

CANTATE / THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Text: St. John 16:5-15

CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I have a simple question to ask you this morning: Are you saved? This is not a trick question. It is a straightforward and to-the-point kind of question: Are you saved? It is a simple question and a simple question requires nothing more nor less than a simple answer. In keeping with this idea, as one answers this question, there are really a very limited number of responses, in fact only two—either yes, you are saved, or no, you are not saved. There can be no equivocating, no quibbling, no negotiation. As your pastor, the answer I would expect to hear from each of you is a resounding *“Yes, Pastor, I am saved!”*

Now I have another question for you: How do you know you are saved? This question may seem a little less straightforward than the first. Still, neither is this question a trick question. Indeed, there is only one acceptable answer and that one answer is important! So, how do you know that you are saved?

Many, but not all Christians, would probably answer the above question by saying, *“I am saved by grace through faith alone,”* or as we Lutherans have traditionally confessed, *“Sola Gratia, Sola Fide.”* Yet, such a short answer actually begs another question— *“Faith in what or in whom?”*

The answer to this question is just as important as.... No, that is not correct. No, the answer to this question is, in fact, even more important than the answer to the question, *“How are you saved?”* After all, not just any faith will do; and there, stands the crux of a great dilemma and much error in the Church, and much despair among Christians. What do I mean? Please allow me to explain.

Our salvation fundamentally rests in our faith in the Gospel Promise. What is this promise? It is simply that the forgiveness of our sins and our justification, our being made right and innocent before God, our reconciliation to God, are bestowed freely on account of the works of the innocent JESUS CHRIST, the only-begotten SON of God, who took on human flesh, who suffered by crucifixion, died, was buried, and rose again for all mankind, and therefore, our salvation is not the result of any merit or works on our part. So, another question: is this your faith?

Is this your faith or is your faith distorted? Has your faith been misplaced? Is your trust truly in the Gospel Promise? Is this really what you mean when you answer: *“I am saved by faith alone”?*

Let us examine what it is you believe. We can use a simple tool of philosophy known as a syllogism to aid us. A syllogism is a mechanism that incorporates two premises or propositions, a major premise, and a minor premise, to derive, or come to, one conclusion. For example, consider the following syllogism:

Major Premise: All men are sinners.
Minor Premise: I am a man.
Conclusion: Therefore, I am a sinner.

Now many, if not most, Protestant Christians would answer the question, “*How are you saved?*” using the following syllogism, which is based on the sixteenth chapter of St. Mark’s Gospel where the Evangelist records JESUS’ Words to His Apostles, “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.*”

Therefore:

Major Premise: Whoever believes in CHRIST is saved.
Minor Premise: I believe in CHRIST.
Conclusion: Therefore, I am saved.

Now, this may seem like a sound bit of reasoning, even if many of our Christian brothers and sisters seem to forget the “*baptized*” part of the passage. This avenue of reasoning answers the question, “*How are you saved?*” with the answer, “*By believing of course!*” Thus, the logic follows that you are saved on the condition that you have faith. Therefore, if you are to know that you are saved, you must *know* that you have faith. Sounds reasonable does it not?

However, this line of reasoning has one major flaw. How do you truly know if you believe, that is, how do you truly know if you have faith? And if you cannot be sure of your faith, how then, can you ever be sure of your salvation?

You see, this line of reasoning makes the content of the Gospel Promise conditional. You can never claim the Gospel Promise unless you *know* that you believe, thus making of your faith a human work, because you cannot be saved simply by believing, but you must *know* that you believe. In other words, you have to *believe* you believe, thus turning the focus of your faith from the Word of God and the Cross of JESUS CHRIST inwardly to self-reflection, and thus, making your faith the *object* of your faith and not the *gift* of God which it truly is.

This error leads to all kinds of other errors. For when one is turned inwardly the focus is on one’s self, and when the focus is on one’s self, objective faith is no longer possible and subjective faith quickly reigns in its place.

Thus, the Truth meets a hard shell that it can no longer penetrate because the shell has been reinforced by personal feelings and desires, one’s personal likes and dislikes, the religion of emotion, sentimentality, enthusiasm, and excitement. The shell has been reinforced by a

religion that says that in order to believe in God, one must *feel* God. Thus, the error of the pietists of the 17th century and many Christian sects of today.

