

“In the Gospel we stand” 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you-- unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Today for our meditations we have this passage from Paul's 1st letter to Corinthians, chapter 15. And this is such a great passage to meditate upon. It may be a little bit neglected, but it is really important, and especially today.

For it reminds us what the foundations of our faith are and how strong and unshakable these foundations are. One of many problems today is that both the society in which we live, and also many Christians have been influenced by a certain idea. We could call this idea – faith and science opposition.

Or values and facts opposition. It goes under different names. What is it about? The idea is simple. It goes something like this, – the Christian faith is only about our subjective preferences, our personal beliefs and values.

It is our, so to speak, internal and private matter. Thus we shouldn't bring it out in public and we shouldn't share it with others. Or sometimes word “impose” is used, – we shouldn't impose it on others. We have our private beliefs, others have theirs.

Facts and science mindset, on the other hand, as they say, deal with hard realities of this material world. It deals with objective reality and therefore this is what we use in public sphere when we want to engage on any issue.

Do you see what happens if someone accepts this false opposition? Then you can dismiss any Christian from public debates just by claiming that whatever Christians say is just their private opinion and we shouldn't impose it to others.

And what happens when Christians get influenced by this idea? We may still hold our faith valuable for ourselves, but... we are really made impotent as witnesses of Christ. Because if we believe that our faith is only our private matter, we will not even try to share it with other.

Why would we? If we have believed this false idea, then why would we impose our private beliefs to other people? And many Christians indeed are deeply influenced by this idea not even realizing that it is a false opposition.

And what happens? Then we focus on being nice to others, serving them, – those are all good things. They help in this life. But the words of Jesus that are spirit and life, the faith creating Gospel message is withheld from people. No one hears it. For why would we impose salvation and eternal life to anyone?

Let us be reminded of what Paul wrote to Romans: “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Rom 10:17) And how would anyone trust in the true God and His Son Jesus Christ, if they haven’t heard about Him?

And how would they hear without someone speaking to them? And this is where we can see how our today’s reading from Corinthians is so helpful. For Paul shows how wrong this false idea is and what Christian faith is about.

“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you.” From what we know about Christians in Corinth, they don’t seem to be the easiest people to get along or to care for. But Paul planted that congregation.

Those were people whom Paul himself had brought to Christ. And now, when he had dealt with a mountain of different problems, he wants to remind them the Gospel, the Good News. To remind them what the Gospel is about.

So what is the Gospel? And let us not assume that everyone in the LCA knows it. Not so long ago there was an event here in Tanunda, where one of the LCA officials said in front of everyone that the Gospel is ... to love your neighbor. Really? Actually that is the Law. The summary of the Commandments.

This is what God commands us to do. You shall love your God and you shall love your neighbor. That is a terrible, terrible confusion. What is the Gospel, as Paul summarizes it? **“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: *that* Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, *that* he was buried, *that* he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...”**

This is the Gospel. This is the Good News. Not that we need to do something. But that God in Christ has done everything that needed to be done so that our relationships with God can be restored. That we can again call Him our Father.

That one day we could see Him face to face and live with Him in everlasting blessedness, peace and joy forever, in fully renewed, perfectly beautify and adventurous new heavens and new earth.

This is how Paul summarized the Gospel. Jesus Christ died for our sins. For mine and for yours. Exactly as God had foretold it in the Scriptures. That He was buried. He was indeed dead.

Being innocent He has taken our place and received the death that we deserve. And that He was raised from the dead on the third day, exactly as the Scriptures and Jesus Himself had foretold it again and again, when both – His disciples and His enemies were present and heard it.

This is the Gospel. This is the central message of the Bible. This is where Christian faith stands or falls. You take this message away and then Christian faith is nothing else, but a moral teaching as all the other belief systems.

But with this message everything changes. Our sins, all of them are dealt with. Forgiveness is proclaimed to all nations. Death has been dealt with. It has no power over God's children. Over you. For if we are united with Jesus by means of the Holy Spirit, then as He was raised in new, glorified body, so will we.

These are great news. If we have the Gospel, we have all that God has prepared for His people. All of that will be ours. Besides, the Gospel is not just information. Remember, our God is God who speaks.

He does everything by speaking. By speaking the Gospel He sends His Spirit into our hearts. And when He does it, the Spirit creates new hearts, that rejoice in forgiveness and eternal hope.

