

PENTECOST 3C – 1

June 13, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

2 Samuel 11:26—12:10, 13—15 Psalm 32 Galatians 2:15—21 ***Luke 7:36—8:3***

There was once a man who was bitten by a dog, which was later discovered to be rabid. The man was rushed to the hospital where tests revealed that he had, in fact, contracted rabies.

At the time, medical science had no cure for this disease and so his doctor faced the difficult task of informing him that his condition was incurable and terminal. “Sir, we will do all we can to make you comfortable. But I cannot give you false hope. There is nothing we can really do. My best advice is that you put your affairs in order as soon as possible.”

The dying man sank back on his bed in shock, but finally rallied enough strength to ask for a pen and some paper. He then set to work with great energy. An hour later, when the doctor returned, the man was stilling writing vigorously. The doctor commented “I’m glad to see that you’re working on your will.”

The dying man replied, “This ain’t no will, Doc. This is a list of the people I’m going to bite before I die.”

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I know this is a funny story, but I think it also points to a deeper truth: Many people think that God operates the same way. Many people – even many people who have heard the Good News of Jesus Christ! – still think that God is going to squash them like a bug because of all the sins they've committed in their lives. Their image of God is of a righteous, vengeful god who must be appeased for all the wrongs they've committed.

This is the story of the woman in today's Gospel reading. She knew the depth of her sin. She knew that there was never enough she could do to make it up to God for all the sins she'd committed. She was guilty, and she knew it. This is why, when she approached Jesus, the most she could do was to stand behind him – she couldn't bear to stand face-to-face with him.

This is also our story. If we're honest with ourselves, our own sins are too great to bear, gazing into the face of the living God. God is righteous, and we are not. For our sins, we deserve death. There is nothing we can do to make it up to God; there is nothing we can do to make ourselves righteous.

“Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.”¹ This is Mary LaVacca's Confirmation verse. She chose it herself. As she stands before us today to affirm for herself the faith that her parents claimed for her in baptism, I think she understand the message of love and forgiveness she's been studying hard for these past nine months.

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Max Lucado, in his book *The Applause of Heaven*, says:

“Even though by the 'book' I'm guilty, by God's love I get another chance. Even though by the law I'm indicted, by mercy I'm given a fresh start.

“No other world religion offers such a message. All others demand the right performance, the right sacrifice, the right chant, the right ritual, the right séance or experience. Theirs is a kingdom of trade-offs and barterdom. You do this, and God will give you that.

“The result? Either arrogance or fear. Arrogance if you think you've achieved it, fear if you think you haven't.

¹ Romans 5:1—2, Mary LaVacca's chosen Confirmation verse

“Christ’s kingdom is just the opposite. It is a kingdom for the poor. A kingdom where membership is granted, not purchased. You are placed into God’s kingdom. You are “adopted.” And this occurs not when you do enough, but when you admit you can’t do enough. You don’t earn it; you simply accept it. As a result, you serve, not out of arrogance or fear, but out of gratitude.”

Lucado continues:

“I recently read a story of a woman who for years was married to a harsh husband. Each day he would leave her a list of chores to complete before he returned at the end of the day. 'Clean the yard. Stack the firewood. Wash the windows ...'

“If she didn’t complete the tasks, she would be greeted with his explosive anger. But even if she did complete the list, he was never satisfied; he would always find inadequacies in her work.

“After several years, the husband passed away. Some time later she remarried, this time to a man who lavished her with tenderness and adoration.

“One day, while going through a box of old papers, the wife discovered one of her first husband’s lists. And as she read the sheet, a realization caused a tear of joy to splash on the paper.

“I’m still doing all these things, and no one has to tell me. I do it because I love him.’

“That is the unique characteristic of the new kingdom. Its subjects don’t work in order to go to heaven; they work because they are going to heaven. Arrogance and fear are replaced with gratitude and joy.”²

As Mary enters her new life as an adult member of this congregation, it is my fervent hope that she will stand fast in the faith she has received. I pray that you all will exercise that mark of discipleship to encourage her in her faith. And I pray that Mary will continue to live a life of gratitude and joyful thanksgiving as a fellow worker with us in the kingdom of God.

Amen.

<997 words>

² Max Lucado, *The Applause of Heaven* (Nashville: Nelson, Thomas, Inc., 2008).