

Lesson: Ephesians 1:3-14

Psalm 85:8-13

Gospel: Mark 6: 14-29

7th Sunday after Pentecost

July 11, 2021

**“Law and Gospel
Sermon Preached by Rev. Lowell Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City**

Grace and peace be to you through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. What a story! A story of a prophet speaking the truth and being struck down; a story of sexual intrigue, power and corruption. It is a story that humanity experiences day in and day out. When I was preparing to become a pastor, Bishop David DeFreese of the Nebraska Synod said to me “don’t be surprised by sin.” I wondered, what does that mean? Sin is pervasive; sin is those things that take us away from the love of God and the love others. And in so doing we estrange ourselves from oneself, the strangest dynamic of life.

The Greek philosophers spoke of this, to “know thyself.” And we have discovered that to know oneself is to know God and other people. In this community we know ourselves and we simply fall short. We are fundamentally unwilling to be dependent upon God. We don’t like to be dependent upon another, and to be dependent upon God is a different aspect of life. It is not a sign of weakness. Decades ago, Ted Turner would say things like “Christianity is for losers” and I remembered wanting to argue. But then I thought yes, we are losers for Christ; I find myself by losing myself and finding God. And finding the love of others is truly the search of life that we’re on. We are committed to love one another and to love God.

Many fine theologians do great work in describing ‘law and Gospel, but as a pastor in the normality of church life, I understand that God’s law – knowing how things should work – has three potential uses. The first use of rules or regulations is God’s instructions for life. For example, to ‘have no other gods before me’ is to create a more civil society. If we follow the fundamental designs of God’s law, this will be a better place to live. Think of driving; if we didn’t follow the laws, didn’t stop at stoplights but just blew through them, our actions could harm others and ourselves. The curbing of harm, living together as a civil society is certainly good use of the law, but that’s not salvation.

To drive toward salvation, to hear the pure Gospel, involves the second use of the law that more like a mirror, you could say a theological purpose that mirrors our activities. Take a deep look at yourself and understand the words of our brief order for confession. Some of us continually beat ourselves up and don’t understand the Gospel. We always understand the first part of the confession -- the law condemning us and convicting us, the testimony of “the things we’ve done or things we’ve left undone” and the pressures that allow us to justify harming others and disrespecting God.

The Gospel lesson speaks of this. King Herod wrestled the title from the Roman Empire. Although referred to in the scripture as King Herod, the son Herod Antipas (“after the father”) never did become king and was actually banished and kicked out of leadership. In his short quest for power, here he is with the ability to choose between life and death. His daughter wanted to get rid of John the Baptist; he could have stopped this, and yet he allowed the pressures, and the adulation and power. “Don’t be surprised by sin.” These are the dynamics in which we need to hear the Gospel message. He needed Christ; *we* need Christ; we can’t do it on our own.

I have a car that beeps and whistles. If somebody pulls out and I don’t follow quickly enough, it speeds me up; it beeps if I don’t stay in my lane. Perhaps I’m a safe driver with all this, but I must be a bad driver because I hear beeps all the time. ☺ We mirror God’s love by being able to look at ourselves. In the fundamental nature of the

distortion that we create through sin, we need the breath of the Gospel message. It comes out so beautifully in the Ephesians text: “Before the foundation of the world Christ chose us.” From the beginning God loves you, the fundamental of unconditional love. We were destined for adoption; we’re part of God’s family. He bestows on us redemption and forgiveness of sins, and gives us grace, wisdom and insight.

I love this phrase “...as He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time.” One of the distortions of sin is taking away time. What I mean by that is breaking God’s time, right here and right now. You may have done something in your life that brings up regret time and time again. It can be in the far distant past, and yet can be brought up again and again. Or you can have a fear of the future of a variety of things that haven’t yet even occurred, and yet they overwhelm the present because of your fear of either your own actions or the collective actions of others. The fullness of time – law and Gospel – helps us to understand this insight, the “fullness of time” now. God’s love breaks into the midst of sin.

I love how the Psalm says it: “steadfast love and faithfulness have met together.” This is God’s doing, not our doing. “Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” What a beautiful intimacy of speaking of God’s love for you, a holy kiss for you right here, right now, through the internet, for people gathering here in the sanctuary, this kairos moment. Kairos means ‘the fulfillment of time.’ That time is fulfilled now. The law and gospel message of redemption holds tension that yes, even in this time, God’s love is here and present, through the gift of Jesus Christ. No one can take that away from us. Even though sin will distort our messages, we come back again and again.

A kairos moment came to me once when I was with my son Joe, then about 11 years old, at a church conference. The topic was time marching on, and kairos where God breaks in the fullness of time. At lunch, a woman approached me and said “Are you a pastor? Can you help me?” You see, I was not yet a pastor so I stumbled and stuttered while my son behind me chanted “Kairos! Kairos!” Kairos is all around us when we understand the law and gospel message, when we don’t try to make it a performance requirement that we strive harder. It is a total gift, and as the love of God breaks in and confronts us with the reality of sin, it is encapsulated within His love. We are, as Luther said, “sinner but saint.”

One of the greater things about law and Gospel is that we don’t have to pretend; we don’t have to deny the truth. The Cactus Conference of the ELCA is designing a fall workshop to confront the issue of racism. Part of me is scared to do that because can we actually talk about being anti-racist, to confront the reality of sin, without adopting new sin because of the color of our skin? How is it that we can speak of love for one another? How do we confront each other with the reality of sin, and yet with the dignity of the Gospel message? These are difficult times and yet here it is now, law and Gospel united in the beautiful message of Christ’s love. Salvation is very near to those who fear Him. May we turn to Him that glory may dwell in our land.

The righteousness of God creates a dynamic of life – Pentecost life – new life, new growth. So in these warmer days of summer I pray for this encouragement: as we hear of King Herod, absolute destruction and the reality of sin, we are redeemed. This Gospel of our salvations is marked with the seal, the promise of the Holy Spirit, God’s own pledge of our inheritance toward the praise of His glory. Now is the time of our salvation, the kairos moment, the fullness of time; here for you and me now. Thank you, God for loving sinners. Thank you, God for the gift of Jesus Christ and the fullness of His love. Amen.