

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proverbs 4:13 (Luke 17:11-19)

When Luther died, the Protestant world was thrown into confusion. It lost its most vocal spokesman. Enemies advanced from without; inner conflicts arose within. Many did their best to take up his mantle, whether by choice or default, but it seemed the world would only have one Martin Luther. No one, however, would have been more sickened by the notion that the Lutherans needed Luther to survive than Martin Luther himself. He was merely worm food, as he had joked in life. They didn't need Luther. They needed Christ, who had never left them.

Elector John Frederick, the ruler of Saxony, Luther's prince when the Reformer was still alive, had always been a Christian, but one could say that he wasn't always the pious soul his chaplain might have liked him to be. He liked a good party, and at times his court took on a bit of a frat party feel. His faith, therefore, could have been crushed by this harsh turn in his lifestyle and situation, but it didn't. It sobered him up, so to speak, and he became a more committed Christian than ever before, much to the emperor's chagrin. Why? Once the emperor had him as a prisoner, he tried to use John Frederick as a tool. He tried to get him to endorse the religious changes he was trying to force upon the Reformation churches in order to bring them back to the papacy, promising to lighten his prison term and punishments. John Frederick refused each time, and he in fact through visitors encouraged his Lutheran subjects to stand firm, even unto death. Eventually, to punish the humiliated John Frederick even more, the emperor took away his books, including Luther's translation of the Bible into German. What did John Frederick reply? It's one of my favorite replies in church history. "The books," the elector said, "one can very well take from me; however what I have learned from them, one cannot tear out of my heart."

How well is what the Bible teaches imbedded in your heart? How easily could someone or hardship tear what you have learned from it from your heart? Suppose you were all alone somewhere, no books, no fellow Christian to encourage you; could you encourage and remind yourself of God's love with passages of Scripture, with biblical truths? If so, how well could you do so?

Think of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. He was baptized, and we hear that immediately the Spirit led Him out into the wilderness. That's the patten of the Christian life. Baptism puts us into a boxing ring with the devil. He doesn't need to work very hard on those that are already his, whether they know it or not, by not being Christ's. No, it is the Christian that the old evil foe must get to work on. And so right after Jesus was baptized He was tempted.

Many of you remember the story. What happened? Three times—at least three times, that is, since that's all the Evangelists saw fit to record—Satan came hard at Jesus with carefully twisted verses of Scripture, as he had done with Eve, and other subtle deceptions. But Jesus resisted him. How? He quoted Scripture against twisted Scripture. He quoted God's trustworthy words against the devil's misleading words. How did He find those verses? Did He flip through His Lutheran Study Bible? Did He email His pastor? Did He pull up the WELS Q&A on His smart phone? I have AT&T and I can barely get service in Saginaw sometimes, I doubt the wilderness of Israel is brimming with 3G yet. How did He know what to answer? Was it just because He was God? No, remember that He was taking our place under the law and was tempted in our place. He acted here as man alone, setting aside His divine powers. He didn't do anything here that we as Christians cannot do with His help. He knew what to answer because He had been instructed, and because He treasured that instruction throughout His life.

What about you? How hard would it be to tear what you have learned from the Scriptures from your heart? How much have you actually taken to heart? How much have you learned? Have you been steadfast like Christ, or even like John Frederick, in temptation and trial, or have you foundered? When we examine ourselves and note where we've fallen short of God's glory, where we've forsaken His will, we do well not only to ask for forgiveness, but to address what led us into error to see how we can prevent it from happening again. Doing this requires instruction. How does God tell us we can best guard ourselves against various and specific examples? What help does He promise? What would He have us do in different situations? Instruction is an integral and ongoing part of the proper Christian life. ***"Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life."***

If you've ever fallen in love, think about how interested you became in that other person with whom you were smitten. You wanted to know all about him or her, didn't you? You wanted to know where he or she was from, what his or her family was like, what he or she liked or disliked, what he or she believed and thought about life and numerous issues involved with it, why he or she had chosen various paths, what he or she had planned for the future, and yes, why he or she was interested in you, loved you. If that is how we respond when we fall in love with another human being, and are loved by another human being, how in the world should we respond similarly, and even more fervently, when we've fallen in love with God Himself, when we are loved by God Himself, and how can we not love God or know that we are loved by Him when we catch sight of a crucifix, taste His goodness and experience His bodily presence in the Lord's Supper, and hear of His passion for us in the Gospels. So where do we learn more about Him whom we love, who loves us? Of course, you know the answer, don't you? In His love letter, signed with blood, delivered by apostles and prophets, addressed to you. What does it say about our love for Him when we leave such a letter on the nightstand, on the bookshelf, or don't even bring it into our home; when we are bored when it is read to us or uninterested in having it explained; when we are embarrassed to speak of it to others or afraid to be associated with it?

Your Savior has healed you of a much more serious, despicable, and fatal disease than leprosy. Your Jesus has cleansed you of spiritual cancer, laying waste not only to your flesh but to your soul and spirit as well. He has freed your mind from the madness of fallen reason. He has revived your tepid hearts with His own breath and blood. He has taken us, ugly, filthy, blemished, stained and unlovable in iniquity, and for all the world to hear and see, taken us, the Church, to be His bride, and not merely until death do us part, but for eternal life. And while He has ascended for the time to the right hand of the Father, He has been sure to write you. Like a soldier in a fox hole in some faraway wasteland receiving a long-awaited letter from his wife or child, cherish His words to you. Let no one tear them from your heart. Learn them while there is time, for who knows when someone will try to tear them from you, when something will put them to the test. What is the greatest gift we've ever been given? Christ. And how we hold to this book about Him speaks volumes about how sincerely we are convinced of that answer. Amen.