

"Pure Power"  
Ephesians 1:15-23

June 2, 2019

The Ascension of Our Lord (Observed

In November 2016, an amazing thing happened: the Chicago Cubs won the World Series. You may have heard of it. It was in all the papers. And I may have mentioned it here once or twice. What was astounding about this victory was not only what happened during the Series on the field, but what happened after the Series off the field.

Both Cub players and Cub fans had become accustomed to losing. With rare exception, the Cubs had losing records for the better part of a century. Fans had not only come to expect losing, but had projected that attitude upon the team itself. The Cubs became known as the "Lovable Losers", not only by fans of other teams and people who couldn't care less about baseball, but by Cub fans themselves.

Therefore, the turnabout in attitude when the team finally did win was amazing. For over 100 years, the attitude had been one of weakness and loss. All that was known was how to lose. It wasn't known how to win. So, it was stunning when they had a parade in Chicago a few days after the conclusion of the Series for the Cubs. The huge turnout for that parade indicated that cub fans had a new attitude of power and victory. The estimated attendance at that parade was 5 million people. This would make it the 7<sup>th</sup> largest gathering of humans in one place in the history of the world and the largest gathering of people ever in the Western Hemisphere. No longer would they be known as the "Lovable Losers." Now they would be the Powerful Victors.

Now why do I bring this up (except for the opportunity to make yet another gratuitous mention of the Chicago Cubs World Series Championship)? The reaction of the Cubs fan came to mind when I was thinking of our observance of the Ascension of Our Lord.

Like Chicago Cub fans, we have come to adopt an attitude in our spiritual lives that reflects weakness and failure. There seems to be a lot of negativity about the Christian faith. We talk a lot about sin which is often viewed as a negative because it is a failure to keep the Law of God. No matter how hard we try to change that, we are weak. For sin is not only the evil actions which we do and so many good things which we fail to do, but, because sin has corrupted our beings, sin is also who we are. We are sinful by nature before we even commit our 1<sup>st</sup> sinful action.

The effect sin has upon God and upon our neighbor is also very negative. We do not love God above all things. We do not always use the name of the Lord with reverence and respect. We do not always hold the Word of God sacred and gladly here and learn it. We do not love our neighbors as ourselves. We may do things that harm their authority, their lives and health, their marriages and sexuality, their property, their good reputation, and like.

And, of course, the effect sin has on each one of us in this life is negative and threatens more negative effects in the life which is to come. Often, our suffering, pain, and sorrow here on earth come as the direct consequence of our sinful behavior. The Word of God is very clear that sin also has a negative effect upon our existence after

we die. Because of sin, people will not only physically die, but spiritually die forever in hell. As bad as the Chicago Cubs have had it for over a century, humanity has had it much worse for millennia and will have it for all eternity.

Even salvation, which should be considered in a positive light, has some negative connotations to it as well. Salvation is based on a judicial model of handling things. In other words, God, because of His perfect holiness, cannot simply ignore or dismiss our sin. He must punish sin or remove the sinner from His presence. Therefore, in order for salvation to occur, someone had to pay the price of sin and sin must be punished.

Jesus Christ came into this world to do exactly that. Many enjoy the cuteness of His birth in a manger in Bethlehem. Many welcome His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Many favor His ministry of healing, feeding, exorcising demons, and raising people from the dead in order to serve humanity. However, many people are repulsed by the way in which Jesus paid for sin and was punished for the sin of the world. Salvation focuses in upon the brutal and painful suffering of Jesus, the Son of God. In an agonizing death upon the cross where He was separated from His holy Father as He bore the sin of the entire world, Jesus offered up His life as punishment of and payment for all sin of all time.

It's all very painful and agonizing and a solution which many people are not interested in. It seems so negative and certainly no fun. Many people fall away in the faith, faster than a Cubs' fan after some of the failures of that team. But that's not all.

The life of a Christian in this world is often felt to be very negative, too. Instead of occasionally considering your sin and gathering it together to confess to God, Luther taught that we should live a life of repentance, not merely doing acts of penance. As we have been studying in our Sunday morning Adult Bible Study, Luther saw all things through a "theology of the cross". This means that, instead of viewing your relationship with God in glorious terms – constant happiness, great amounts of money and possessions, perfect health, and the like (which many evangelists promised to those who have enough faith, even today), we are to view life through the prism of the cross (i.e. suffering). This flies in the face of, not only religion throughout the land, but also in the face of our culture.

In essence, Christians have become like Chicago Cub fans of religion: always seeming to lose and never seeming to win. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ follows the way of the cross in order to fulfill God's plan of salvation and is thought to be a Lovable Loser because He was a nice guy who did many good things, but ultimately failed.

We also become "Lovable Losers" among our friends. We worship somebody who suffered and died. We are called by Jesus to follow in the path that leads in precisely the same way that Jesus established, a path that includes suffering and death. We are urged to not seek earthly success, but accept the fact that, in following Jesus Christ, life often will stink.