This is why Paul uses such vivid language describing the effects of the Gospel. “[The Gospel] **which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you-- unless you believed in vain.**”

Think about this. The Gospel is what gives us new life with God. We stand in the Gospel. Meaning, that is the Gospel message that creates and sustains our faith. Nothing else. Not our good and moral lives, not our noble intentions.

We stand only in the Gospel. Sometimes even Christians seem to be puzzled, what a big deal with this pure teaching of the Gospel? It is simple. If you hear the Gospel, you receive the Holy Spirit and the gift of eternal life.

If you hear only ideas of your pastor or even teaching that is twisted, nothing happens. You don't receive the Holy Spirit and saving faith is not created. This is why Lutheran church has always been so emphatic that Christians stand only with the pure teaching of the Gospel or fall without it.

As Paul says, – we are saved by the Gospel. As it was already said, the Gospel is not just an information. It is God's power, actively involved in rescuing us from the domain of darkness and transferring us into the kingdom of God's Son.

And this is very important, there is a condition that applies to us. “IF you hold fast to the word that I preached you”. Yes, we can't choose Christ. He comes and chooses us. But once the Holy Spirit is at work in us, once the battle between old Adam and a new creation in us has begun, we can't stay passive.

We need to hold fast to the Gospel. Meaning, we need to listen to it, to meditate upon it, read it, learn it, take it in using every opportunity. Unless you believed in vain... This is scary if we understand the gravity of these words.

If we don't hold fast to the Gospel, if we are lazy Christians, then we may lose the gift of the Holy Spirit and we can lose our salvation. This is Paul's concern for Corinthians, and this should be our concern for everyone who takes their salvation for granted and doesn't hold fast to the Gospel.

Now let's return to the false idea that Christian faith and this reality in which we live are somehow the opposites. Just listen once more what Paul presents as the very heart of his message. Jesus died, was buried, was raised and then...

"... He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

What is Paul talking about? Is he talking about his personal, subjective beliefs? No, not at all! And this is really important for our assurance. Our Christian faith is not based on something we don't know, so we just blindly believe. Not at all! It is about real historical events, about what actually happened.

Surely, we know that resurrection is not possible. Once dead, no one comes back to life. And the disciples of Jesus, they all knew it. This is why they were like deaf when Jesus repeatedly foretold that He is going to die and then on the third day, He will be raised again. They just couldn't hear it.

For it didn't make any sense to them. Until... they saw it with their own eyes. Not just one person. Not just two. According to the OT legal requirements every testimony would require two or three witnesses. How many do we have here?

Cephas, the Twelve. Then all the apostles. Then more than five hundred brothers at one time. Most of whom were still alive. Do you see what it means? Paul challenges Corinthians to search for the truth. "If you don't believe me, go and speak with some of those, who saw Jesus after His resurrection."

What it also means, that most of what we have received as the New Testament was written when eyewitnesses of those events were still alive and could confirm that what is written is what really happened.

Do you see how solid, how historical, how strong is the foundation of our trust in Jesus Christ, our resurrected Lord? Our faith is not about believing some funny stories where no one knows what really happened.

Our faith is about trusting this person of Jesus Christ, because we know for sure what He spoke and what He did. We trust in His for we know that He has received authority over everything, including life and death, which makes Him... yes, true God.

Just one more concluding thought. Paul humbly writes: **“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”**

This is not about Paul. He doesn't boast about his accomplishments, which by the way are truly remarkable. He says that it was all God's grace. God's grace chose him, a persecutor of the Church, God's grace entrusted him the ministry of the Gospel. God's grace alone enabled him to accomplish what he did.

And it is by God's grace that we have received the Gospel that Paul was sent to proclaim. And we too are here by God's grace alone. We are not here because we are better than those who aren't here. We are not here because we are worthier than the others. Not because we somehow deserve it. None on these.

As God's grace was at work in Paul's life, so it is God's grace that has called us and kept us in the true faith. And I pray that similarly as Paul, we too may acknowledge it, wholeheartedly.

And that similarly as Paul we too would do as much as we can, so that this grace that is so abundantly given to us, would not be given in vain, but would produce lives that are pleasing to our Lord, and a blessing to many.

Amen.