

Walking the Talk of Salvation

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Light of the World, Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen.

Today we begin looking at the book of the Bible we call First John. This book is most often referred to as an Epistle or letter. We're most familiar with the letters from Saint Paul that were written to specific congregations who were facing specific issues. (SLIDE) The letter we call 1st John actually lacks many of the normal characteristics associated with other Biblical letters. Paul's letters, for example, begin with a salutation such as the one I began my sermon with this morning. Bible scholars refer to the Johannine letters as "General" or "catholic" letters, but 1st John is more like a written manuscript from a sermon that might have been given to the Johannine congregation. You might also recognize some of the language from 1st John. We use portions of this Epistle in our Liturgies of the Church. One more bit of information you need to know before we dig into the scripture for today is that just because the Gospel of John, the three Epistles attributed to John, and the Book of Revelation all bear the name of John, doesn't mean the same person wrote all these documents. Most scholars believe there was, in the early days of the Church, a certain school of theological thought with certain Christian values and beliefs. It's most likely the Gospel, Epistles, and the Book of Revelation all arose out of this Johannine School of thought, but not from the pen of the exact same person.

Walking the Talk of Salvation

So, as we begin to focus on the scripture for today we can see that the beginning of 1st John echoes the beginning of the Gospel according to John. Both books start with “In the beginning...” (SLIDE) The Gospel, of course is referring to the very beginning, when God’s Word, Jesus Christ created the cosmos. In the Bible, the first words from God are “Let there be light!” Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus declares, “I am the light of the world.” Here in our scripture reading from 1st John the writer proclaims God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

Isn’t it great to know that God lights up our world? Did you know most violent crimes are committed between midnight and 1 o’clock am? (SLIDE) Criminals love the cover of darkness. They tend to hide in the shadows where their actions are more easily hidden. That doesn’t mean you can let your guard down during the daylight. Most property crime like theft happen during the daytime while people are at work or out and about living their lives, but the violent crime involving weapons or assault and battery happen under cover of darkness. Like it or not, we are all part of that group to God. We’re all criminals who prefer to keep our actions under cover of darkness. As the author of this letter reminds us, if we say we have no Sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Jesus came to earth from heaven in order to shine God’s light into the darkest corners of our lives. (SLIDE) He came to expose the lie that somehow, by our own effort or

Walking the Talk of Salvation

inherent goodness we could live lives of stainless integrity, keeping every Commandment perfectly, earning our spot in heaven. Deep down we all still continue to believe we're somehow different or better than all those other people who commit those heinous acts like murder, theft, or adultery. Yet this letter from John tells us when we fall into that trap, we're deceiving ourselves.

Many years ago the Air Force came up with what were called our "Core Values." The very first core value is integrity. The statement goes like this... (SLIDE) "Integrity first. Service before self. Excellence in all we do." I believe the smart people who came up with these three core values hit the nail on the head. Integrity has to come first, otherwise the rest is meaningless. Integrity means that we speak the truth and we live and walk in the values we claim. (SLIDE) Our words match our actions. A person with integrity acts the same way when they are alone as they do when other people are watching. People of integrity don't just talk the talk, they also walk the talk. Humans have had trouble with walking in the light of God almost from the beginning. After the fall from grace in the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve hid themselves with fig leaves. (SLIDE) We've been hiding from God ever since.

So, given this sad, fallen state of affairs between God and humankind, what can we do? We are helpless when it comes to our salvation, but we are not helpless when it comes to our response to God's goodness and light. While we Lutherans

Walking the Talk of Salvation

acknowledge the fact that we are sinful and unclean and that only God can change that fact, we also believe we can respond to God's Grace and Mercy in ways that demonstrate our gratitude and thanks. (SLIDE) God already knows we can't cleanse ourselves from the stench of our Sin, but once cleaned by the blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we can at least attempt to live out our lives in ways that reflect the love God first gave to us.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could demonstrate integrity in living our lives always doing what Jesus would do? Even after we've "been saved" we continue to say we believe and trust in Jesus as our Savior and our Lord, but we act as if God's gift of salvation were some cheap dime store trinket. No matter how many times I remind myself that every single person alive today or who lived in the past or who will be born in the future is created in the image of God, I still make distinctions and divide people into the good and the bad. As much as I want to walk in the light of God, I still think awful thoughts and sometimes those thoughts come out of my mouth in slanders and slurs. I admit, it's really hard to always think of the actions of others in the best possible light as Martin Luther said in his explanation to the 8th Commandment regarding bearing false witness... Most of the things on this chart I can muster once in a while, but every day, 24/7, not hardly...

Here's the harsh reality, no matter how good you think you are, no matter how many good works you have under your belt, no matter how hard you try, you

Walking the Talk of Salvation

can never be perfect as Our Father in Heaven demands. When I was serving as a student chaplain at the Dayton VA Hospital had the opportunity to learn a lot about the 12 Steps of the Alcohol Anonymous program. The first thing I learned was that you can't become a recovering alcoholic unless you first admit you have a problem with alcohol. That same principle applies to every vice and sin out there on the smorgasbord of life. The first step to becoming a recovering sinner is to admit you have a problem with sin and are powerless to change that fact. I know that seems obvious, but look at the present state of our society today. Sin is out of fashion. Most sin today is either overlooked or legitimized. One of the more controversial news items this week came from the state of Louisiana where they passed a law that the Ten Commandments must be displayed in every classroom in every school. (SLIDE) Why or how this got to be controversial is a complicated story, but my first thought was, "I wonder which version of the Ten Commandments they were making mandatory. I know of at least three versions. There's the Jewish version, the Evangelical Protestant version, and the Catholic/Lutheran version. My second thought was that it would have been much better if they had made the Lord's Prayer mandatory instead of the Ten Commandments. The Commandments represent the Law and we believe the Law always condemns. Since we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we all stand guilty as charged. Not a one of us is sin free. Yet, God loves us too much to allow our Sin to forever keep

Walking the Talk of Salvation

us separated. Into the darkness and chaos of our lives, God sent the Light of the World, His Son, Jesus Christ. That's why I believe the Lord's Prayer should be displayed in classrooms instead...

Think about what Jesus said and did while he was here on earth. He called people to repent from their sin and come into His marvelous light. He healed people who were sick, lame, and blind. He even raised people from the dead! Now here's the rub. Jesus forgave people their sins. For people who believe they are fundamentally good, to have this Jesus fellow forgiving them, well, that just made them angry. It made them so angry they put him to death. That's what happens when we deceive ourselves and when the truth is not in us. When someone comes along and points out the error of our ways, we get angry. We get resentful. We get revenge...

Thank God for Jesus Christ who forgives us even when we don't think we need it. (SLIDE) Thank God for Jesus who never backed down, but who willingly gave his life to redeem your sin and mine. Thank God for the light who shines into our darkness to expose our lack of integrity. Thank God for Jesus who took our sin and the sin of the whole world into himself to make us whole and Holy. May the love of God in Jesus Christ draw you closer to God and into his marvelous light now and always. Amen.