

JUDICA (LENT 5)

John 8:46-59

Whoever is of God hears the Word of God

Luther stated in thesis 21 of the Heidelberg Disputation, “A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is.” And isn’t a theologian of the cross hard to find today, even in our midst? “A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is.” But that’s hard to do on a hospital bed, in a school cafeteria or the skeleton closet, or with a loved one. “A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is,” but few, including us, really want that to happen.

Jesus made people uncomfortable, especially the established religiocrats of the day, if I can make up a word. Jesus came and sought to reshape the Faith into its original mold. And sinful pride wanted none of it. The arrogance of the flesh took up stones to cast at Him who had called upon him who had no sin to cast the first stone. But sinful pride and arrogance is always the last to admit any sin. Jesus asks, “*Which of you convicts me of sin?*” But we’ve all had those moments where we were sure God had dropped the ball, when He hasn’t hastened to our whims.

“*Whoever is of God hears the words of God.*” And the Greek there should perhaps better be translated “*listens to the words of God,*” because there is a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing means the sound hit your ear. Listening means the sound hit your heart.

Let me illustrate my point. A child is jumping on a bed. The parent, spotting the child, shouts, “Don’t jump, or you’ll get hurt.” The child hears the parent, smiles, and keeps jumping like the proverbial monkey, about to bump his head. The child heard, but it did not listen—a big difference, measured in stitches. Jesus doesn’t want us to hear. He wants us to listen.

Notice how the Jews answer Jesus, “*Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?*” Oh, and thanks for coming to die for us ungrateful maggots, by the way. Jesus’ words don’t quite play a fetching melody, and so they are rejected, and not only rejected, but anathematized, attributed to the devil and committed to hell.

Jesus words never were and never will be popular. There always have been and always will be those who could care less about them in life while in death their families have plenty of advice about which “nice ones” should be said over their coffin, and which “not so nice” ones shouldn’t. There have always been and always will be those unwilling to be instructed but quick to take issue with the results of patient instruction. Jesus words are too harsh when they hit close to home, too antiquated when they don’t mesh well with the latest downloaded moral or doctrinal update, too boring when they require more than a moment’s thought, too inflexible when they butt heads with our own convenience, too early in life, too late in death, too unloving when they speak the truth in love, too loving when they speak grace when we’d rather hold grudges. Jesus’ words are a buffet of uneaten dishes, too spicy or too bland for the flesh’s fickle taste. And you know both sides of it. You’ve been the one whose Faith has been scrutinized in such a way by others, and you are the one who has scrutinized the Faith in such a way.

Everyone wants the Jesus who marries and buries—and marrying and burying is great—but few want the one who preaches and teaches, especially when He preaches and teaches “hard words” (John 6). Of all the things that bother a pastor, nothing truly frustrates a pastor more than the fact that the congregation is full of people just like him, who oftentimes want to hear anything but the truth, to face anything but reality. But God is not judged by our critiques of Him; we are. And no matter what Jesus we want, Jesus is the only Jesus we’ll ever get, the only Jesus the Father has sent, the only Jesus the Father will ever send us.

“A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is.” Sin is sin and grace is grace, truth is truth and lie is lie, no matter what we think of it, and may it ever be that way, because, if they weren’t, it would mean God had removed His patient hand from our sorry predicament, it would mean that hope was lost and life had lost all meaning. *“So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”* But let’s keep our stones in our pockets and our hands folded in prayer.

“Abraham,” they pled. They were related to Abraham. They had the blood of Abraham flowing through their veins. And, after all, Abraham had built this church. He had kinda sorta like signed the constitution. But they’d better know Abraham before they pled him, and they’d better know to whom they spoke before they put Abraham on His level. Jesus knew Abraham. As the LORD, He’d been the One to call him, sustain him, and bring His promise to him to fruition, and the only Blood that mattered in all of this was that which He Himself would shed for us.

Don’t claim pious fathers or grandfathers as your accomplices in sin, when they looked to the very Jesus from which you flee. Don’t trump the Christ with grandma when you rebel against Christ, when Christ was the very One to whom grandma bowed the head. Lutheran isn’t a gene; it’s a clear and bold acknowledgment of our sinfulness, and a clear and bold confession of this Christ, called the devil for His gracious honesty, alone as our hope for salvation. Christians aren’t born, they are made, baptized into Christ and instructed in His Word, remolded into the image of God with God’s very Body and Blood.

Christ’s words are not to be received as a child receives medicine. They need not be bubblegum flavored. Rather than someone having to force this medicine down our throats, no one should be able to take it from us. His words are *“Spirit and life.”* We are unspiritual and dying. Why wouldn’t we run to receive our prescription, especially when it is free? Free prescriptions are hard to come by, you know. The dying do no good throwing stones. They need saving, lest a stone rest over their head.

“But Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.” There is no worse punishment than Jesus’ hiding Himself. As St. Augustine warns, “As man, He fled from the stones; but woe to those from whose stony hearts God has fled?”

“Whoever is of God hears the words of God.” So hear, and don’t only hear, but listen! Abraham rejoiced to see Christ’s day. Why shouldn’t we do the same? Abraham was glad to see Him. Why shouldn’t we be the same? He has no sin of which to be convicted. We do. So let’s let Him and His Word do what He and His word do best: point out and blot out sin. What pains our ears often heals our souls, and grateful ears make happy hearts, so listen. His Father glorifies Him. Who are we not to do the same?

“A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is.” *“I AM”* came to save you from who you were. He wouldn’t be speaking to us today if He didn’t want us to be His own, and you are. You were, but now you are. You were perhaps obstinate, bothered by Jesus’ words, but the very words that trouble the sinful flesh give birth to faith. You were perhaps slow to listen, but Jesus is quick to speak ready spirits into groggy souls. You were perhaps offended, but the offense of the cross is the foundation of faith. You were dead in sins and closer to death, but, as One soon to die, Jesus has called you to life. You were many things, but now you are one thing. You are Abraham’s children through faith, children born *“not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God”* (John 1). Amen.