



Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
29 September 2024

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen. Martin Luther once said, “Where God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel.” A reminder for us that the presence and faithfulness of God is never without the existence of the devil. Some would argue that the presence of the church is the exact attraction for the work of the devil. Others would argue that the devil does not exist at all. I will tell you that we, who believe ourselves to be so civilized, often dismiss the existence of the devil. But Matthew chapter 4 tells us of the moment when Jesus meets the devil in the wilderness. For Martin Luther, the existence of the devil was by all accounts, daily reminded to him.

I’m starting today with Luther because his understanding of God’s grace and blessing was rooted in his baptism. Baptism, for Luther, was the ultimate expression of how we belong to God, no matter what. Once we are baptized, there is no power, in heaven or on earth or under the earth, that can separate us from God’s love. As the Apostle Paul tells us in the book of Romans tells us: <sup>38</sup> I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,<sup>[b]</sup> neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. <sup>39</sup> No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. Although Luther’s conversion experience while reading Romans changed his whole outlook on life and faith, it certainly did not mean that he never experienced doubt and struggle again. Thrust into the role of a leader of the new Protestant movement – when all he had ever wanted to do was reform the Church, not found a new one – he lived a turbulent life, constantly debating his opponents and in danger from the authorities. He translated the whole Bible into German while holed up in the castle of a protective prince of Germany to avoid being captured or killed. Not surprisingly, he was often plagued with fear and anxiety, and with doubt and discouragement about whether any of this would ever bear fruit.

When all of this started to get Luther down, he had a unique strategy: he would stand up, face down the devil that he believed to be tormenting him, and yell, “I am baptized!” Some sources indicate that he would write the same phrase – “I am baptized” – in chalk on his desk, to remind himself, as he worked, of his unbreakable connection to Christ and to the communion of saints. We could do worse, I think, than to do the same. There is a lot to get us down these days. A lot to make it seem like evil is ascendant in the world, offering fear and despair as a logical response. A lot to make us wonder where God is in the midst of the chaos.

Last week was one of those weeks for me. I visited my surgeon in Madison for a year review since the surgery that changed/saved my life. As we were wrapping up, I mentioned to him that I thought I had developed a hernia by my surgical scar. After confirming the concern, the doctor said I could fix it at some point and since it was not causing pain – it was no big deal. Until Saturday morning when of course, I woke up with experiencing some new pain. Not bad enough for the Emergency Room but enough to notice. And three days later – the pain had intensified. Not wanting to ruin the work the surgeon had completed a year ago, I decided I should head to the ER to make sure the intestine was being pinched by the hernia. But before leaving the house, I went to brush my teeth. Many of us do it every day, multiple times a day. I grabbed my toothbrush. I grabbed the toothpaste. I put the toothpaste on the toothbrush and as I began to brush I smelled a strange smell. Not unfamiliar but not familiar enough to figure out what it was until I rinsed my mouth out and realized that I had somehow brushed my teeth with both toothpaste and the gel from my deodorant. Do you know what happens after you brush your teeth with deodorant? Your lips dry up like you have sucked on a lemon and I had to brush them again to get rid of the ocean fresh scent of my deodorant from my tongue. Yeah – it was glorious. There are moments where I can understand how Luther was feeling when the world around him was unfamiliar, challenging, difficult, even to the point of despair.

So I wonder about the disciples today - <sup>38</sup> “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” <sup>39</sup> “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, <sup>40</sup> for whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup> Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to



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the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.” Why are the disciples so quick to judge the work of another who seems to be serving the needs of the world in the same way that Jesus was inviting the disciples to serve?

Jesus does not waste any time. “Listen up,” Jesus might have said. “<sup>42</sup>“if you give one of these simple, childlike believers a hard time, bullying or taking advantage of their simple trust, you’ll soon wish you hadn’t. You’d be better off dropped in the middle of the lake with a millstone around your neck. “If your hand or your foot gets in God’s way, chop it off and throw it away. You’re better off maimed or lame and alive than the proud owner of two hands and two feet, godless in a furnace of eternal fire. And if your eye distracts you from God, pull it out and throw it away. You’re better off one-eyed and alive than exercising your twenty-twenty vision from inside the fire of hell.”

So it is that most of us would be walking with one foot, reaching out with one hand, seeing with one eye if we are to take Jesus at face value today. In the early days of my ministry, Mark 9:42 was the verse that would keep me up at night. “If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better if a large millstone were hung around their neck, and they were thrown into the sea.” I would take that verse to heart and guard every word from my tongue, most every thought in my head and work to live up to the pillar church members often placed me on as their pastor. Until I realized, I could not live up to that pillar. It is exhausting to strive for perfection. It is just as exhausting to come to terms with our imperfection. Strive towards the pillar? Yes. Trust God would help me work to climb up to the top of the pillar? Of course. But achieve the status or position of perfection on the pillar. Not a chance. I know. I know. You are not surprised. However, it took me a while to learn that as pastor, God did not expect me to be perfect. It took even longer for me to understand that as a child of God and as a disciple of Jesus, what God wanted was my heart, my worship, my trust in a relationship with God – not the perfect child, perfect disciple, or perfect partner in a relationship. What God does expect is that I remember that: I am loved. To quote Luther – “I am baptized.” All are true of who I am and who you are. What is also true is that I am broken. I am a sinner. I sometimes doubt that God is present. And when I had children, I learned that I wasn’t even right some of the time. And finally, God expects that I remember that I am forgiven.

- It is such a simple gift – to give a cup of water in the name of Jesus.
- It is a simple thing to ask the one who is afraid if you can sit with them for a time.
- It is a simple thing to offer your hand in greeting to the one who stands alone.
- It is a simple thing to buy an extra can of soup to share with the food pantry for someone in need.
- It is a simple thing to fold your hands in prayer for someone you know who is hurting.
- It is a simple thing to send a text message to remind someone that you have thought about them.
- It is a simple thing to remind another they are loved by the words you speak, the cookies you bake, the time and presence you offer.
- It is a simple thing to remember you are forgiven when you believe you are not.
- It is a simple thing to learn the name of another just by asking.
- It is a simple thing to be the one who offers a moment of welcome to someone who is afraid they are not.
- It is a simple thing to trust God’s promise to be with you.

All you need do is remember the words you heard today, “I am baptized.” And that my friends will be the cup of water gifted to each of us today. Without the ocean breeze scented deodorant. Thanks be to God! Amen.