

First Lutheran Church
Ft. Benton, MT
21 Pentecost A 2020

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.'" (Leviticus 19:1, 2)

In the beginning, the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature (Genesis 2:7). Of the man's ribs, the Lord God likewise formed a woman as a fit helper for Adam in the beginning. By design man was created in the likeness of his Creator, in the image of God. A perfect, harmonious union existed in the beginning—God with man, and man with his "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" wife. That's how life was in the Eden of Paradise. Set apart in the image of the Creator, Adam and Eve went from dust and rib to holy bliss before God and one another. The man and his wife were both stark naked, and were not ashamed in the dawning moments of time begun.

And then dawned that forever fateful day, the shadow of which you and I now live, and move, and have our being. A forbidden fruit, a crafty serpent, and a temptation to recreate themselves in their own image and own likeness shattered the perfect harmony. All that God had created "good" in the beginning would no longer remain so along side sin. All was changed. All was cursed. All was no subject to death. To dust Adam would return along with his God-given bride. Together they would suffer head on the consequences of a disobedient, unholy, lonely life apart from God's perfect design for them. Together husband and wife would labor by the sweat of their brow and bear children in pain. The image was lost, not completely, but in part. The human race would woefully survive the crippling blow, but death would be its undoing from generation to generation.

With Genesis in the rearview mirror, the same Lord and God of creation brings a spoken Word to His pilgrim people. He speaks first to His servant Moses, who in turn passes the directive on to the whole nation. "Be holy" is the command. "You shall be holy," He says. It is imperative that the holy God have a holy people. Since His very image is holy through and through, it follows that those whom He has created be and remain forever holy. Anything less is simply unacceptable and must be forever cut off from His divine presence. God will tolerate no inconsistency. He will have no hint of unholiness in us since there be none in Himself. As goes the Creator, so goes His creation. That's the way He made it in the beginning, and that's the way He still demands it be among His pilgrim people. Moses is spokesman for God, speaking to all the congregation of the people of Israel that which they already know from the stone tables and hearts of flesh but cannot keep. Moses had been the one through whom the Lord God had delivered His Ten Words from Sinai's heights. Now they are reminded yet again of the "Thou shalt" nature of God in a world tainted by sin and overrun by death. "As for you, O Israel, be holy just as I am holy." That's your perpetual mark, your aim in life, your heart's desire, your mission as long as you shall live. Don't waver in your devotion, don't fall victim to temptation, don't let the crafty serpent revisit you, don't turn to idols, don't give into the flesh. Be steadfast and unmovable. Holiness is your only chart and compass in life lest you be cut off and cast off in death.

The Lord God has given you the blueprints to holiness in His holy Ten. You know what they say. You know what you are to do and how you are to be. Go, fulfill your calling as sons and daughters of a holy and righteous God. Furthermore, "you shall observe all My statutes and all My rules, and do them: I am the LORD" (19:37). And with that you and I strive hard and long to make our mark on the world with ever increasing good deeds at every turn. We come in obedience to hear God speak in His Word today. We give our ardent offerings to help the kingdom's cause. We pray, and we listen, and we meditate on the Law, and we fight back the inclinations of the flesh, and in the end we don't measure up. Holiness in practice falls far short of holiness in doctrine. We know the pure teaching, but we can't carry it out because we are but poor, miserable sinners in the

hands of an angry and vengeful God. He keeps exacting His holiness while we keep rousing His wrath. He keeps making demands while we keep missing the mark. We promise to do better, to grow stronger, to be more conscious of our sin and overcome, but even our most righteous of deeds God declares but filthy rags. Filthy rags have no place in God holy, righteous hamper. Yet, that's all we have to offer even putting the best construction on it.

What's a struggling pilgrim to do? One thing you and I are tempted to do is compare our good Christian works with the wicked works of the world. You see, we aren't nearly as vain and profane as the woeful wicked. Therefore, God must spare us in His good pleasure while He condemns them. God makes no such promise, no provision, no assurance. Rather, He says emphatically, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Another temptation we run up against is to rewrite the Law and make it more palatable. We redefine the terms to fit our own definition of holy. We tell ourselves, "What God really meant by that is _____" (you fill in the blank). We don't like what God says and don't want to believe that it applies to ourselves, so we recreate Him in our own image and likeness. How convenient! The problem comes when He meets us head on with "do not turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods." Time and again Old Adam bucks the Word, insisting on his own way and in his own time. But holiness is not something you can barter with. God's holiness is not something you can simply explain away or arbitrarily ignore. His holiness is a concrete, abiding truth that stands firm for all time and eternity, world without end. Amen. So that leaves the sinner in the hands of an angry God loathing of complete despair. And that is the reason we are given the Law in the first place. The Law always condemns. It allows for no provisions of the flesh, but is set in place to put the flesh to death. You can't have a resurrection of the new man without first putting to death the old man. The indiscriminate charge to be holy just as God Himself is by nature holy is our death sentence. It stops us in our tracks. It reduces to dust all that we purport to be apart from God's grace and mercy in Christ. As it was for Adam and Eve, so it is for us.

Being holy isn't something the Christian does under his/her own power or by his/her own measures. Holiness is something Christ declares us to be in and through Himself. The Christian does good works as a fruit of faith not as a means to it. A good tree bears good fruit, while a bad tree bears bad fruit. The fruit is either bad or good by reason of the tree that produces it. Since you are in Christ, you do things that are counted as righteous. It's not a righteousness of your own, but one that is granted by faith. That's what Paul is getting at in Romans. Furthermore, we recognize that Jesus as the incarnate Word of God has fulfilled all righteousness for us. His was a holy, sinless life completely free of all manner of unrighteousness. "Therefore," writes Paul, "God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9, 10). Had Jesus not been holy in life and work, the Father could not have exalted Him to such a place of glory. And as goes the Lord, so goes the servant who does the Lord's bidding.

In Holy Baptism, you have been brought to a new beginning. Therein Christ clothes you with His holiness and recreates you in His image as a new creation. Your sin is swept away in the cleansing flood that drowns and puts to death. Then in resurrection glory the Holy Spirit makes alive again in perfect unity and perfect peace. How does the Catechism say it? "[Baptism] signifies that the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever. St. Paul writes, Romans, chapter six: We are buried with Christ by Baptism into death, that, like as He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Small Catechism, Baptism IV). Thus the whole Law of God, every righteous demand and every perfect prescription is kept whole and undefiled for us in Christ and in Christ alone. When God looks at you, He sees His Son. And when the Father beholds His Son, He sees your sin crucified on the cross. Thanks be to God! Amen.