

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Columbus, OH)
Trinity 17 – September 26, 2021
Luke 14:1-11, Ephesians 4:1-6: He Who Humbles Himself will be Exalted
By Peter Wagner

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Hear again from Ephesians chapter 4. Paul writes, **“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”** This is our text.

Paul’s exhortation to humility in Ephesians is vividly illustrated by Jesus’ words in the gospel reading. The Pharisees jockeyed for the place of honor at the banquet table. But Jesus rebuked them, **“Do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited.”** Instead, Jesus says, **“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”** Pride is the first and deadliest sin. But humility is the posture of faith. Humility falls prostrate before the Son of God, recognizing that he alone is in control.

The humility of faith is the opposite of the scoffing pride of this world. This week’s appointed psalm, Psalm 2, asks, **“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain against the Lord and against his Anointed?”** That’s the pride of this world, directed against the church and against Christ the Anointed. But God scoffs at the world’s raging. **“He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, ‘As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’”** Our king, Jesus, is established as head of the church. No prideful raging can overthrow his holy dominion. So the Psalm concludes, **“Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.”** As Christians, we never stand against the world on our own; we take refuge in Jesus the Son of God.

But today, people everywhere are perishing in the way of unbelief. Make no mistake – this pandemic is the hand of God. For unbelievers, God is using the pandemic to demonstrate his power, teaching the nations to fear his wrath and repent. For believers, God is using it to draw us to himself, teaching us to trust in him alone. Covid has taught us that the church is the one sanctuary of God’s presence where we may find refuge. It has taught us that secular authority cannot dictate whether we gather for worship or how we worship. But most importantly, it has taught us to value Jesus’ sacramental presence here in worship, a presence that brings real, eternal life – life free from fear and death. Hearing God’s word and receiving his gifts – the Divine Service of God – this is the one true essential, far more necessary than any store or service. As Jesus said to Satan, **“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”**¹

But in the past year and a half, the world has mocked us not only for our confession on worship, but also for quarreling about comparatively minor things like masks and vaccines. Instead of confessing God’s hand in all this, instead of seeking refuge in him alone, Christians have joined in the endless debate on how to respond to Covid. Rather than seeking unity in faith, we’ve sought to exalt ourselves and confirm our own opinions. And pride is at the root of it.

Whether you wear a mask or get vaccinated is a private decision, based on the advice of your doctor, made out of concern for your neighbor. If the church were to teach as doctrine such opinions of men, our worship of Christ would be in vain.² Moreover, your political and social views on these questions do not reflect the sincerity of your faith. But we can still harm the church collectively and ourselves spiritually by insisting on our opinions. We can harm the church collectively by quarreling and putting our pride and hypocrisy on display to the world. This brings dishonor to Christ and his name that we bear. And we can harm ourselves spiritually when we devote ourselves to political and social views above God’s word. God has commanded us to meditate on his word when we rise up and when we lie down, to keep his statutes constantly before our eyes.³ Instead, we find ourselves

¹ Matthew 4:4

² Matthew 15:9

³ Deuteronomy 6:4-9

meditating on our opinions day and night, keeping our Facebook feed constantly before our eyes. If that's not idolatry, what is?

The outcome of all this is that Satan is using human pride about human opinions to divide the church. Instead of listening patiently to each other, Christians across our country are despising each other and seeking to justify themselves. Up till now, the unity of our own congregation has been preserved. Praise God for that! But Satan is crouching at our door also. Do not let pride divide this congregation.

What should we do? Paul writes, **“I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness.”** Our calling is to walk in the way of Jesus Christ. He was born in human form and laid in a humble manger. He emptied himself and took on the form of a servant.⁴ He had compassion on sinners and washed the disciples' feet in love. And he went to the cross, laying down his life for you in absolute humility. Therefore he calls you to take up your cross and walk in the same way – in a manner worthy of your calling – in humility and gentleness. He calls you to take the lowest seat at the table, sitting at his feet in silence, listening to his holy word before you speak.

Paul continues. **“I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of your calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,”** Rather than speaking your opinion, consider your grieving brothers and sisters in Christ. All of us together are grieving that Christians are quarreling, grieving that so many have not returned to worship for a year and a half, grieving that so many will never return at all. Bear with one another in love. Encourage each other. Be patient with your weaker brothers and sisters, and pray for one another. Above all, pray for the unity of the church!

“Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” That's the point. Satan is seeking to destroy our bond of peace and cast out the Holy Spirit from our midst. But we should eagerly receive the Spirit and the peace he bestows. This peace and unity – this communion of the saints that we confess in the Creed – is based on our unified confession of pure doctrine. True unity is not based on what we think should be done, but on what God has already done for us in Christ Jesus. And how does the Holy Spirit establish us in the bond of peace? He has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with his gifts, sanctified and kept us in the one true faith.⁵

Therefore Paul concludes with a high doxology, one that lifts our spirits and comforts our troubled hearts. **“There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”** These words remind you of the Triune God in whose name you are called. There is one body and one Spirit, one Lord Jesus Christ, one God and Father of all. On this fact we stand firmly. Despite all Satan's raging and all the world's raging, despite our division and suffering, the true, universal church will never be extinguished. It shall always be preserved, just as certainly the Trinity itself shall endure. When we are grieving, when our faith is mocked by the whole world, we do not stand alone. Our hope is not in vain, since our refuge is the Triune God.

Our hope is not in vain because it comes from God, not from within ourselves. Paul says that our faith is, **“the one hope that belongs to your call.”** Faith belongs to God who calls us. We were called by the one Lord Jesus Christ into this one faith, through the one baptism that we share in him. And that baptism is a baptism into his death, once for all. He humbled himself for our sake, so that sharing in his death and humiliation, we might also be raised with him.⁶

Therefore he exalts you and calls you his friend. He says to you, **“Friend, move up higher!”** Come to a better place at the banquet table, not because of your worthiness, but because of his calling and his mercy and his love. In Christ, you become fellow heirs, sons of the one God and Father of all. So join in the communion of the saints. Kneel in the place of honor before his altar. Partake of the body and blood of your gracious host, which establishes and maintains your perfect bond of peace. And be comforted! Be comforted because your heavenly Father is over all and through all and in all, and he alone has won the final victory! Blessed are all who take refuge in him. Amen.

⁴ Philippians 2:7

⁵ Small Catechism, Explanation of the Third Article of the Creed

⁶ Romans 6:5