

⁸But God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹Therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, it is even more certain that we will be saved from God's wrath through him. ¹⁰For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, it is even more certain that, since we have been reconciled, we will be saved by his life.

The theme of our new worship series is “Christ Through Us.” It celebrates our synod’s 175-year history and ends with a celebration of the Reformation as well. We think about how Christ works through us, his people, to accomplish great things. But we can’t talk about “Christ through us” until we properly understand “Christ for us,” the theme of our service today.

Paul describes our natural spiritual condition with brutal honesty in this chapter: sinners, powerless, enemies of God. The simple truth begins with honesty and humility. Our problem wasn’t simply ignorance to sin or having good intentions but imperfect results. Our problem was full-blown rebellion against God. And so, any idea that you contribute to your own salvation flies in the face of what God tells us throughout his word, but especially here in these three verses.

We did not earn God’s love. How do you know? Because again and again in scripture, our natural spiritual state is described as dead and helpless. And what are dead things able to do? Nothing. How much help can the helpless provide? None. It’s in the name. Dead is dead, and there is nothing a person can do to get themselves off the mat when they are spiritually dead.

But listen to what Paul also calls us: justified, saved, reconciled. There was nothing we could do to give ourselves spiritual life. But we were justified by his blood. We were saved through Christ. We were reconciled by his death. Notice that phrase: “Christ died for us.” That’s where our theme “Christ for us” comes from. And this is the most defining feature of Christianity. Every other religion besides Christianity makes you the active agent. You must obey these commands to prove worthy. You must shape your life in a way that pleases the deity. But in Christianity, you are the passive recipient. Just in these three verses you see it clearly: “Christ died **for us**.” “**We have** now **been** justified.” “**We will be** saved.” “**We were** reconciled.” “**We will be** saved.”

It is a simple truth, but the most important truth. We ought not mix law and gospel. We ought not think that we contribute to our reconciliation with God even a small bit. Why? Because Christ died for sinners. He died for you and me. And this gives us confidence, knowing

our place in heaven is not set by anything we do or don't do. Every verb is God's action, action done for us.

That simple truth not only takes us from death to life. It also shaped what we confess to the world around us. Our confession is not complicated. It is simple and straight-forward because God's message to broken sinners is simple and straight-forward. We are justified in the blood of Christ. This is the same truth proclaimed by the apostles, confessed by our Lutheran forefathers in the Augsburg Confession, and treasured by our little Wisconsin Synod. "Christ for us" defines everything we teach. It shows us the way of salvation. It gives the Christian Church its purpose. It brings a comfort to believers that they can find nowhere else.

God has graciously preserved clarity of his word around us. Too easy it becomes to blur the line between faith and good works. And we ought not think we are immune to this trap of the Deceiver as individuals, as a congregation, or as a church body. We fall prey to it when we muddle our confession and try and reduce it to some common denominator-type statement, where we say we believe the Bible, but refuse to say what we believe about the Bible on account of creating division. But law-gospel truth is clear. The teachings of God in his word are clear. Therefore, we cannot get lost in the cesspit of non-confessionalism or refuse to honor our God for all his goodness. No, we must plumb the depths of his word. We must study what he wants us to know and obey, so we can confess the way to heaven rightly and clearly.

Grace alone, faith alone, and scripture alone. These were the tenants of the Lutheran Reformation over five hundred years ago. These were the same unadulterated principles that our German Lutheran ancestors brought to the New World from the motherland almost two centuries ago, as those farmers and tradesmen gathered together to start churches and be fed the truth of God's word, as missionaries piled into a 75-year-old America (and a 2-year-old Wisconsin) with strong seminary training in their pockets and a stubborn commitment to the truth of Scripture.

This church body would not be built on cultural tradition or national pride, but on the clear confession that we are justified by Christ's blood. For the last 175 years, this same gospel has been proclaimed in pulpits, taught in Catechism classrooms, sung in hymns, and passed from one generation to the next. And before you shrug your shoulders about that, think about how many friends you have who have broken from their churches because their church began to change its teachings. It wasn't the personality of the pastor that rubbed them the wrong way. It was the church softening what God teaches to try and draw more people into its doors. And by trying to expand the gates of heaven to fit more in, what they actually did was keep more out, preaching myths instead of the truth.

All this may sound arrogant. "We have it right and others have it wrong." But it needs to be said because it's not a brag about what we have done. It is a credit to the men and women who

came before us in our synod and in our own church, who did not view doctrine as a secondary concern behind the whims of their sinful hearts, but saw it as the most important thing. Christ has won the victory for sinners, and there is nothing we can add to the mix that makes that plain claim any more true.

But now, it is our work to keep that confession. Yes, we stand on the shoulders of spiritual giants, but we can throw away all that they have accomplished in a single decade. We can become apathetic to the faith. We can give into the temptation to treat the Bible as a pliable text that we can bend and fashion the way we want instead of seeing it as the word of God. We can turn away from the gospel of sins forgiven in Christ and to the social gospel, where all we concern ourselves with are the concerns of earthly life and the impossible task of making a sinful, fallen world perfect. We can refuse to drag our kids to church because we think “they have to find the truth for themselves.” As if you founded this confession of faith! As if you wrote the creeds we confess each Sunday, summarizing the faith that is in your heart! Don’t be so taken by this idea of the “self-made man” that you strand your kids on an island when it comes to knowing Jesus. You know the truth. Teach it to them. Indoctrinate the world around you. And I know that word carries baggage, but I chose it with purpose. Teach your children about Jesus! Spread the good news to the world abroad! Because if this were just opinion, you would be right to be careful what you say. But you know and believe that this is not opinion. This is truth. Christ died for sinners, and now sinners are reconciled to God.

And yet, 175 years is not a testament to man’s patient endurance. No one can persevere with the truth for 175 minutes, let alone years, because of our sinful condition. We get rocked by doubts. We turn to walk down our own paths. So, just as the simple truth of sin and grace shows Christ doing the work of salvation for us, so also this 175-year anniversary celebrates Christ working through the Christians who came before us to preserve this simple confession as well. He gave wisdom to those who laid the foundation of our Wisconsin Synod, and every generation after that was tempted to soften to the world’s pressures. He gave confidence to those who started our churches here in the UP, a confidence laid not on their own ingenuity or heartiness, but on the Lord of the Church, who provides for believers wherever they are and works to hold them in his truth. And he continues to care for us, providing us with the certainty of peace with God and eternity, and working day-by-day and week-by-week through his word to strengthen us in that certainty, even as Satan fires arrows of doubt into our hearts.

We still have two weeks left to celebrate 175 years of God’s grace in our synod, but this much must be clear: what matters most are not the buildings or the historical photos or the accomplishments in the mission field. What matters is that Christ died for sinners. And only when we recognize that can we celebrate what God has accomplished on the basis of that truth. Amen.