

THE HEIGHT OF JESUS' LOVE

Hear again the Word of the Lord,

For all of you have died, and the life of all of you has been hidden in the Christ in the God.¹

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

As many of you heard last Wednesday, our Lenten series this year is progressing through the verses of the Hymn of the Day, or Office Hymn. God has not called you here for either a history lesson or English language instruction. Even so, hearing a bit about our theme hymn can lead to a greater appreciation of the Jesus, and His love, about which we sing.

Such need was recently driven home to me again. A recent non-Lutheran repeat visitor asked to take an hymnal home to better learn – and teach in his home – that that which is used here to receive God's gifts. This congregation used to formally present a hymnal for home use to each new member family when they joined our roles if they had none. Such realities helped informed today's homily whose work it is to tie the second verse of today's theme hymn with these words:

For all of you have died, and the life of all of you has been hidden in the Christ in the God.²

Turn back to hymn 611 for three to five more minutes, please. The words of "Chief of Sinners Though I Be," were first penned in the English language by an

¹ *Colossians* 3:3.

² *Colossians* 3:3.

Irishman. That man, a bookseller, published in 1864 in a book of his poetical works that which would become the words of our chosen hymn this year. The verses of that hymn have been available since 1912 in English speaking congregations of the English Synod (from which our English District of the LCMS is descended).

Thanks to a member of Catalina Lutheran Church, there is an early copy of one of those hymnals in my study. From that, one can learn that over the past 104 years, “Chief of Sinners” has been moved in the internal divisions of our hymnals. From early on until 2006 it was in the section entitled, “Redeemer.” Then it was moved to the division called, “Confession and Absolution.” Both section headers certainly fit the words of the entire hymn. Both describe that which we receive by dying with Christ and being raised up to the heights of God’s love in Him. Either division in which the hymn has been placed declares the hiddenness of our life in God – that which is revealed to the faithful in our confession of the height, depth, and eternity of His love for us in Jesus.

Throughout the century that “Chief of Sinners Though I Be” has been in LCMS congregations, only a couple of changes to today’s theme verse have survived to be included in *Lutheran Service Book*. The first is a simple spelling change. That in no way impacts the meaning of today’s verse.

Other changes are subtler. They consist of punctuation marks. Those do effect the emphasis of the text. The words you have sung today in the second verse of

hymn 611 have been assembled into three sentences as they were a century ago. Yet they are divided differently. That can impact how the hymn may be heard. At the least, the changes do, if one pays attention to the words and inflections of a text as one sings, subtly shift one's thinking away from that which the verse's composer intended.

Please open your hymnals to "Chief of Sinners Though I Be," hymn 611.

Follow along as I read through a text which appears to record the original intent of William McComb as he composed this poem:

O the height of Jesus' love!

*Higher than the heavens above,
Deeper than the depths of sea,
Lasting as eternity;
Love that found me, -- wondrous thought! –*

Found me when I sought Him not.³

Confessional Lutherans are used to maintaining that "Words mean things," from that we hold that words are important. We also can behold today that the manners in which words may be grouped can impact the direction or meaning of texts.

For example, both the 19th century hymn and its 21st century revision exclaim how wonderful it is that God's love in Christ found "me!" Both old and new end with a statement of biblical reality. That is: Jesus' love finds the individual without him or her ever seeking Jesus. There we have agreement

³ McComb, William. Evangelical Lutheran Hymnbook, "Chief of Sinners Though I Be," St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1918, 99, v.2.

