

Easter 5 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

May 10, 2020

John 14:1-14

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Lutherans bear the name of Martin Luther. This German monk who started the Reformation, the beginning of Protestantism in the early 16th century. Our churches bear his name. Although he never wanted that.

Luther was a very smart guy, a very insightful guy, a very real human being. Also deeply flawed. And very influential in history, in ways both good and bad. Being a Lutheran does not obligate you to like him or agree with him.

I'm telling you that because I'm about to share some of his ideas with you. And you don't have to agree with his ideas just because this is a Lutheran church. I'm not telling you Luther's way is the right way. But his way is an interesting way of looking at Christianity. And you can take him or leave him, just as you can take or leave me, or any preacher like me.

The great student and scholar of Martin Luther's theology, Paul Althaus, a 20th century German, said that the ultimate text that summarized what Luther thought and believed and taught about Jesus Christ was a verse in today's gospel. John chapter 14, verse 9. *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.* It's an exchange between Jesus and Philip at the Last Supper. Philip wants to know God and to see God. God the Father. Jesus responds: *"Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?"* *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*

It's a fairly provocative statement. That Jesus is equal to the Father. The Father means the God of all, the Creator of the universe, the pillar of clouds, the pillar of fire, enthroned in heaven with seraphim as pets. That Jesus is equal to him, almost equivalent to him, is the assertion being made in today's gospel.

Now. Most Christian thinkers talk about Jesus being "divine." Meaning that Jesus has some of the properties of a god. So there's this idea that Jesus has two natures, his God nature, and his human nature. And that's a big part of the Christian religion, and always has been. But for Martin Luther, it isn't just that Jesus is god-like, or the Son of God. It is that Jesus is for us the heart of God. Whoever sees Jesus sees that heart of God for us mortals. Whoever knows Jesus knows the heart of God for us mortals. For Martin Luther, Jesus isn't just adjacent to God, sitting at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus is a portal into the heart of God.

In Luther's mind, this is a highly unusual choice. Jesus was Jewish. He was poor Jew. He was

an uneducated Jew. This is a very unusual way for the God of the universe to come to us. Certainly for Luther and for many other Christians, the message of Christmas is the shocking message that God comes into a broken and oppressed world, through an odd family arrangement, as an outside who can't find accommodation in the inn, and so is born in filth with barnyard animals, and placed in a barnyard food trough, surrounded by animals and visited by lowborn shepherds. Why such a lowly birth?

And then, what many of the New Testament writers struggled with, why such a lowly death? As a criminal, flanked by bandits, executed by Gentiles in a degrading and inhumane public ritual. It's a highly, highly unexpected way for a God to reveal himself.

For Luther, this is what it means when Jesus says, *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father*. It means it's an unexpected place. It's not self-evident that Jesus would be God. It's ironic that Jesus is God. And that's one of the main things you have to know about God, according to Luther. Allow me to sing a stanza of a song from our hymnal: *Immortal, invisible, God only wise, In light inaccessible hid from our eyes, Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise*. That's a great song, and I love it. But these are the classic characteristics of the God of the Universe. Immortal— he never dies and is not subject to time. Invisible, hid from our eyes. Blessed, glorious, Ancient of Days— a title of power from Daniel. Almighty. Victorious. This hymn, number 834 in our hymnal, does not mention Jesus. Period. Not Christ, not the Son of God, not Immanuel, not Jesus. He's not in the hymn. It's a hymn about God as God is classically conceived. Powerful, awesome, victorious, too bright to see, too big to name. And God may be those things, Luther wants us to know. Indeed, he probably is those things. But that is not how he made himself known to us.

In today's gospel, Jesus says, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*. A lot of people don't like the part about no one coming to the Father except through Jesus. What do you mean? Jews don't go to heaven? Buddhists don't go to heaven? Luther was not interested in Buddhists. But he was concerned about people in Christianity who try to speculate about God. Who approach God philosophically. If God is good and if God made the universe, how come there is so much that is wrong? Why are there pandemics? What is hell like, and do good people end up in hell just because they aren't Christians? These are meaningful questions, and there is a time and a place for considering them. But ultimately, what God wants us to know is found in Jesus. At least according to Luther. At least according to John chapter 14.

Luther was a scholar of the Old Testament. His theology is anchored principally in the letters of Paul. His absolute favorite gospel was John. But over half of his sermons— and there are hundreds, perhaps thousand in existence— over half of his sermons are based on Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Because those are the stories of Jesus. Being born in Bethlehem. Giving the Sermon on the Mount. Calling fishermen. Healing the untouchables. Eating with sinners. A lot is there in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. All of it Jesus.

I don't expect you to agree with Martin Luther on everything. Or with me on everything. But I do think Luther had a true appreciation of today's gospel reading. To see Jesus is to see God. Or at least to see God as he wants us to know him. Allow me to finish with these words which are where the gospel of John begins. John 1:18. *No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.* Amen.