

Sermon Manuscript for Vespers, May 21, 2016

Commemoration of Emp. Constantine and Helena, Mother of Constantine

Text: Luke 24:1-27

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Jesus encourages us to talk theology. When he appeared to the men on the road to Emmaus, St. Luke records that he “drew near and went with them.” He didn’t stop them from talking. He didn’t rebuke their dialogue. Instead he rebuked their unbelief. And then he enriched their theological dialogue by opening up their eyes to the chief theological topic. He opened up their eyes to his work of saving poor sinners by his death on the cross.

The two men were in a discussion. We can even translate Luke’s words to say that they were arguing with each other. Jesus was not dismayed by their intense discussion. Instead, he joined them. They were talking theology. They were talking about Jesus. They were talking about how he came to redeem Israel. They were even talking about Christ’s resurrection. But the one thing they were stuck on was, quite literally, the crux of it all. Jesus had died. And they were sad. They were sad because, though they were talking about the great mysteries of God, they could not find comfort in it. Their doubting hearts were veiled by the fear and sorrow over death. Perhaps their conversation would have been more lively and uplifting had that one little detail not taken away the hope they thought they had.

We were hoping that it was he who was going to redeem Israel, they said. But he died. The very thing that was supposed to give them eternal and certain hope and gladness was causing them to mourn and despair. Jesus of Nazareth was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, but the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. This death of Christ was the sting that soured their theological conversation. And now they are confused even further by reports of his resurrection. They aren’t satisfied. They saw him die. Even if there were reports of his resurrection, this one stumbling block stood in their way.

But Jesus encouraged their theological conversation. He gave them their joy. And how did he do it? Did he reveal himself to be the risen Christ right then and there? Did he say, “Sure, there was that set back of my death, but hey! I’m alive. It’s all good now!”? Did he tell them to think of more uplifting things than death and crucifixion? No, he encouraged their conversation by teaching them that his death was necessary.

They were talking about all the right things. They confessed Jesus to be a mighty prophet in both word and deed. He was mighty before God and men. This means that what he spoke was true, and no one could accuse him. But the stumbling block came at the topic that no one can avoid but always wants to avoid. This topic is not only avoided in theological conversations. It is avoided in life. No one wants to talk about the true cause of death. Sure, we can mystify it and pretend that it isn’t a big

deal. We can numb our consciences by treating death as the expiration of any other material on earth, or as simply one less member of the clan. But no one wants to talk about the sting of death. No one wants to address that which makes our spirit sad.

And when this happens our theological conversations become anything but theological. Just as the old lady who knows in her heart of hearts that her grandchildren have fallen away from the faith would much rather talk about their academic and athletic achievements than about what God's Word says about sin and repentance, so do our conversations often turn to what is vain and gives no joy. When the reality of sin is avoided in our own hearts, then a theological conversation in which the truth is confessed and error is condemned quickly turns into a talk of strategy and political posturing. Clear discussions of the Word of God in which sin, grace, atonement, sanctification, and the Triune God are clearly confessed can subtly turn into a series of sound-bites that get a lot of facebook likes but contribute nothing and edify no one.

While we talk about Christ dying for our sins, the fact is that our sinful desires don't want to address the reality of death. And this makes us lousy theologians.

But this is what Jesus addressed. O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! He didn't address what had then become an empty shell. He didn't simply talk about death, as though death were the real problem. He instead addressed the sting of death. O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe! Here is the real crux. Here is the true sin of Adam and Eve, the true sin of all those born of natural seed. It is unbelief. Their hearts condemn them, and this is why they take no joy in talking theology. But Christ does not turn them away from their conversation. Like a gentle yet stern teacher, he leads them into Scripture. From Moses through all the prophets he shows them that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and then enter into his glory.

It was necessary that the sin that stains our hearts should be felt by the innocent Son of God in his own flesh and blood, which he claimed as his eternal temple. It was necessary that he would bear the curse of our sins, the punishment of our sins, and make the perfect and full payment for our sins to God. It was necessary that he would in this way enter his glory even as he rose triumphantly over all sin, death, and hell. It was necessary. And why? Because God's Word said so. Because the Prophets foretold it. Here Jesus teaches us our formal and material principle for all our theological conversations.