However, there's more to the story. Our salvation is indeed established upon the suffering and death of Jesus. It is indeed a way that is perceived to be weak and often understood as a failure according to human standards. Discipleship begins with the

way of the cross which is suffering and death. People of the world think of us as being weak or naïve. But discipleship doesn't stop there any more than Jesus' ministry ended in the tomb.

From your catechism days, you may remember the two states in which Jesus operated. First there was the "state of humiliation." This doesn't mean that Jesus was humiliated or embarrassed about what he did. Rather, it refers to the fact that Jesus did not always or fully use His divine power while here on earth. Jesus humbles himself, puts on the form of a servant, and lives a life of weakness and humility. Through this, Jesus was able to suffer and die on the cross to earn forgiveness for our sin and open the way to salvation. He was intentionally operating in weakness.

However, the way to salvation does not end there. There is also what is called the "state of exaltation." This refers to the fact that, after dying, Jesus now always and fully uses His divine power. The way Jesus operates now changes completely from weakness to pure power. He descends into hell with power in order to proclaim his victory over Satan in Satan's capital. He rises from the dead with power to proclaim His victory over sin and death to the entire world. And, on this day which we celebrate today, Jesus ascends into heaven to proclaim His victory to heaven and the entire universe. Salvation, which was earned in weakness, suffering, and death by Jesus, is proclaimed and carried out in pure power, might, and glory. It was established by the cross, but empowered by the resurrection and the ascension.

Although we do follow Jesus in the way of the cross and see our lives through a theology of the cross, we do not live with weakness or powerlessness. We, too, live by pure power, even though it is not always apparent to us. It is this power that Paul speaks of in our epistle reading for today.

St. Paul encourages us to see three things through the eyes of our hearts which have been enlightened by the Spirit to understand and believe, not only God's saving actions, but His completion of salvation through power and might.

First, we are to see and "know what is the hope to which he has called you." Many people live lives that are filled with suffering and pain of all sorts. The worst thing is that life seems devoid of hope. Things are bad and seem only to be getting worse. There seems to be no prospect of improvement. Although many Christians experience the same suffering and pain as non-Christians (and even more suffering for being Christians), we have hope for the future. The way to salvation leads through weakness and suffering, but it does not end there. God has called us to hope, not despair; to victory, not defeat; and to life, not to death.

Second, we are to know "the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints." The hope which we have is not simply a removal of our suffering here on earth, an increase in our material possessions, or our "best life now." Although those things seem to be a lot, they are a mere pittance compared with what God has in store for us – the "glorious inheritance in the saints" in heaven. We have an eternity of joy and peace, heavenly wealth beyond our wildest dreams, and our best life which lasts forever.

Third, we are to know "what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe." No matter how weak we may feel; no matter how long it seems for hope to be fulfilled; and no matter how long it takes for us to receive our inheritance in

the saints; we are living in pure power and not in weakness. The power of God which raised Christ from the dead; which seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion is the same power by which our Lord rules today. Because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and since Jesus' ascension to the right hand of God, God has put all things under Jesus' feet and gave him as head over all things to the church.

This is an astounding and exciting victory, even better than the Cubs winning the World Series. So where are the 5 million Christians coming out to celebrate this event? Divine Services held on Ascension Day are so poorly attended that they are no longer held in many churches, including ours. Some say it's because Ascension Day always falls on a Thursday in the spring when people are busy. Some say it is because midweek services are not popular. However, If so many people turn out to celebrate a baseball victory, why do so few turn out to celebrate the greatest victory in the history of the world: victory over sin, victory over death, and victory over hell?

I think it is because people don't realize what this means. It is not that Jesus simply went back home to heaven and we are all sad to see him go. It means that Jesus has ascended to the right hand of God and now rules the entire universe for the sake of His Church. This means we have won. We who were weak losers have become powerful victors.

That means now we live in utter and absolute joy, despite our circumstances here on earth. The sorrow, pain, suffering, and even death will not last. Although we do not know what the future holds, we know who holds the future.

This means that we now live in supreme confidence for the future no matter what the future brings for we know where our future ends up. It is not in weakness or loss. It is not in poverty or pain. It is not in illness or suffering. It is not in death or hell. Our future is in the inheritance of his saints in heaven forever.

This means that we now live in total devotion to the Church and its ministry without fear or doubt. There is only one thing that ultimately matters for us and for those who have not yet heard the the Gospel and that is to know Jesus Christ and what He has done for them on the cross and in the empty tomb; what He is doing for them now in ruling the universe for the benefit of His church; and what He will do one day when He returns and brings them home.

The only thing that might be more joyful than Ascension Day when Jesus went up into heaven is what we might call Descension Day when Ascension Day is reversed and Jesus comes down from heaven again. St. Paul puts it this way: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the cloud, to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." That's power. That's victory. Amen