

### THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:14a, 36-47

*Through preaching, worshippers are born.*

A terrible thing has happened in Christianity: we have forgotten what worship is. We have gotten the idea that sitting in the pews makes one a worshipper. No, sitting in the pews means one has a posterior, and nothing more. Worshipping is something entirely different, and those who participate in it—worshippers—are produced in only one way: the preaching of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, our Lord and Christ, crucified and risen. We cannot worship Jesus Christ unless we speak his language, and his language is faith, which is created only through the promise, received through the preached word and baptism. Yes, through preaching, worshippers are born.

So what about that preaching? What was so great about Peter's sermon? It was so Lutheran—law and gospel, sin and grace, all the way through. He preached Jesus, our Lord, the saving God of the Old Testament, and our Christ, the long-promised Messiah, who saves from eternal destruction. He preached Jesus, crucified by them. He preached Jesus, crucified for them.

St. Luke tells us: "*Now when [those gathered] heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'*" Peter struck a nerve. He not only preached law, but he preached law that personally convicted his hearers. They were cut to the heart, moved to ask the question of all questions. They were moved to look beyond the hand to mouth concerns of everyday life and the plans for momentary gratifications of the flesh to the eternal, uncomfortable as it may have been to do.

"*Brothers, what shall we do?'*" It is a variation of the jailer at Philippi's question, "*What must I do to be saved*" (Acts 16:30). St. Paul's answer to the jailer was, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.*" St. Peter's answer is the same. Yet, while St. Paul emphasizes the act of believing, St. Peter today emphasizes how the faith that believes comes into existence. St. Paul gives a gospel imperative. He commands what the gospel itself leads the jailer to do: believe. St. Peter points his hearers to the gospel, the Means of Grace, which produces the faith that believes God's promise in the gospel. He points them to baptism, the sacrament of initiation, by which men, women, and children become members of the Church, God's family.

"*Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.'*" St. Paul says, "*Believe.*" St. Peter says, "*Be baptized.*" It may sound different, but they both said the same thing. St. Peter says to be baptized "*for the forgiveness of your sins.*" The Greek formula here is one of purpose. It means, in other words, "*Be baptized, so that your sins will be forgiven.*" How is this forgiveness received? Like every promise, it is received through faith. How does faith come? Faith comes through baptism. Believe! How? Be baptized!

"*And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" The Greek here could mean two things. Both are true. First, in baptism, one receives the Holy Spirit himself, who is the Father's gift to all who believe. Second, in baptism, one receives the gift the Holy Spirit brings: faith, which receives the forgiveness of sins. This gift of the Holy Spirit is truly the gift that keeps on giving, because the Spirit continually works faith in our hearts through the gospel, prays in our stead when we can't manage the words, wars against the desires and schemes of Satan and our flesh, and fixes our eyes on Jesus when they wander.

“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” What’s the most amazing part of that verse? I won’t make you raise your hands, but I will tell you that your answer will say a lot. Many would say the most amazing part is the number: three thousand. Many would say that, but none of you would, right. The most amazing part is that poor, miserable sinners, dead in their disobedience, were baptized and added to the Church, the family of God, by God himself. The most amazing part is that those whom Peter just informed of their responsibility for Christ’s crucifixion now claimed that horrible event as their own, receiving forgiveness for their sins through the very sin they were cut to the heart about. Are we happy three thousand souls were converted? Yes, most definitely. But would it have been any less amazing if it were one? No, like every childbirth, each and every new birth wrought by the gospel is amazing.

What had started as a gathering of posteriors in the pews now turned into a gathering of worshippers? Through preaching, worshippers were born. They were born through holy baptism, having been preached to the font, along with their children. “*And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*” There we have a summary of their divine service, of their liturgy, and it is not much different from our own. Wait, you mean Germans didn’t invent all of this stuff? No, they didn’t. God’s service was born in the baptism of God’s children, as they gathered to do what God called them to do: to hear the apostles’ teaching, to join in the fellowship only unity in those teachings produces, to receive the sacrament of preservation, that is, the Lord’s Supper, and, after inhaling God’s grace in Word and sacrament, to exhale, speaking back to God in prayer. None of this was geared to entertain or to sell the gospel to outsiders. This was a gathering of the saints, where they were taught and fed, where they expressed their fellowship at the altar, both in Holy Communion and in intercession for fellow believers and all the world. This was Lutheran worship. And it all came about only through the message, the gospel, preached by Christ’s called servant and saint: Peter.

Are you here as a worshipper today? No one expects a spectator at a football game to understand every aspect of the sport when he first begins watching it, and, in the same way, no one should expect someone to understand and appreciate everything we experience in God’s service right away. This is no trite thing. This is an encounter with God, and stripping down our encounter with God to make it more comfortable or familiar for the posterior in the pew is not the answer. In fact, can anyone name a single saint’s enduring encounter with God in the Bible that was ever completely comfortable and familiar? Name a time being cut to the heart by the law was fun. No, rather than stripping down worship for the posterior in the pew, we must preach up the posterior in the pew, because worshippers are born through preaching.

Do you want to be a worshipper? Then hear St. Peter, and be cut to the heart, for you have sinned, and, by sinning, you have crucified Jesus, the Lord and Christ. Then hear St. Peter, and turn your eyes where he points them. Look to the font. Be baptized and believe. Return to your baptism and believe. Receive the forgiveness of sins by the faith God himself and God alone has given you. Receive the Holy Spirit and, with the Spirit, receive what he brings: eternal life, salvation, hope, and a tongue that speaks the language of our Lord: the language of faith. Now let us worship. Amen.