

Catechism Convocation – 2008  
John 14:15-21

The church is Christ's rib. Believe it. Every redeeming quality the church possesses she possesses because the church comes from the side of Christ, from the pierced side of Christ. Love is a redeeming quality. We love because He first loved us. Our love does not redeem us, His did; His does. "It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love." St. John wrote that. St. John describes Himself as the "disciple whom Jesus loved – the beloved disciple." The bloody cross showed John that he was indeed the beloved disciple. You too are the disciple whom Jesus loved. Jesus' cross shows you the same reality. Jesus' cross shows you the same infinite love. "Greater love has no one than this, that He lay down His life for His friends." There is no greater love than Christ crucified. His love has recreated a world of self-absorbed sinners, a world of social refuse who knew as little about love as a slug knows about ballet.

The church is Christ's bride, washed in His redeeming love. Filthy in her own right, bedraggled and pitifully unchaste, the heavenly Bridegroom washed His beloved in His own blood, cleansing her and preparing them to be one flesh. "As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love." Jesus said that. He says that to the church in every age. He says that to every beloved disciple – remain in my love. Remain in a spiritual posture of continually receiving what I offer, what I give, what I bestow. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit." Love is the fruit of Christ crucified. Love is the fruit that dangled from the tree of the cross, the tree of life. Love is the fruit that is now laden on the branches of the church. The church loves! Christ crucified will bear fruit through the church. Here Luther teaches us well how to pray and the second petition is the model. What is the second petition? Thy kingdom come. What does this mean? The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also. Christ crucified will bear the fruit of love in the church, we pray that it would bear fruit in us and through us.

Now I must admit that I am feeling a bit like a fish out of water. I am standing in an unfamiliar pulpit. The architecture of the church is also a bit different for me. It is not Sunday morning. This is not a funeral nor is it a wedding yet here I am, standing in your midst, preaching. I am most accustomed to being told what to do and then doing it – I am married after all. The church tells me what to preach (gives me the appointed texts upon which to proclaim God's Word – an appointed lectionary). For our Catechism Convocation I chose the texts read earlier, noting especially the Gospel lesson. "If you love me, you will obey what I command." "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me." Lutheran minds tend to lock up at these words. Lutheran minds go into a power skid and a roll-over seems imminent. Lord I love, help Thou my unlove. If you love me you will obey what I command. Sweat begins to bead on Lutheran temples, dread knocks on the door of our hearts, and our knees begin to bend as we adopt a posture of confession. I have not obeyed your commands. It is true enough.

Sin continues to infest our being. Often, the cleansed bride runs back to her filthy rags. Lust, gossip, greed, deceit, vindictiveness, pride, sloth; these, not love, are what we choose to clothe ourselves with. “I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended you and justly deserve Your temporal and eternal punishment.”

“If you love me, you will obey what I command.” There is more here than “Lex semper accusat – the law always accuses.” There is a promise, a declaration of a great truth, a Christ centered truth, a description of what the Christian in Christ is and what he does. Here we can see an article of the Gospel that is to the glory of His Name. Think! How did God create? He created by the power of His Word. Let there be light, and there was light. That which He called for came out of non-existence by the authority of His voice, His Word. He creates by the power of His Word, and He recreates by the power of His Word. Be holy for I am holy. It is a divine declaration that has its nexus in the death and resurrection of His Son. We know that God’s Word does not return empty, but accomplishes the purposes for which it was sent. “As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my Word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” First and foremost this refers to Christ. He is the Word made flesh Who came from the Father full of grace and truth. He did not return to the Father’s right hand before He had watered the earth with His precious blood so that it would bud and flourish with His love. We love because He first loved us. God wills to produce fruit – and He does it through the church for the benefit of the world, through you for the benefit of your neighbor. “God works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.”