It is necessary for us to talk theology. Why? Because the Scriptures are God's Word. They are God's truth. And the material of which they speak is Christ and his work of saving us from sin and everlasting torment. Everything we talk about in relation to God's Word is talk about Christ. Whether we are talking directly about Christ's work, whether we are talking about the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts and in his church through his Word, or whether we are talking about the roles of men and women, the headship of the husband and father over his household, and what God's Word says about authority in heaven or on earth, we are talking about Christ.

A few years before my grandfather died he made a very profound prediction, which I believe has proven to be true. And we should keep it in mind both with respect to the church at large and in our own private theological conversations. He said the following:

Christ is the center and focal point of every article of faith, and this fact [is] the paradoxical context of law and gospel, *simul justus et peccator*. Quite possibly the next serious controversy and split in American Lutheranism [Not just in the Missouri Synod] will center around two radically different interpretations of the *praecipuus locus* in Christian theology. The controversy is already raging.¹

All of the refusal and shrinking from confessing clearly and plainly what God says concerning those things that aren't popular to talk about in most circles, all of the pandering to feminism and avoidance of the first article of the Creed, all of our weak attempts to confront the lies of this godless culture – all of this boils down to not being able to see Christ and his atoning death in every inch of God's revealed Word. This is the sin of the heart, the unbelief, which only brings sadness and uncertainty in the face of the devil's deceit. Even in our zeal, our inability to confront our own sin-stained, weak-hearted, desires only prevents us from keeping Christ at the center of all our conversation. He is the faithful Bridegroom and head of his church, who by his death has restored this broken creation over which we mourn. He, with his saving work, is vitally relevant to all of our discussions in the church and in the culture, because God's Word, which reveals Christ crucified to us, always speaks to our daily lives. If we can't immediately see how this is true then this is only further proof that we must repent and trust in Christ to grant us wisdom. And it is only further evidence that our task of bold confessing and teaching is done in weakness; our sufficiency is not in ourselves, but in God.

But though we speak God's Word in the weakness of our own fainting and doubting hearts, Christ does not discourage our conversations. He rather encourages them. By his Holy Spirit he calls us to repentance and faith from his Holy Scriptures. And he teaches us from the authority of his Word what the entire task of theology is all about. It is all about what he did for sinners, what he did for those who are caught up in error's maze, what he did for your parishioners, what he did for you. He does not ignore the foolishness of your doubting heart. He rather exposes it and restores it, just as he bore it in his own body.

And then he further encourages you in your habit of theology. He strengthens you as you study, proclaim, and confess his Word even, and especially, when your heart is filled with sorrow over the cares of this world that constantly denies it, when your conscience is accused by the devil who constantly attacks it, and your heart is stained by the flesh which constantly doubts it. Though your preaching and laboring in the Scriptures may seem like it is in vain, Christ teaches you that it isn't. Because all Scripture points to him who died and rose again. All Scripture points to him whose blood cleanses your conscience from dead works and all guilt.

¹ Robert Preus, "Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (July, 1996, Vol 60:3): 196-97.

Therefore, whatever problem you are addressing, whatever lie of Satan you are attacking, whichever misled lamb of Christ you are correcting, if you are preaching from the Holy Scriptures, then you are preaching with a good conscience. Because the Scriptures bear witness to Christ, the source of a good conscience toward God.

So dear friends, may we keep on talking theology. And may the hope of Christ's resurrection give us confidence and boldness to assert all of what God says as truth. His Word is truth. Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, guide us all to see
From Sacred Writ the misery
Of our own heart's condition.
And teach us also there to find
The prophet's pen and Spirit's mind
Revealing sin's remission.

It's necessary that Your Word
Would not be slandered, cursed, or
blurred,
But, with its truth fulfilling,

That You should die to rescue all
Who did inherit Adam's fall.
For us Your blood was spilling.

Teach us to talk theology
And sing the glad doxology
Of God's right Arm's salvation.
Make all our conversations true.
May Your good Spirit us renew
And lead us from temptation. Amen.

