

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost • July 30, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Romans 8:31-39

“The Gospel and the Sacraments (Augsburg Confession V, XIV, XXVIII)”

If you are hearing me right now, I am pastoring you. It's part of what the congregation has called me here to this place to do. You might be with us today for the very first time, or you might be marking your fiftieth year here at St. John's; chances are you're somewhere in between. I'm here – along with Pastor Meehan, Pastor Nass, Pastor Mitiku, and any of the other pastors who have been entrusted with the honor of standing before you as a pastor called to this place – to deliver a message to you. If you've been an active participant in life together with your fellow Christians over the years, you've heard a number of sermons delivered in different styles, by a number of preachers. I know that, as a hearer, some of those sermons connected with me better than others; I expect that's the case in your situation, too. But even when the style of the sermon or its particulars don't seem to be resonating with me, God is still at work to bring a message to me and the rest of the congregation from His Word, a message that every single soul needs to hear – whether it's for the first time or the five hundredth: “**God is for you.**” That's the message I have the honor of delivering to you today.

As a pastor, I know that people all too often can show disregard for God's Gospel and the Sacraments, His means of grace. I know this because I've let that happen in my own life at times. Sometimes, that disregard comes in the form of skipping out of regular participation in the worship life of the body of Christ that is the Church, giving priority over to other obligations or activities. It's more likely, however, that this disregard for God's gifts comes in skipping out on daily interaction with Him in engaging with His Word in the Bible. When that happens, we're not hearing from God. When we're not hearing from God's Word, we miss out on the comfort and the power that it gives, we miss out on sharing that comfort and power with our neighbor. We show disregard for what God does through His Sacraments – particularly Holy Baptism and Holy Communion – by not receiving them or by not living the life that they empower.

Today, our summer exploration of the Augsburg Confession brings us to a set of articles that speak to the central purpose of the pastor's role in a congregation: the ministry of the gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Alongside St. Paul's message to his fellow Christians in Rome, the words of these Articles are here before us as reminders of God's faithfulness and His love for you in Christ. **These are words for life.**

Paul spells it out in Romans 8:31-39: **in Christ's love, we are *overwhelmingly victorious* in all things.** Does this mean that whatever you do will meet with success, that life will be easy for you as a Christian? Definitely not! If fact, Paul acknowledges that those who follow Jesus are in constant danger of losing their life and being put to death. But amid that constant danger, God is for us. Victory is accomplished not by us, but by God, who is fully engaged in battle for us. That's the nature of God's self-giving “*agape*” love that went to the cross to do battle against all the forces that would try to pull you away from Him. Paul points us to the message of the cross: **He is *for* you.**

As a pastor, I get to stand before you today to proclaim that great news!

This public proclaiming is part of the ministry of the gospel which the Augsburg Confession defends. The Lutheran princes and people who put forward this statement of faith back in 1530 knew that the pastoral office was given to the Church as a gift. Above all other reasons, the pastor is in the congregation on behalf of the people of God and for the benefit of God's people. I, along with the other pastors of our church body, have been called to serve among the people of God's flock, entrusted with the sharing of God's gifts for you. The pastor is not a special person who stands above others as more holy or righteous; instead, he's more like a deliveryman who can only bring you that with which he's been sent.

God delivers His gifts to His people through the means of grace, the Sacraments. You and I get the good that we don't deserve when God washes us in Holy Baptism and makes us His children. We receive the renewal and strengthening of faith that we cannot earn when Jesus feeds us with his own body and blood in Holy Communion. God's self-giving love for you means that you get to experience and take with you the overwhelming victory that Jesus won on your behalf, no matter what the world may throw at you. That's what pastors get to proclaim as agents of God's grace. That's why I'm here.

Why is the Church here?

When you take a read through Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession, you'll see that the Church of the reformers' day had lost that focus. The Church is not called to be a civil authority or a ruler or the world, yet that had increasingly become the case in the centuries leading up to the Reformation. Instead, we can look at the world from the perspective of the "two kingdoms" or "two realms." God is at work in both. In the realm of the left hand, God brings order and rule to the world through the working of the State. God brings the forgiving and withholding of forgiveness of sin, and the administration of His means of grace, through the realm of the right hand, the Church. Pastors, bishops, and popes are not here to dictate the laws of society or to rule the world. The Church has a different calling.

The Church is here to point to Jesus, God who is *for* you.

Hear again Paul's words to assure Christians of the life that we have in and through Jesus:

*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup>Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. <sup>35</sup>Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? <sup>36</sup>As it is written,*

*"For your sake we are being killed all the day long;  
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."*

*<sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

This is the message that I have the honor of delivering to you today: **"God is for you."**

**Amen.**