

Lent 4B (3/11/2018)

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

We tend to think of faith as an effort we put forth – an accomplishment, or more likely, a failure. But, the life of faith is pure grace. God gets all the credit for our daily conversion from death to life, and forms us into who God wants us to be: people “created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

There’s a popular image of Jesus – done and redone in paint, stained glass, and other media – which is loosely based on a brief passage from the Book of Revelation: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”¹ It’s like an apocalyptic dinner party: “Jesus will be here any minute, so garnish the salad. Oh, and be listening for the door!” One of the most recognizable versions of the image features an Anglo-Saxon savior with flowing auburn hair and beard. He is clad in a radiant white robe, and poised to knock at the wooden door of a cottage set in an enchanting forest scene. The door’s exterior, however, is missing a subtle, yet important, feature – the doorknob.

Jesus knocking at the door has become a popular symbol of Christian conversion. (By the way, if it holds some sentimental value for you, forgive me if I ruin it.) Jesus comes to each of us, the image proposes, and knocks at our spiritual door. Since there is no means of entry from the outside, he can’t get in on his own. But, if only we open the door and let him in, we are sure to experience blissful

¹ 3:20.

relationship with the Lord of life. It's the illustrated version of "accepting Jesus Christ into your heart as your personal Lord and Savior."

You might recall, however, that following his resurrection, Jesus doesn't need a doorknob, let alone a door, to show up suddenly among his followers. Just ask the disciples hiding out in the upper room that first Easter night.²

But more to the point, the image of Jesus knocking at the door mistakenly presumes that we are capable of opening it in the first place. Paul puts it bluntly in our second reading from Ephesians today. Left to our own devices, we are "dead through our trespasses and sins... by nature children of wrath, like everyone else." Thus, Martin Luther confesses on behalf of the rest of us, "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him."³ The unfortunate aspects of human nature – self-centeredness, pride, carelessness – these are the pillars of the house we build for ourselves, so **we are unwilling and unable to open the door to Jesus. Instead, we board the door up from the inside,⁴ insulating ourselves against any threat to our independence and shutting out anyone who might ask us to give our lives over to love, even Jesus.**

But he comes in anyway. A spoof of Jesus knocking at the door portrays him in SWAT gear and carrying a door ram, set to take down the door and burst into the house. And that's the heart of Paul's message in Ephesians, that "God, who is rich in mercy..., even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together

² John 20:19.

³ *The Small Catechism*.

⁴ Thanks to Professor Kurt Hendel for this image.

with Christ. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” ***Board up the door all you want, God insists, and I’ll still break into your lives with the promise I have made in Christ. Resist all you want, and I’ll still raise you from the death you make for yourselves to the life I want for you.***

This gospel is hard to accept. We don’t generally think of faith itself as a gift of God. Instead, we think of faith as something we conjure up,⁵ an effort we put forth. Faith is an accomplishment, or more likely, a failure. It’s on us to prove that we’re faithful, so we struggle to know if we’re good enough for God. We come to church, or pray, or serve, or perform any number of religious duties with the hope of scoring points with the Boss upstairs.

But, **it’s not about what we do for God, but what God does for us.** This is why we baptize infants. They don’t have the first clue what baptism means, but we drench them anyway, mark them with the sign of the cross, and welcome them into the communion of saints. We take seriously God’s promise to “make them alive together with Christ” and to give them the gift of faith. And, the gift of God is irrevocable.⁶

It’s what Jesus is getting at in our Gospel from John today, part of his clandestine discourse with Nicodemus, and probably the most familiar of all Christian scriptures: “Yes, God loved the world so much that [God] gave the only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.

⁵ Jeff Paschal, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 113.

⁶ Romans 11:29.

For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”⁷ Viewed through the lens of grace, this confession can never be a weapon to bludgeon non-Christians. Instead, **it’s a humble song of praise to the God of cross and resurrection, the Holy One who knows the pain of human life and death, and who makes a way for us to live and die without fear or shame.**

Dear church, the life of faith is pure grace. So, what do we make of our successes, our fleeting moments of faithfulness to Jesus? What do we make of our genuine love and generosity? What do we make of our sacrifices? God gets all the credit for our daily conversion from death to life, but God also forms us into who God wants us to be: people “created in Christ Jesus for good works,” as Paul writes, “which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” **It’s what we’re saved for – God has made us alive together with Christ, and so has transformed not only our identity but also our purpose. Jesus has come through our door, so we follow him right back out to “bear God’s creative and redeeming word to all the world.”**⁸ By his lead, we are able to turn away from ourselves and toward others. And, stepping beyond the shadow of sin and death, we can “come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that our deeds have been done in God.”

⁷ Translation by Raymond E. Brown, in *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 129.

⁸ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, 231.