:1, it says: “Judge not.” We are not to judge anyone else’s situation before God. We’re very hard on others.

But then comes the second one: We judge ourselves, and of course, we’re very easy on ourselves. Paul writes speaking precisely to this: “I do not even judge myself” (1 Corinthians 4:3). We can’t even judge ourselves. The Lord has pointed out our situation.

But the third thing and most serious of all is that we judge God. That is, we say: “Well, Lord, you’re not running the universe the way you should. You should do it this way. You should do it better, and I don’t like the way you’re doing it. I know you say certain things and have certain promises, but you should do it so I can build my kingdom.”

I remind us of the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me. I am the Lord your God.” We, of course, want to be God in our own lives. Then we’ve broken all the commandments right there.

But that’s not the end of the story.

The end of the story is that his great statement of promise still holds. We may try to manipulate God, but that doesn’t work. He still goes ahead and brings about his kingdom.

It is, of course, a hidden kingdom. It’s not a kingdom we want to build or do build. But what is it then? It’s summed up in: “We are more than conquerors in him who loved us.”

And then that list: “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Amen