

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Reformation (Observed)  
Saturday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Sunday, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018

**Sermon: Hospital for Sinners**

**Text: Matthew 11:12-19; Romans 3:28**

Focus: The church is a community for sinners to be forgiven.

Function: That they would extend to others the same grace given them.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: “I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person...” (SC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This weekend we celebrate the 501<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. Somehow that doesn’t sound as exciting as last year’s 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Yet the rediscovery of the Gospel by a German monk named Martin Luther is still worth remembering. Even more significant is the wonderful teaching of Scripture itself: “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28, ESV).<sup>1</sup> We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone! Nothing we do or say could ever measure up to earn us God’s favor. He forgives and welcomes us freely by his grace—as a *gift!*—because of Jesus’ death and resurrection. We contribute nothing to our salvation, absolutely nothing—not an ounce of effort or a cent of money. God does it all!

And yet for a group of people who have celebrated God’s undeserved, unconditional grace for over 500 years, we certainly can be rather smug about it. As Lutherans, we pride ourselves on our Word alone, faith alone, grace alone emphasis, yet we can be rather dogged about our dogmatics in debate with other Christians. We are proud of our Lutheran paradoxes

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

and distinctions, such as Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, and the Two Kingdoms. We use a proper understanding of the Lord's Supper as a litmus test instead of gathering believers around Jesus' Body and Blood. And we are quick to criticize churches of other denominations for being too liberal or contemporary or dumbed down instead of praising God that they are reaching souls for Christ. After all, didn't Jesus say, "The one who is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:30)? Even in our Lutheran seminaries, where we train our pastors and deaconesses to serve the Lord's Church, we spend much more time learning how to prove the Catholics, Presbyterians, and Baptists wrong than we do learning how to win lost souls for the kingdom of God. In other words, we spend more time fighting with other Christians than telling the Good News to those who don't know or believe in Jesus as their Savior. And I'm just as guilty of this as the rest of you.

Now don't get me wrong! I'm not saying that doctrine doesn't matter. I believe Lutheran theology wholeheartedly and remain forever grateful for our Lutheran heritage and traditions. But sometimes we're more interested in proving ourselves right than being righteous. And when we do, we become like the very Pharisees that constantly criticized Jesus.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus upbraids his hearers for rejecting John the Baptist as too strict and too ascetic. "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'" (Matt. 11:18). Jesus also rebuked his audience for not believing in him because they saw him as too soft on sin and too ready to associate with sinners. "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds" (Matt. 11:19).

It's always easy to shoot the messenger. If people didn't like what John or Jesus were saying, they could always criticize. As Jesus said, his generation was "like children sitting in the

marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge for you, and you did not mourn’” (Matt. 11:16-17). In other words, I preached the Law, and you did not repent; I preached the Good News, and you did not rejoice and believe! The religious leaders of Jesus’ day forgot what the kingdom of God was about. And so have we.

We take the Gospel (the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ) and put it in a display case with humidity control—like an artefact in the British Museum. Then we charge people admission to see it, and wonder why nobody shows up. We may still listen to the Gospel on occasion. We might even *believe* it. But if we don’t share it others and give it away, we’re not living it. If we don’t forgive other people’s sins and tell them that Jesus’ loves them, then we have enshrined the Gospel instead of worshiping the living Christ.

The Lutheran Church needs Reformation once again. We need to remember that the Church is *not* a museum for dusty, old saints, but rather a hospital for sinners. Jesus’ critics accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard. Why? Because he probably spent more time at parties than Synagogues. (Remember: his first miracle was to keep a party going by turning water into wine!) Jesus welcome sinners and ate with them, indicating full acceptance (cf. Luke 15:1-2). In a time when sharing a meal was the most intimate thing you could do with a person (besides going to bed with them), Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, the worst of the worst in his day.

“Zacchaeus,” he said to the infamous tax collector, “hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5).

And when the religious right grumbled that Jesus was dining with a dirty, rotten scoundrel, he replied with stunning clarity: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Jesus’ mission is to seek and save the lost. So that should be our mission too.

Our church's goal should not be to turn everyone into a perfect Lutheran who can sing the liturgy without the hymnal and know every word of Luther's Catechism by heart. Our goal should be to love our neighbors, to seek the lost, and to invite them to meet Jesus so they can be saved too, so they can worship him too, so they can enjoy the fellowship of the Church too.

Jesus didn't wait for us to get our act together before he forgave our sins. No, the Bible says that "God shows his love for us in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). We should change the words on our church's road sign to read ONLY SINNERS WELCOME! Martin Luther famously told his friend Philip Melanchthon that Christ only died for sinners, so see to it that you are one! Luther wasn't granting license to sin. But he was trying to get that old monkey named guilt off of Melanchthon's back. The Law always accuses our consciences. To be saved, we need only Jesus and the cross. And so does everybody else! Let's not hinder them or get in the way of them coming to Jesus by implying that you have to dress or look or speak or think—or even vote a certain way before they can be saved. As Jesus wryly told the Pharisees, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you" (Matt. 21:31).

The Church is not a museum for saints; it is a hospital for sinners. That's not just Chris Matthis talking. That's what Jesus says: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). Jesus came eating and drinking, laughing and crying with people. Maybe it's time for us to get out of our Christian ghettos and into the backyards and living rooms of the tax collectors and sinners. Maybe, for the sake of the Gospel, we should go to more parties and fewer self-congratulatory, "churchy" things. After all, that's where Jesus went. Maybe we can join him on the way. Being saved by grace alone through faith alone doesn't mean that we want to *be* alone. Heaven still has vacancy.

And Jesus wants to fill up his banquet hall. Cheers! In the name of the Father and of the Son  
and of † the Holy Spirit. Amen.