

SACRIFICIAL LOVE IS SHOWN IN PRAYER

He is Risen and Ascended!

Hear again the Word of God for this only Sunday of the Ascension season:

Above all things in yourselves keep having intense sacrificial love, because sacrificial love continues to cover over (a) multitude of sins...¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Today, things do not look the same as last Sunday in the Chancel, in particular here in the Sanctuary (the area immediately adjacent to the Table of the Lord). Yes, the flowers are different than last week. That is of necessity, as it is helpful to our understanding of the beauty and fragility of this mortal life that any plant material which adorns the Lord's Table be cut from living plants. Yes, the communion veil may be draped a bit differently, the boots (shoes) covering the Lord's Table waiters may be a bit different; the page to which the Gospel Book is opened is different; but there is something significant missing. That is.... the Paschal Candle. It was moved after being extinguished following the reading of the Gospel this past Thursday. There it will stand, unlit, except for when baptisms are celebrated here, until next year's Holy Saturday service of lights and readings. While it was here, it represented Christ's special presence with His disciples during the forty days before the day He ascended into heaven to sit at the position of all honor, authority, rule and might in our flesh. Now that we have celebrated His ascension, we know that there He will remain, coming to us only in His chosen Means of Grace, until the Last Day. He who remains heralded as the

¹ 1 Peter 4:8.

resurrection and the life (banner on South, or left of the cross), is again proclaimed as Christus Victor (banner on the North, or Right of the cross). In this image we in the Church may envision Jesus ruling with all His enemies dwelling under His feet.

From these visual reminders of heavenly and earthly realities, the Church's ears, heart, and her peoples' minds are moved to living under God's grace. The fathers of the Church began calling this *Exaudi Sunday*, "*Hear, O Lord Sunday*" centuries ago. They did so in order to help the sinner/saints on earth who stand, sit, or kneel in the Naves of His congregations' buildings remember the time of the prayers the first congregation of the risen and ascended Lord was called to maintain while awaiting the Promise of the Father. Those among us who received God's gifts on the second Great Feast day of the ancient Christian Church, Ascension Day, heard the eyewitness report of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and learned of their return to Jerusalem, to pray and wait for the coming of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. A remembrance of their ten day wait in prayer seems to be behind St. Peter's word of grace for this last week of the Easter season:

For the end of all things has come near. All of you must have been wise in mind then, and all of you must have been clear-minded for prayers...²

Among those waiting through the time we know was a week and a half, was Peter, the human author of today's letter. The words of he who had waited in prayer for the arrival of the Holy Spirit continue to encourage those who have received that same Spirit. He calls us to remain in the prayers of the Church. That is one reason God

² 1 Peter 4:7.

continues to call you to assemble together around His Word and Sacraments, that He might fulfill His Word in you, and you respond with the New Testament sacrifice of the prayers.

The larger Church of the right confession of the Faith in our day has recognized the Apostolic call to prayer – especially in the manner in which it is connected to God’s sacrificial love in today’s reading. Some of us have seen the latest *Lutheran Witness* with its articles on prayer. A few of us may have read over the report of the LC-MS Commission on Theology and Church Relations entitled, “Theology and Practice of Prayer: A Lutheran View.” While the latter was published and distributed in February, the former has just come out. Both are meant to encourage prayer among Christians that is Bible based, and that does not contradict with right belief. Perhaps, in particular, the *Lutheran Witness* editor is familiar with *Exaudi Domine*, “Hear, O Lord,” *Sunday* and its emphasis on prayer (I am certain of that). Her timing of the release was certainly “spot on” with the more ancient Church calendar used by congregations like this one.

In any event, the Church’s cry for this week, “Hear, O Lord,” is a word of prayer, as the faithful call upon God with His Word. In so doing, we show that we firmly believe that He hears us and answers us for our good, in His time, according to His ways. St. Peter, familiar with the Psalm’s call to the Lord to hear the prayer of the faithful, begins his emphasis on prayer in a somewhat unexpected manner. After having reminded the recipients of his letter that the Good News of Jesus Christ was preached to those who were spiritually dead, Peter moves on with this encouragement to prayer: *the*

end of all things has come near. What does that mean? Why is that an encouragement to prayer?

The reality is that, from the moment of Christ's ascension, wherein the clouds hid Him from the view of mortal eyes, the faithful have awaited the end of all of this fallen creation, to be heralded by Jesus' return on the clouds. From the beginning, the witnesses of His ascension did as they were told. They went from the mountain top to the city, and remained in prayer. They did not know the day nor the hour of Jesus' return. Yet, from Christ's departure, they remained watching, waiting, and praying for His return. They knew, as you know, that whether Christians meet Christ at their deaths, or on the Day of His bodily return, they have been called by God to remain in faithful prayer. In doing so, we remain ready to meet Him. St. Peter encourages us while we wait in the Faith:

All of you must have been wise in mind then, and all of you must have been clear-minded for prayers;...³

Those words speak to clarity of thought in the believers. They are spoken to "all of you," specifically to the Assembly of God's people in their prayers. It is a call to remain fit for offering the Word of God back to God from a unified mind centered on the clarity of the forgiveness of sins – that which God declares to name His people holy. Self-control and sober-mindedness in prayer enables us to place our emphasis in prayer on that which God wills to do.

