

"The Happy Exchange"

2 Corinthians 5:21

March 10, 2013

4th Sunday in Lent

We can, at times, be very superficial in our thinking as we evaluate certain things in our life.

For example, when we look at food, we judge it mainly according to how it looks and tastes. If it looks appealing and tastes good, then we don't evaluate the nutritional value. On the basis of that superficial judgment, we eat a lot of sugary foods or fatty foods. As a result, we can end up malnourished, overweight, or both.

That superficiality often invades our spirituality as well. We look at sin very superficially. We see it as merely external words or actions which are bad in some way or another. Standards for measuring badness vary. People will talk about personal moral standards and measure themselves according to such standards. Sin (if they use that word) becomes a very subjective thing. For many people "sin" boils down to simply not being nice.

As Christians, we may think that we are not being superficial if we measure ourselves against the 10 Commandments. But if sin becomes just the bad things we do which violate the 10 Commandments, we are still seeing sin very superficially.

Our status as sinners becomes very superficial as well. We tend to see ourselves and others as basically good people because we don't do the really bad things like murder or steal. We are sinners only insofar as we have made some inappropriate choices or have been guilty of some unsuitable behavior. It's really not all that bad – just a flaw or weakness.

A sinner can rehabilitate himself or herself if he or she simply stops making inappropriate choices and refrains from unsuitable behavior. If you are basically a good person, couldn't you do that – make the appropriate choices and do the right behavior? Even if you had done something really terrible or have made lots of inappropriate choices and done lots of bad behavior, couldn't you

change that if you put your mind to it? If sin is only external behavior, you should be able to make those changes and, dare I say it, save yourself if you try hard enough.

But sin is far worse than inappropriate choices and bad behavior. In the Confession of Sin in Divine Service, Setting One, we say, “Most merciful God, we confess that we are *by nature* sinful and unclean.” Sin is much more than what we do, what we say, or even what we think. Sin is who we are. What we normally call sin – lying, cheating, stealing, adultery, murder, and so on – are simply the sinful results flowing from our innate sinfulness. Jesus taught that sin is not a matter of outward action, but of inward corruption. He said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft false witness, slander.” (Matthew 15:19)

Do you see then how futile it is for anyone to try to save themselves and make themselves right before God? Sin is a matter of identity and not just action. The prophet Jeremiah asked the rhetorical question of the persistent sinners around him, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard change his spots?” (Jer. 13:23) Even if you could change your actions, your words, and your thoughts, you couldn’t change who you are. You and I are sinful human beings in our very nature. We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners. Salvation, therefore, becomes a much more complicated matter than simply rehabilitating ourselves or changing choices and behavior. It means changing who we are.

How then can we possibly be saved from death and hell? We tend to look at salvation superficially, too. Many people will deny the reality of hell, despite what the Bible clearly teaches. They deny the need for salvation. Many others think that, because God is love, He will save anyone and everyone by simply overlooking their sinful behavior. They believe everyone will be saved. But can God just “overlook” sin? For those of you who are lactose intolerant, gluten intolerant, or diabetic, you know that you can’t eat just any food, even if you love it, because you cannot accept dairy products, gluten, or sugar into your body, nor can you simply overlook those things as if they didn’t matter. How much more impossible it is for a holy and righteous God to accept sin into His presence!

He cannot accept sin in His presence or overlook it. He cannot accept our sinful actions. He cannot accept us who are, by nature, sinful.

Even if we admit the need for salvation, we tend to look at the way in which it was accomplished in a very superficial way. We casually repeat phrases such as “Jesus died for your sins.” First of all, it can be misleading if you pay close attention to it. It almost sounds like our sins were in trouble so Jesus died on their behalf and they somehow benefit from that. I can remember more than one Sunday School teacher correcting me by saying, “Jesus didn’t die for your sins. He died for you!”

But more importantly, such a phrase doesn’t go far enough. There is a certain detachment present in such a statement. It almost sounds as if Jesus died on the cross for list of sins which the Father held in heaven. Our text for today shows that something more profound is happening to procure our salvation.

The text says, “God made him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us.” Jesus, the Son of God is perfectly holy and righteous. The text literally says he “knew no sin”. He never did experience any sin. Yet for our sake and for our salvation, God made him who had no sin to be sin itself. He did more than suffer for a detached list of sins. He did more than die for sins. He literally *became* sin.

A preview of this was practiced in the Old Testament. A goat was chosen from the herd to be the scapegoat. The priest would place his hand upon the head of the goat and all the sin of the people was transferred to that goat. The goat became sin for the people and was then sent out of the camp into the wilderness, carrying the sin of the people.

In an even greater way, God the Father laid your sin, my sin, and all sin for all people of all time upon His Son, His only Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus became sin for the people and was sent outside of the city wall to be hung on a cross, bearing and being the sin of the world. It was as Isaiah had foretold, “Surely he took up *our* infirmities and carried *our* sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for *our* transgressions, he was

crushed for *our* iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Is. 53:4-6)

This is serious stuff here, but it had to be in order to accomplish what the text promises. It says, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This is a very strong statement of what God has done for us. We are more than just forgiven of our sin. We have become something different in our nature - the righteousness – the holiness – of God. This is not because of anything we have done in stopping sin in our lives or in doing more good things. This is not because of how we have changed ourselves. This happens because God changes us. When we are “in Christ”, that is, united to Him, we not only *have* the righteousness of God. We *are* the righteousness of God.

This is what makes baptism so important. When you were baptized, you not only had your sins washed away, but you were joined to Christ and His holiness. When you come to the Lord’s Table, you not only receive forgiveness for your sin, but that connection to Christ is strengthened and reinforced. Jesus’ body and blood are joined to bread and wine. When you eat Jesus’ body and drink Jesus’ blood, you are joined to Christ. You receive His forgiveness and His righteousness.

This makes all the difference in the world as we struggle with sin in our daily lives. We can see ourselves very superficially as God’s people. We see ourselves as struggling sinners who are ultimately failures. We may be filled with doubts about God’s love for us, especially when we sin. We may worry about our salvation because it just seems that we can’t break ourselves free from sin.

Instead of looking at yourself as you see yourself, look at yourself as God sees you. When you are in Christ, God does not see your sins or your old sinful self – your old Adam. Instead, God sees only Christ’s holiness covering you and the new self created in baptism in union with Jesus Christ.

Therefore, hold tightly to your baptism every day. In your baptism, you are in Christ and have the righteousness of God. Seek the Supper often for it is in the supper that your bond to Christ is strengthened and the righteousness of God is retained. Live confidently as the saints of God whom

you are. Have no doubts for God truly loves you and did the ultimate exchange to have you. Be assured of your salvation for you are the righteousness of God and shall be with Him forever.

Martin Luther called this process the Wonderful Exchange. He wrote, "This is that mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ's, and the righteousness of Christ not Christ's but ours. He has emptied himself of his righteousness that he might clothe us with it and fill us with it; and he has taken our evils upon himself that he might deliver us from them." What a truly happy and wonderful exchange that is! Amen.