

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Ephesians 2:1-10

By grace you have been saved, through faith, the Apostle writes, as we hear it today, *and this not of yourselves, rather, it is the gift of God*. Well, I suspect that most of us knew already before we heard it today that this was written somewhere in Holy Scripture.

You would think that these words would be as precious to all Christians as they are to those of us who are of the Lutheran faith; for in these words *that is summed up briefly and beautifully*, which is the heart of the Christian faith. *By grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not of yourselves, rather it is the gift of God*. But it seems that many who claim to be Christian are not quite comfortable with these words, and would rather that they were not written *anywhere* in Holy Scripture. Some can barely bear to hear it, that we are saved by grace through faith, and this is not of ourselves. Whenever they hear it, they immediately jump up to correct it and specify that we *also* need to do good works to be saved, or make Jesus Lord of our life, or do something else, whatever they call it; they cannot let it stand, what the Apostle writes, that it is *by grace* we are saved, and not at all of ourselves.

Well, with some it seems that their concern is really not that *we* are saved by grace, so much, but rather that *others* are, also. They cannot have this preached and taught as Holy Scripture preaches and teaches it, for anybody and everybody to hear, for it might make some of these who hear it, and believe it, to rejoice *too much* in the goodness of God, and not be anxious enough about going to Hell, and then they might not try hard enough, and we cannot have that, for everything is all about that, being good and doing good; some, it seems, are more concerned that others might not be made to feel bad enough about not being quite as good Christians as the concerned Christians think they themselves are.

There are even those who cannot and will not have it that *they themselves* are saved by grace, and it is not of themselves; and then there are those to whom this comes as the most natural thing of all; they are those who twist and turn it into a teaching, or at least a *feeling*, that the commands of God do not concern me because I am a good Christian, that the remission of sins Holy Scripture teaches is a *permission* to sin, that I have no need to heed the Word and will of God.

Most Christians will know by instinct that this is not right; even if you might not be able to explain offhand exactly how it is wrong, to hear it said outright, it immediately makes you feel uncomfortable, does it not? Well, it should. This instinct, though, which tells you that it cannot be true that a Christian is free to disregard the Word and will of God, it is not of yourself any more than your salvation is.

To acknowledge that we owe it to God to honour and obey His will in all things, both because He is God to begin with, and because of His goodness: that by grace we have been saved, well, it is not of ourselves. We are by nature *dead in trespasses and sins*, as we hear it today that the Apostle writes, driven by *the spirit who works in the sons of disobedience*, that is: by the spirit of the evil one. And what that spirit wills and works is not only, and not even first and foremost, that sinners do not do many good works, and do evil instead, although he wills and works that, also; first and foremost what he wills and works is the ungodliness of unbelief, that we will not honour God as the Giver of all things good, and so we will not be content to have all things good given to us out of His goodness alone, and we adhere instead to the ancient lie of the evil one, that we are equal and alike to God in knowing good and evil. The evil one convinces us, and makes us to convince ourselves, not only that our judgement as to what is good and evil is as good as the judgement God presents to us in Holy Scripture, but also that we are capable of *mastering* good and evil ourselves, of doing good and being good and neither doing nor being evil, and so we have no need to be saved by grace, and it would not be right, rather, it has to be of ourselves, and it cannot be the gift of God, for we cannot and will not allow for God to be *that* good.

The evil one hates nothing more than for God to be glorified for His goodness, because it is for His goodness God wills to be glorified. For so good is God that His goodness is what He counts as glory, that by grace we have been saved, and this not of ourselves, rather, it is given to us all out of His goodness alone. And therefore the evil one hates nothing more than for God to be glorified for His salvation, and therefore, nothing is more offensive to that in us which is of the evil one. For as we also hear it today that the Apostle writes it, that we have been saved by grace, and not of yourselves, and it is all the gift of God, well, it means, also, that all the glory goes to God and His goodness, and our own goodness does not come into it, and *no one should boast*; and that we *really* cannot have.

