

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

2 Corinthians 3:4-11: "Only the Holy Spirit Can Give Healing Which Lasts."

August 19/20, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty and everlasting God, by whose grace we have been admitted into the glory of the new covenant: Grant, we beseech You, that being delivered from the death of sin and the bondage of the law, we may rejoice in the life and liberty of the Spirit, and evermore find our sufficiency in You; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 117)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the third chapter of St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. / Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, whose words to us are "spirit and life" (Jn. 6:63), and whose healing gifts of righteousness and forgiveness are applied to us by the power of the Holy Spirit, dear fellow redeemed:

There are a lot of health problems that we can treat on our own. If we are feeling hungry, we eat. If we are tired, we go to bed. If a headache develops, we take a pill or two. If we sustain a minor cut or scrape, we apply a bandage. But if something more major happens, we seek help from medical professionals.

In order for these medical professionals to help us, it is absolutely necessary that they tell us the truth, even if the truth hurts. We want to know if we have some sort of serious condition or injury, so we can work on treating it. Having a doctor tell us that we couldn't be healthier when he detects cancer in our bodies or malfunctioning organs will not do us any good. We trust our doctors to diagnose us as well as they are able and to treat the problem with the best tools at their disposal.

But for all that medical professionals are able to do, they can only do so much. Surgeons can cut out cancerous tumors, but they cannot stop more tumors from developing. Psychiatrists can help people work through mental difficulties, but they cannot take away all anxieties. No matter how well-trained health professionals are, they can offer only temporary help and temporary healing. They cannot give us what we need the most.

I

What we need the most is not physical healing but spiritual healing. Physical deficiencies may trouble us in this life, but spiritual deficiencies can result in suffering for eternity. Before we can receive treatment, an accurate diagnosis of our spiritual condition is required. This can be hard to come by. There are a great many spiritual practitioners out there who are not qualified for the work in any way.

They are like the doctors who are known for prescribing opioids in excessive amounts. They leave the decision to the patient and are happy to take the patient's money. Or these spiritual practitioners downplay the seriousness of the sinner's condition, so that he or she feels no strong motivation to address the problem. Or they prescribe the wrong treatment for a problem that only makes things worse.

The truth is that by nature, we are in bad shape. One of our hymns lays it all out in the open: "What God doth in His law demand, / No man to Him could render. / Before this Judge all guilty stand; / His law speaks curse in thunder. / The law demands a perfect heart; / We were defiled in ev'ry part, / And lost was our condition" (ELH 226, v. 2). As the hymn verse says, our spiritual sickness is diagnosed only by God's unchangeable law.

God's law does not make promises; it makes demands. It demands perfection. His law tells us "how we are to be, and what we are to do and not to do" (2001 ELS Catechism, question 11). Any spiritual physician who teaches that it does not matter how we live, or who says that God's Commandments are flexible, or who teaches that we can make ourselves right with God, is a liar. There is no wiggle room and no comfort to be found in the law. God's law is His line in the sand, and death is waiting for any who cross it.

The moral law has always been written on human hearts (Rom. 2:15). But because the conscience can grow dull, the LORD gave Moses the Ten Commandments first on two stone tablets and then on the pages of Scripture. He gave other laws besides, which regulated every aspect of life in the church and in society.

When Moses received these laws in the LORD's presence, his face absorbed the rays of God's brilliant light. He did not know this was happening until he returned to the Israelites' camp. The people were afraid to come near him since his face shone so brightly. So Moses put a veil over his face while he talked with the people, but he removed it when he came before God (Ex. 34:29-35).

Moses' shining face reminded the people that the law he delivered to them was from the holy God. The law was something to pay attention to. It was something to take very seriously. But while the law helped them keep their behavior in line, it could not save them. They did not perfectly meet God's strict standard. They were sinners, law-breakers. So the law, which came

to them in such a glorious way, nevertheless condemned them. Or as Paul said, *"the letter kills."* The Old Testament law with its demand of perfection kills any hope we have of saving ourselves.