On the other hand, the older, and apparently original word grouping of today's second verse places exclamatory emphases on 1). The height of Jesus love; and, 2). His love that found the singer of the hymn. The most recent changes to the hymn places exclamatory emphases on 1). The whole of Jesus' love which lasts forever; and, 2). His love that found the singer of the hymn. A comparison of the first points made by the verse uncovers a subtle change which appears to have been made in the last quarter of the 20th century. That leads to disagreement on how the emphasis of the verse should begin. (If you have not been paying attention to the words you are singing, and how the verses are intended to be sung, stop it. These hymns are great expositions of the Word of God. They allow us to confess – in memorable (and loud – as the children from Faith Lutheran School did on Sunday) our sin and our Savior). As you pay attention, you will discover that our contemporary revision of today's hymn verse wants us to hear an emphasis on the eternal nature of Jesus' love. Yet, we have heard that the earliest composition of the verse wants us to hear a beginning that holds forth an emphasis on the height of Jesus' love. It is that one which we may learn truly captures the fullness of today's biblical verse of emphasis:

For all of you have died, and the life of all of you has been hidden in the Christ in the God.⁴

Jesus loved us, loved you, so much, that He allowed you to die with Him!

You have heard repeated here throughout the years, (and in the *Small Catechism*, which

⁴ *Colossians* 3:3.

is also contained in your hymnal (pages 321ff)), that you have died with Christ and have been raised to new life in Him (cf. *Romans* 6:4). You have learned, or are re-learning, that God does that through the water and Word of Holy Baptism.

What you may not have reflected upon, recently or ever, in the manner in which our hymn presents it, that your baptismal life is hidden in Christ. You may really have to reflect deeply on the height of Jesus' love to discover that God has raised you up in Him. You have heard of His love for His followers, again today, when He promised to go and prepare dwelling places for them, for you, in our heavenly Father's House. You have been reminded of Jesus ascension, in this season of fasting and preparation for the rehearsal, the memorial, of the Day when Jesus displayed His love for you by dying in your sins. You behold images of that event on a regular basis as you receive God's gifts here.

Yet, do you think of that which is portrayed in a hidden manner? That is summed up in the phrase, *life of all of you has been hidden in the Christ in the God*. The Apostle Paul's usual manner of speaking is to call believers to life, "in Christ." Here, he calls you all, in his inspired construction of the verse, to the hidden truth that to have a life in Christ is to have a saving relationship with God the Father.

Because you have died and been raised – both hidden realities to human senses – with Christ in Holy Baptism (cf. *Colossians* 2:11-13), you have been given His saving Faith. Hear this divine revelation of God's hidden working for your present

and eternal salvation: the Holy Spirit working through the water and the Word, points you ever to Christ Jesus, Who stands before the Father interceding for you.

That leads us back to tonight's hymn verse, in particular, the original first emphasis line: *O the height of Jesus' love!* He ascended to the Cross for you, that your sins might be covered over. He rose from the grave for you, that you might believe and confess the coming resurrection of your body. He ascended to the Father for you, that He might draw you to Him to dwell with Him on that unending Last Day.

Then, the hymn turns to describing Jesus love as it leads you to its second emphasis: *Love that found me, -- wondrous thought!* That which comes before that joyous exclamation is descriptive of the height of Jesus' love which leads to the wondrous thought that God's love in Christ found you! That height is described first as ascending to the heavens - where Jesus your Head rules for you. It is from there He shall return, as our verse continues, *Deeper than the depths of sea.* His love will encompass all, as that which is sin, and sinfulness, will be cast away. The sea will no longer hold terrors, for they will have been drowned in a rush of cleansing fire. When that has passed away, that which will endure will be God's love for you in Christ Jesus. What a wondrous thought!

Then, to ensure we who sing this day's hymn understand that which we have confessed in song, the Irishman leads us to sing that all the hidden good is God's Work. The whole of God's love in Christ Jesus is summed up with a statement: *Found*

me when I sought Him not. That is so hidden in the wisdom of God that not even the devil can deceive you, as you remain in God's Word, daily returning to your Baptism, into despairing of the love of Christ in God that He gives to you. After all, you even now eternally live by the faith of the Son of God Who continues to lead you to the Father!

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

Lent II Wednesday

Psalm 25: 1a-2, 6, 2b, 22; Colossians 3:3; John 14:1-7

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Pastor Michael A. Morehouse

Soli Deo Gloria