And therefore is it that we cannot have it, either, that *we ourselves* have been saved by grace, and still are, if we are, and not of ourselves; because it gives us no reason to rejoice in our own goodness; it makes us to *not* be alike to God; it makes God alone to be good. We cannot have that; sin in us cannot.

When we who are of the Lutheran faith joyfully embrace what Holy Scripture teaches, that by grace we have been saved, and are, and this is not of ourselves, *rather it is the gift of God*, it is only because *God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses*, as the Apostle also writes it, as we also hear it today, *made us alive together with Christ*.

Well, first He made Christ to be dead together with us; because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, the Son of God, who is Himself God from eternity, came into the world, out of the love of God, to have Himself born into our mortal flesh, and baptised into our death, to take our sin upon Himself, all our evil and impurity, and bear it for us, in our stead on our behalf, and die into the fullness of death, His own judgement against sin, the hatred of His holy goodness against all ungodliness and impurity in the lives of sinners, and in our hearts and minds. And having Himself borne His own judgement against all sin, crucified and cursed and condemned for it and with it, He has paid the price and penalty for it, in full and in abundance, and God has *raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places*, as the Apostle has written it in the previous chapter, and *put all things under His feet, and given Him as Head of the Church, which is His body and His fullness, who fills all in all*. And so He lives in His Church, in His Word and worship. With His Word of salvation He declares sinners to be right with Him, and righteous before His judgement, because He has made us to be that. And with His Word He breathes His Holy Spirit into us, who is Himself, and His very own life, so that His life is in us, and we are *alive together with Christ*, so as to no longer *conduct ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind*, that is: not only, and not even first and foremost, no longer to live openly in obvious ungodliness and impurity, but also, and first and foremost, no longer to reject His love, but rather surrender and submit to His salvation, in the obedience of faith. And this is not of ourselves, rather, it is the gift of God; real faith is not of ourselves, rather, it is God Himself alive and at work in us, with His love, by His Word of love.

We still have it in us, though, to resist and even resent His salvation being given to us out of His goodness alone, and refuse to take it to heart; whether we notice or not, something inside of us will not have it. Therefore is it that Christians will, at times, find ourselves taking pride in our own goodness and godliness, as if our own goodness and godliness is what makes us good in the sight of God, and not His own goodness alone. And therefore is it, also, that Christians will at times find ourselves wondering and worrying whether I can still be righteous and right with God, as little good as I have been doing lately, and as much sinning, and whether I still have the faith in me, as little as I feel the faith inside of myself; because sin in us cannot have it and hear it, that God is that good, because the evil one cannot have it and will not hear it.

Therefore is it, also, that most churches outside of our communion constantly come up with constructions as to how, when the Apostle writes that we are saved by grace and not of ourselves, and that it is the gift of God, it does not really mean that it is not of ourselves, and that it is the gift of God, but rather that we are saved because of *something* we do, and we will only be saved if we do that, and do it well enough, whatever it is, good works, or loving Jesus enough, or whatever.

And therefore is it that the Apostle reminds us of that of which we need to be reminded always, even if we already know: that it is the gift of God that we are saved by grace, through the faith which He Himself gives to us, with His Word of life, by which He makes us alive with Christ.

For only when we live in this His Word, with which His life is given to us, will we remain alive with Him rather than go off on our own ways, where the evil one would have us go, and die again into the ungodliness that it is to not acknowledge the goodness of God, that by grace we have been saved, not of ourselves, rather, it is the gift of God. And only when it is constantly before us, that our salvation is given to us only out of the goodness of God, only then will we rejoice, not in our own goodness, which really is no good, but rather in the goodness of God, by which we have been made alive with Christ, and are. And only when we have His love breathed into us, with His Word of love, will we serve Him according to *His* will, rather than our own, as *His workmanship*, as the Apostle writes it, *created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*

O Christ, our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us! Amen.