

Judica

29 March, Anno Domini 2020

St. John 8:42-59

Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

“If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.” Let these words from your Savior sink in. Let them reach down into the fear, the anxiousness, the nervousness of this hour of pestilence and sickness and death. Let them snuff out the fires of anxiety and worry that are raging in your heart. Let them fill you with the peace that passes all human understanding. Believe them. Believe the One who spoke them. Let them be your most precious and prized treasure. Repeat them to yourselves over and over again.

To blind reason, obsessed with surgical masks and gloves and virus-killing cleaners, these words of Jesus are completely reckless and foolish. To the world, it's as if we are trying to say that Christians can't be harmed by COVID-19 or any other disease or calamity. But that is because the worst thing the world can imagine is the end of their life in this world. Is it the worst thing you can imagine? Does the thought of your grave cause you panic? This is the only life the unbelieving world knows and cares about. It's the most they have to hope for. If you don't have this life, what do you have? That's all the Pharisees could think about. “Abraham died! The prophets died! Are you saying they didn't believe?!”

I'm sure many dear Christians have died of this disease just like they have died of heart attacks and cancer and AIDS and war and car accidents. Only Enoch and Elijah were transferred immediately to heaven without their bodies being laid in the grave to await the resurrection. But 100% of those who believed the promises of God our Savior and whose earthly bodies did die, are still alive and will remain that way forever. In the same way, all who die because of COVID-19 or anything else believing that in Jesus Christ their sins are forgiven, will live forever. They will not taste real death. That is what the Lord Jesus is speaking of today's Gospel. Responding to the Pharisees, Jesus said “No. I'm absolutely not saying they didn't believe. They DID believe - in Me. I'm saying they didn't die. They are very much alive because God, the one true God in whom they believed and put all their hope and trust, is the God of the living, not the dead. They are alive because they rejoiced to see My day, the day of salvation. They believed my promise that I would come and conquer sin and death. They believed the promise I made to Adam and Eve in the garden to crush the head of the one who had enslaved them.”

Abraham and the prophets and all the saints are alive because they are with God. They share in His life which He graciously bestowed upon them through His promise of forgiveness in Jesus.

It's one thing to be cautious and responsible. It's one thing to not put God to the test by throwing yourself in harm's way. It's another thing completely to love this life and fear nothing more than losing your life in this world. Death is the thing that has everyone panicked right now. It's not getting sick. It's the fact that some people will die as a result of getting this sickness, just as many already have, around thirty thousand. That's why we are all trying to keep our distance from one another. It's why businesses are being restricted and closed. It's why the streets are much quieter. We are afraid that we or, because of us, one of our loved ones might die. And we are going to incredible lengths to prevent that from happening. And because we love our neighbor we should most certainly do what we can to help and support our neighbor in every physical need as the Fifth Commandment directs us. But do not be afraid of death. Do not let this pandemic rob you of Christ's peace and the joy of your salvation. If you are forgiven by Christ, what can a virus do to you? Temporarily lay your body in a grave. That's it. Nothing more. Dear Christian, through your Baptism into Christ you have already died as the Holy Spirit clearly teaches in Romans chapter 6. And because you have already died, you will live and never have to fear death. Death is now a friend because when your body falls asleep your soul will be with Christ and Christ will raise your body from the dead on the Last Day. In both body and soul you will live forever.

Christ Jesus certainly cares for your earthly body which He has created, as we saw last week in the feeding of the five thousand. We aren't flippant with either our body or the body of our neighbor. They are both God's creation to be cared for and respected. In the prayer which He taught us to pray, Jesus commands us to pray for our daily bread which includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body. And sometimes you are the answer to your neighbor's same prayer. Sometimes you are the daily bread. And sometimes that means putting yourself at risk. Indeed, helping your neighbor always comes with risk and cost. It demands sacrifice - sacrifice of time, of money, and sometimes even of life. If your child was in danger, you would of course, take whatever risk to yourself to save them. The Lord Jesus Christ was willing to lay down His life to help us. If you only helped your neighbor when there was no risk or cost, you would never help your neighbor.

But the needs of our body is only the fourth petition - give us this day our daily bread. There are three others before it that need even more of our attention. This physical death that COVID-19 (along with an endless number of other things) can bring is only symptomatic of real, eternal death, the eternal judgment of the body and soul that have lived and thought and spoken against the divine will. The death of the soul that has set its heart on idols like health and control and life rather than on the true God - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is this eternal death which needs our even greater attention and care. Yet it is the one that is most easily passed by. Are we as careful to avoid sin and false teaching which lead to the eternal death of the soul as we are to avoid germs? Are we as insistent upon hearing the life-giving Word of God and receiving the Holy Communion to our eternal salvation as we are upon taking the right supplements and medicines and eating enough fruits and vegetables? Apart from Christ, apart from His Word, there is no life. You may avoid COVID-19, but without the Word of God, you will die, you will taste the bitterness of the death that has no end.

The “no” that we have to answer to those questions reveals our upside-down priorities and the idolatry that still lurks within. Repent. Let us confess our idleness and disinterest in the things of salvation and our idolatry of our earthly life and seek the mercy and forgiveness of Christ. Let us pray for the faith of father Abraham who loved the Word of God and trusted His promises more than he loved his own dear son, Isaac. In the waters of Holy Baptism you have been promised both the forgiveness of all your sins and, as a result, the resurrection of your body to everlasting life. This promise stands forever. God will not change His mind. Christ says to you “Do not fear. I have taken away your sin and your death. I have suffered God’s judgment in your stead. I have swallowed death and rolled away the large stone from the entrance to your tomb. Death cannot hold anyone who clings to Me in true faith. You will not taste the bitterness of death because you have no sin to answer for. I have already answered for it on your behalf. I have given My Body and My Blood for you for the forgiveness of all your sins. The death of your body is really no death at all. It is only a slumber and your grave is a soft bed from which I will one day awaken you and bring you into the paradise of God’s eternal presence.”

The Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is the true and only answer for the fear, the panic, the sickness, and the death that surround us on every side. He has taken all the bite and sting out of death so that even in the midst of such days as these, as we watch the number of confirmed cases and death tolls rise, you may rest. Your life isn’t in this world. This world is passing away. Your life is in Christ who has ascended far above the heavens. He will see you through these days. He will see

you through death, however it may come to you. He will see you safely through to eternal life. Hear His Word more now, not less, so that you might be filled with His peace. Don't let the world fill you with its own ungodly panic and fear. Instead, eat and drink your Lord's crucified and risen Body and Blood and so be filled with His life and scoff at defeated death. Proclaim to all creation Jesus' victory over death until He comes and grants all His children the perfect rest and peace for which we now long and pray.

In the Name of +Jesus.