But perhaps the worst result of this error is that of self-righteousness, of not being able to admit that one is wrong; that one has sinned and continues to sin; that one has doubts and conflicts of faith. According to this line of thinking one cannot be saved, and therefore, Christian, because to doubt, is to sin, and to sin means one is *not* saved. The sad end is the secret despair at ever being saved. Such despair robs a Christian of his or her voice, such that, one can no longer plead, “*be merciful to me, a poor sinful being,*” because one can never be sure that one believes enough.

But what then is the alternative?

I suggest that the alternative is a profoundly Lutheran syllogism, one that places faith squarely where it belongs—on the Word and Promises of God:

Major Premise: My LORD JESUS CHRIST said, “*I baptize you in the Name of the FATHER, and of the SON, and of the HOLY SPIRIT.*”

Minor Premise: JESUS, who is God, never lies, but only tells the truth.

Conclusion: Therefore, I am baptized into CHRIST (that is, I have been raised to newness of life in CHRIST JESUS as His Word proclaims.) Thus, I *am* saved.

Here, our major premise is based, not on fallible human emotions or faulty human opinions, but on the Words of our LORD as recorded by St. Matthew, when JESUS said to His Apostles, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the Name of the FATHER, and of the SON, and of the HOLY SPIRIT,*” and our conclusion is based on the Word of God as revealed by the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of St. John, “*JESUS answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the SPIRIT, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God,’*” and St. Mark, “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved,*” and in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, “*Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the Name of JESUS CHRIST for the remission of sins,*” and again, “*And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins,*” or by St. Paul, “*For as many of you as were baptized into CHRIST have put on CHRIST,*” and again, St. Paul, “*Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the HOLY SPIRIT, whom He poured out on us abundantly through JESUS CHRIST our SAVIOR, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life,*” and finally, St. Peter, who, in speaking of Noah’s flood, wrote, “*There is also an antitype which now saves us—Baptism*”

This, dear ones, is the faith and confession of a Lutheran—faith in the Words and promises of God. From these Words of God as recorded in Holy Scripture we learn that salvation has never been dependent on what we do or on what we feel, but on what God has said, what He has promised, and what CHRIST has done. This is objective faith—faith that sees faith as a gift of God and not as a work of our own. This is a faith that rests on God and His assurance of salvation, not on how one feels, even in times of doubt. This is a faith that returns

daily to the objective gift of salvation given you in your Baptism. This is faith that says, *“God said it, therefore, I believe it.”*

Yes, this is true, saving, faith. It is a faith bestowed by the HOLY SPIRIT, sent forth by the FATHER and the SON, as a free gift of God—free to you because its benefits were bought and paid for with the precious Blood of your SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST. It is the faith the HOLY SPIRIT poured over you in Baptism, preached into your ears through faithful pastors, declared to you in the blessed words of Absolution, and fed to you in our LORD’s Holy Supper.

So, it is, that the true Christian Church is a sacramental Church where preaching, Absolution, Baptism, and the LORD’s Supper are held above all other things. Why? Not because they are good works, but because they are the means by which God, the HOLY SPIRIT, creates faith, convicts sinful hearts, and delivers life-giving mercy, grace, and forgiveness. Their focus is on one thing and one thing alone—JESUS CHRIST crucified, dead, and buried and on the third day, raised again for you, and now ascended to the right hand of God the FATHER as your High Priest and advocate.

The HOLY SPIRIT preaches the objective truth of JESUS CHRIST and Him crucified. He holds JESUS before you so that you may look upon Him with God-given eyes of faith. Thus, the Church lives and has Her being by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Are you saved? Absolutely! How do you know? Because God has said it is so. When did He say it? He said it as He poured the Water of Life over you on the day you were baptized. How did He do it? He did it with His Word and His SON’s precious Body and Blood. Are you saved because you have the strength to believe? No, you are saved because JESUS had the strength to shed His Blood and give up His life for you. Why did He do it? Because that is how God has chosen to love you. Is there anything left for you to do? No, it is finished, as He said.

So, when someone asks of you, *“Are you saved?”*, let your answer be, *“Yes, I am baptized into CHRIST.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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