

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, August 29, 2010

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Hymns: 39, 237:1, 351, 245, 141:4-5.

Lessons: Jeremiah 31:15-19, Acts 3:1-20, Matthew 3:1-12.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 2:4-7.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Can you love someone who is wicked, evil and terrible to you? Can you love someone who doesn't reciprocate your love, who doesn't give some inkling that he or she loves you back? Can you even like such a person, who constantly is doing wrong, and disobeying everything you hold dear and want to do?

Probably not. But God did. God does. Listen to Romans 5:6-11: *"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."*

We are all sinners. That was made abundantly clear last week when we studied Satan and his evil work. Paul goes on from those words to speak of God's great love for us, and he writes *"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions."*

Have you ever played the "I love you THIS much game?" I'm thinking of the way we can sometimes talk to children and tell them "I love you THIS much." We might stretch out our hands to show a certain distance. They in turn will reply "I love you THIS much." Then they will stretch out their arms as far as they go. A variation is "I love you". The other person replies "I love you more". Then you get into a skirmish of words trying to tell each other how much you love them more. Well, God loves us and all mankind more than we can imagine. In fact, when we were dead in trespasses and sins,

GOD'S LOVE AND MERCY MADE US ALIVE IN CHRIST!

1. **God's love and**
2. **God's mercy**
3. **Were active in our conversion.**

Words like mercy, love, grace are used in this chapter. They are synonyms but each has its own distinctive meaning.

We start today with the word Love. This is the same love we read about in Ephesians 1:4-5: *"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will."*

This love is the Greek word agape, (uh gah' pay) the highest form of love. This is not merely a friendship between two people – people who see endearing qualities in each other and on that basis like each other and

form an affection for each other. This is love which comes from God toward man. It all comes from God. Nothing in man the sinner, the God-hater, the spiritual corpse drew God to him. Love resided only in the heart of God. In fact, we read in 1 John 4:8: "**God is love.**" This love is love in its fullest sense and purpose. It sees our deadness and is moved to bring us to life. This divine, infinite love will ever remain the most wondrous and glorious mystery which is too deep to be really understood by our finite minds. The fact that "God is love" is revealed to us through the gospel.

Paul now continues the thought: God gave spiritual life to us, who are now Christians, while we were still dead in our trespasses and sins. The reason for this is given here: God, who is rich in mercy did this on account of the great love with which he loved us. There is not a word of merit on the part of man. The entire process of regeneration or conversion is ascribed to God alone. He was rich in mercy and is rich in mercy to this day, rich beyond all human understanding. He abounds in mercy, in free favor and love toward fallen mankind. By reason of this great love, a love entirely unmerited on our part, with which He loved us, He showed us mercy. The same God who is angry, who has no choice except to be angry with sin, is also the God of grace, of a mercy that is so rich as to be exhaustless, as we read in John 3:16" ***"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."***

St. Paul speaks of "**God, who is rich in mercy.**" Mercy has much in common with love. But it is also somewhat different. Mercy is the attitude in the mind and heart of God that moves him to take pity on us when he sees our lost and wretched state. God's mercy moves him to action.

What did he do in his love and mercy? He "***made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.***"

St. Paul has already told us about the incomparably great power God used to raise Christ from the dead. Raising Christ from physical death proved the completion of Christ's saving work and sealed our redemption. It made possible our resurrection from spiritual death.

When Paul says that God "***made us alive with Christ***" he is referring to the miracle of conversion. When we could not lift a finger to help ourselves, God through Word and sacrament worked faith in our hearts, creating life where previously there had been none. In this way God "***made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.***" In the sacrament of Holy Baptism, in which the Word of God was applied to us along with water, we were made God's living children. For believers not baptized as children, that rebirth was worked by the power of the Word of God.

What a great contrast! Even when we were dead by reason of transgressions, He made us alive with Christ, - by grace you are saved! When we were in that terrible condition of spiritual death, as shown in our ongoing, continual, repeated transgression of God's holy Law, when we were without the faintest bit of saving knowledge of God, without fear, love, and trust in Him, when there was in us nothing but a total inability with regard to the things which pertain to our salvation, then God gave us life together with Christ.

Just as Christ, by the life which He received in the grave, did not return to the former mode of living on earth, but entered into a new manner of existence, as He is now in a new, transfigured, spiritual, state and life, so we were made partakers of this life according to our spirit, when God quickened us – made us alive – from our spiritual death. The new life of regeneration is life that has come out of the life of Christ. By this act of God salvation has been given to us, by the free grace in Christ. Paul can't contain himself – he sort of blurts out "***it is by grace you have been saved!***"

In our Reformation sermon (for October 31, 2010) we will elaborate on that very idea, which was a new idea to many when Martin Luther pointed them to the Bible in the Reformation in the sixteenth century. And

from what we see, and hear in our age, even among church leaders, it is a foreign idea today to many, many people.

Do you see the total and absolute contrast between death and life? One moment a person is dead, without the slightest evidence of spiritual life in any form, the next moment he is alive, with at least some show of life, even if that be expressed merely as a desire for salvation. One thing is clear: there is no intermediate stage, no neutral ground; the change from spiritual death to spiritual life is one step, and that step is the work of God alone.

Perhaps you remember the explanation of our confession of faith from Martin Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. "But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

"In this Christian church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers. "On the Last Day he will raise me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.

This is most certainly true."

This faith is the beginning of the new spiritual life. In this work of spiritual regeneration, of quickening to new life, all cooperation on the part of man is expressly and emphatically excluded. It is God's free gift and gracious present. It is not a reward for works performed by man by which he might have made himself worthy of being regenerated, and given life in the sight of God. There was no merit in us. There can be no boasting on the part of man. On our part we have not contributed even the slightest part toward our conversion.

The glory of that salvation belongs wholly to God and in no degree to man. We rejoice with the hymn writer:

1. "By grace I'm saved, grace free and boundless;
My soul, believe and doubt it not.
Why stagger at this word of promise?
Hath Scripture ever falsehood taught?
Nay; then this word must true remain;
By grace thou, too, shalt heav'n obtain.

2. "By grace! None dare lay claim to merit;
Our works and conduct have no worth.
God in His love sent our Redeemer,
Christ Jesus, to this sinful earth;
His death did for our sins atone,
And we are saved by grace alone.

7. "By grace! On this I'll rest when dying;
In Jesus' promise I rejoice;
For though I know my heart's condition,
I also know my Savior's voice.
My heart is glad, all grief has flown,
Since I am saved by grace alone." Amen. (The Lutheran Hymnal, 373)