The law is like the doctor for whom "good" is never "good enough." "You lost some weight, but you still have a lot more to go." "You stopped one bad habit, but what about all the rest?" "No matter how hard you try, you cannot undo the damage from years past." The spiritual physician prescribes the wrong medicine when he says that the cure for a sinful heart and a guilty conscience is to try harder to be better. Can the patient with a serious infection improve simply by trying to feel better? Neither can the sinner improve his own spiritual condition.

II

But it is possible for spiritual health to improve, just as physical health can improve. Every day, countless people are healed from their various illnesses and injuries. Waiting for that healing to happen can be a real test of patience. We wish that Jesus would heal us instantly like He healed the deaf and mute man in today's Gospel (Mk. 7:31-37). But while Jesus could bring us physical healing instantly with a touch or a word, He does not tell us to expect this.

The way our Savior continues His healing work today is through means. To address your physical, mental, or emotional pain, He gives trained professionals to diagnose and treat the problem. He uses them to carry out His merciful work, even though they are flawed and do not carry out the work perfectly. Honest doctors will tell you that they do not have the answers all—or even most—of the time. But they promise to try their best. As they go about their work, God directs their efforts to bring healing and relief to many people.

The way Jesus provides spiritual healing is also through means. He sends pastors to diagnose the sinner's spiritual condition through the law, and to apply help and healing through the Gospel. But no pastor carries out his work perfectly. He may misdiagnose the problem between feuding family members, friends, or congregation members. He can perceive stubbornness when the problem is weakness. He can be too direct with the law or too soft. The pastor learns every day how little he can control and how imperfectly he has carried out his duties.

Speaking for his fellow apostles, Paul plainly stated, *"Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us."* On their own, they were unequal to the task their Lord had given them. *"[B]ut,"* he said, *"our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit."*

Spiritual healing happens when a pastor points the people in his care to Jesus. Jesus is the one who *"has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows"* (Is. 53:4). He carried all our pain, every pain that results from sin in the world and sin in us. There is no physical, mental, or spiritual anguish you have felt that He did not feel. Maybe no one else around you seems to understand your struggle. But Jesus does. You may feel hopeless or sad or worthless. But you are not alone. The Son of God became your Brother in flesh to be with you in your worst moments and to carry you through your darkest trials.

He knows how the devil relentlessly attacks believers to try to get them to despair. Jesus silenced the devil by keeping God's holy law perfectly for all people and paying for their sins

on the cross. When Satan gets you thinking that your troubles are a punishment from God, or that God has forgotten about you, or that there is no hope, Jesus wants you lift your eyes to Him. He shed His holy blood for you, to cover over your sins. He rose again to give you confidence even while your death seems to be closing in.

This good news of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus is what you need the most. Only this can bring you spiritual healing, so that you see joy and life in your future instead of pain and death. The law cannot give you this hope—*“the letter kills.”* But the Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel and given you a living faith in Christ—*“the Spirit gives life.”* The Holy Spirit brings this life to you through the means of grace, through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments.

The Holy Spirit’s work through the means of grace does not make all problems go away. Your aches and pains might not subside. But the Holy Spirit will help you bear your cross after Jesus and grow in patience. Your griefs and sorrows might not go away. But the Holy Spirit will lead you to Him who has carried those sorrows. You might often feel empty or inadequate or alone. But the Holy Spirit will remind you of your worth in Christ and will show you how you can be a blessing to others and share His love with them through encouragement, assistance, and prayer.

The glory of the Spirit’s work through the Gospel far surpasses the glory of the law. God does not want you to “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” and put all your focus on being better. He wants you to believe His promises, to trust that the righteousness the law demands is credited to you by faith, and that full payment has been made for your sins. He wants you to regularly receive the benefits of Christ’s saving work through His Word and Sacraments. Not only will this bring you comfort, but it will also strengthen you to do the good things that God has created you to do.

Honest doctors who can address your physical and mental pain are a great blessing. But **Only the Holy Spirit Can Give Healing Which Lasts.** He brings you Jesus, and in Him is life (Jn. 1:4).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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