On the other hand, at times, our prayers, your prayers if you are a "normal"

³ 1 Peter 4:7.

sinner-saint, can be “I just wanna...,” or “Gimme...” prayers. Even congregational prayers can be spoken in such a manner. They become prayers that are self - or community - serving, inward looking, and thus fall short of God’s holy Word. Congregations and individual believers alike can fall into bargaining with God in our prayers. These run all the way into such unbiblical thoughts as: 1) “God, if you get me out of this situation, I will do *fill in the blank;*” or, 2) “Holy and Gracious God, if you will give us the resources, we will build for you *fill in the blank;*” and so forth. Have you ever bargained so with God, or perhaps are even now doing so? If so, turn from such sinful thinking. Believe that, because you and we believe that Jesus rose from the dead to make us right with the Father, He knows our needs before we even ask, and wills to grant all things to us for our good, for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Turn and with a mind cleansed by the Gospel offer the right sacrifice of prayer. St. Peter today leads the clear-headed prayers into one good reason for our petitions:

Above all things in yourselves keep having intense sacrificial love, because sacrificial love continues to cover over (a) multitude of sins...⁴

Those words indicate that wise-minded prayer leads us into unconditional love for each other. On the other hand, that which you are hearing, taken out of the context of right prayer, can lead people into thinking that our *intense sacrificial love* has the power to forgive. But, when the sentence is kept with the preceding words, it becomes clear that sacrificial love is shown in offering clear-headed prayers – for one

⁴ 1 Peter 4:8.

another in particular. St. Peter, in connecting right prayer with sacrificial love, is not teaching anything new. He is quoting Scripture. These words, from Proverbs 10, lie behind Peter's word regarding the connection between prayer and unconditional love:

*Hatred stirs up strife
But love covers all sins.⁵*

Using those words of Scripture to interpret the Scripture of St. Peter's letter gives us his reasons for encouraging clear-minded, wise-headed, prayer as a means of expressing our sacrificial love for one another. The person who approaches prayer while hating his brother or sister comes to God with an anger-clouded mind. This can lead one, you, us, into self-centered, self-willed, self-serving prayers, prayers which are not pleasing to God. Conversely, sacrificial love is shown in prayer.

That, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, is just what St. Peter is calling us away from with his encouragement to prayer. He is calling us to service to our neighbor, service which begins first with the household of God, in prayer for one another and for all of us. Because of Christ's sacrifice for us, His prayers for us while we were yet sinners, we are free to pray rightly for our neighbors. This text on prayer as a display of unconditional love continues as it makes clear how God will us to serve one another, by,

entertaining one another as strangers without murmuring; just as each one received (a) gift, administer it for yourselves as good stewards of (the) variegated grace of God.⁶

In other words, the members of the Christian congregation, the household of

⁵ Proverbs 10:12, NKJV.

⁶ 1 Peter 4:9-10.

God, are called to regard themselves as servants – to and for one another. He lists two such gifts of grace which are found in the Christian congregation; 1) speaking the Word of God; and, 2) serving (ministering to others). Christ Jesus did both perfectly. He spoke the pure Word of God without error. He served – ministered – to others in order to meet their bodily and spiritual needs. He did this even to giving of Himself in service -- to bear their sins into the grave; to rise from the dead that they may know they are reconciled to the Father; to ascend into heaven that all the faithful may know that where our Head is, there the Body remains attached.

That means that the congregation, as the visible Body of Christ in our world, serves as His Voice, hands, arms, legs and feet to those around us. Jesus exercises His care for His people, and for lost sinners, through the members of His Body. This means, dear Christian, that you are being called to remain attentive to the gift or gifts He has given you. Whatever your gift: give attention to it in your daily life. You are free to use it in service for others. For you are truly members of Christ, to work His will and His ways, for one another, and for the world. Since God's love, in sending the Christ to bear your sins, has covered over your sins, you are free show sacrificial love to your neighbor. As God works this out in you through prayer which displays sacrificial love, *in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To Him remain the glory and the might into the aeons of the aeons. Amen!*

He is Risen and Ascended!

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Pastor Michael H. Merhouse

SOLI DEO GLORIA

For the end of all things has come near. All of you must have been wise in mind then, and all of you must have been clear-minded for prayers;⁷ above all things, keep having intense sacrificial love for each other, because sacrificial love continues to cover multitudes of sins;⁸ entertaining one another as strangers without murmuring;⁹ just as each one received (a) gift, administer it to yourselves as good stewards of (the) variegated grace of God.¹⁰

If anyone continues to speak, he speaks as if they were the words of God; if anyone continues to minister, he does so as out of (a) strength which God continues to supply; in order that, in all things, God may be continually glorified through Christ Jesus, to Whom is the glory and the dominion into the aeons of the aeons; so shall it be.¹¹

⁷ I Peter 4:7.

⁸ I Peter 4:8.

⁹ I Peter 4:9.

¹⁰ I Peter 4:10.

¹¹ I Peter 4:11.