Ask yourself: “What is the opposite of love?” I suggest that the opposite of love is pride – love gone bad. There is a television commercial for a medicine that cures toenail fungus. It is an animated commercial of this grody little creature that represents the fungus. He announces that he likes to live under the toenail; he makes the place his own, fixes it according to his tastes and invites his friends over. Pride works that way. Next time you see the commercial pretend it is your pride talking. Pride takes up residence in our hearts, it gets in the cracks of our lives and proves very difficult to evict. Pride becomes visible as you neglect to serve, neglect to love. Pride is an assault on love, an assault on Christ’s new command (that we love one another as I have loved you). Pride is impatient, pride is unkind. It envies and it boasts. Pride is rude, it is self-seeking, it is easily angered, it keeps a detailed record of wrongs. Pride never protects, never trusts, never hopes, never perseveres. Pride always fails (cf. 1 Cor. 13:4-8). Christ and His cross, Christ and His love is pride’s only medicine. “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”

It was likely pride that led the mother of James and John to come to Jesus to ask Him for a favor. “‘What is it you want?’ Jesus asked.” “She said, ‘Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.’” Pride jockeys for position. James and John were nearby, waiting with baited breath for their

own pride to be confirmed. Jesus redirects them; redirects them to that which ushers in His kingdom – sacrificial love, suffering sacrificial love. “‘You don’t know what you are asking,’ Jesus said. ‘Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?’” Oblivious to the price of love Jesus had been called upon to remit, oblivious to the nature of the cup He will be called upon to drink, the nature of the baptism that Jesus will submit to, James and John chime in with an empty-headed affirmative: “‘We can,’ they answered.”

What Jesus said to them in reply captures the essence of His giving love, captures the essence of this blessed convocation and the nature of the church. We who want to know Christ and the power of His love will hang on these words. “Jesus said to them, ‘You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit on my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.’” The cup that Jesus drank was the cup of the Father’s wrath against sin. In the Garden of Gethsemane, as the stark apprehension of His suffering filled His troubled heart Jesus earnestly prayed: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” In His cross and passion Jesus drained the cup of suffering to its bitter dregs. The full force of the Father’s wrath against sin was poured out on this lone sacrifice; the full force of our failure to keep the law fell on Him! No one but He could drink of this unsavory cup – yet love fulfilled all righteousness and opened up a cup of blessing. Christ is the end of the law – He drained the cup of God’s wrath, but He does not leave it empty, He does not leave us empty. He filled it with His blood, a saving flood from which we drink our salvation. Jesus had referred to His death as a baptism. “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!” On the cross Jesus was baptized in His own blood. His baptism in water at the Jordan led to His baptism in blood at Golgotha and there He opened up a washing of regeneration for sinners. The new cup, the reconstituted cup and the new baptism unites us to His death and resurrection, delivers His love, and is now at work in us who believe.

The Scriptures tell us that James’ and John’s mother was at Calvary. She saw the kingdom of God inaugurated by the crucifixion of the Master. She saw who was on His right and who was on His left and pride was put to flight. Those were not the positions she had in mind for her boys. She was like salt that had lost its savor, but with God all things are possible. Love was clearly visible. In Jesus’ crucifixion the power of the new command was unleashed. There Jesus emptied the chalice of God’s wrath and filled it with His blood that is pure love to us who receive it in faith. James and John drank of this reconstituted cup and the power of the command to love was at work in them. You, in a few short moments, will also drink of the same reconstituted cup and the Vine will feed the branch with divine love. Pride melts in this meal; calcified hearts melt in this meal, melt in the reception of such undeserved love. Hearts made new then burn to hold to the Master’s commands.

Love cannot be stifled. God’s love can neither be stifled nor diminished. God’s love will have its way. He sees to it. God’s love does not return void, but accomplishes the purposes for which it was sent. His strong word bespeaks us righteous – pure love and pure gift. God’s love is in you. You love because God’s love is in you. His fruit is on

the branch of your life. This is a humbling thing – beautiful and marvelous and joyful but deeply humbling. We are unworthy servants. Apart from Christ we can do nothing. We love because He first loved us. That is the way things are.