

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of February 15, 2009

By Fearing God You Will Not Be Afraid (Psalm 112)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is from Psalm 112:

“Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in His commandments! Wealth and riches are in His house, and His righteousness endures forever. His is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord.”

This is the text.

Dear friends in Christ, happy belated Valentine's Day. The history of Valentine's Day is a little fuzzy. The truth is the practice of giving valentine cards, flowers, and chocolate is a relatively recent phenomenon. It does not really have anything to do with the man whom we call Valentine. There's no record of St. Valentine ever saying to anyone, "Will you be my valentine?" However, most scholars do agree that Valentine was an actual person, most likely a Christian bishop or pastor who lived in ancient Rome and who was martyred, put to death during the early church period.

Today in the Catholic Church Valentine is remembered as a saint and his festival is celebrated on February 14th. He was martyred because he believed in Jesus Christ and he testified about the supreme love of Jesus who gave Himself for our sins, who died to give us eternal life. Valentine testified to the most pure expression of love there is; as it says in the first epistle of John, chapter 4: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins".

This is the love that is deeper than all the oceans. St. Paul puts it like this in his letter to the Ephesians as He prays that we may have "power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge."

It may surprise you, however, that love for God begins with fear. In other words we can only understand the depth of this kind of love when we first understand what it means to fear God. As Proverbs 9 tells us, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."

Friends, contrary to some people's understanding, God is not our little buddy that goes along with whatever we want. Nor is He some sort of genie that we can manipulate and get to do what we want. While He is our friend through Jesus, who often addressed His disciples as "friends" He is still God. This means He is in control and we seek His will. To fear God means to see Him as He truly is: the beginning and the end, the Father of creation, the Lord of heaven and earth, the eternal Judge and King.

He is to be feared because He is awesome, because His power is overwhelming. To give some perspective, some scholars say that the universe is 156 billion light years wide. That means if you went the speed of light it would take you 156 billion years to reach the other side. And yet God is infinitely bigger than this. Not only does He have the whole world, He has the whole universe in His hands.

And yet as awesome and almighty and big as God is, what makes Him even greater is His concern for every part of His creation, especially for you, for mankind whom He made in His own image. As small as we are in the grand scheme of the universe, His creation was not complete and called very good until He made man. This means God has a plan for His people. He has a Law for us to follow. Psalm 112 says, “Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in His commandments.”

To fear the Lord involves something else by necessity too. Job 28:28 tells us, “The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.” In short, to fear God means to follow His commandments and to shun evil. We cannot follow the Lord and follow evil at the same time. To shun evil means to avoid it deliberately. We are to have our blinders on when it comes to things like lust and greed, using profane and hurtful words, using the Lord’s name in vain. We need to have our hearts fixed on Christ, our whole heart with single minded devotion.

The Psalm says that to fear the Lord is to delight in His commands. The fullness of life, the joy of life comes when we follow Christ with our whole heart, when we’re not conflicted with delighting in our sins and trying to follow after them at the same time. And we can delight in the Lord because He is a light to our path, because He delights in His people, because He is our salvation. As the fifth chapter of John’s first epistle says, “This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome”.

Now the commandments of God in the New Testament are summarized as two. The third chapter of First John tells us what they are. It says, “This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as He has commanded us.”

Friends, in short, to fear the Lord is to delight in Jesus Christ, to delight in the forgiveness of sins, in His being with us always. We delight in our awesome privilege to be loved always, to have a relationship with Him, and to share His love with others. This is the meaning of life.

To delight in the forgiveness and favour of our Saviour involves a healthy fear of Him. It involves utmost respect and reverence. It also involves a fear of being without Him – not that He would leave us but that we would leave Him and follow evil. When a child gets lost in somewhere like a crowded shopping mall he feels anxious and desperate to find his parents. He fears being left alone. In the same way as God’s children we ought to fear straying from His will and being lost in our sins without hope for all eternity. This is where we would be if it weren’t for Jesus. And this is why we seek Him and trust Him to lead us with His rod and staff if we stray from the fold. This is why we read our Bibles

and receive Holy Communion often. He leads us to repentance and strengthens our bond with Him with these divine gifts.

Friends, to fear God does not mean to be afraid of God. In this world we tend to equate fear with fright: watching a scary movie, getting nervous before a presentation, sweating profusely and shaking before a flight, being afraid of heights... But in the Bible, to fear the Lord is actually a word of comfort. Fearing God keeps us from being afraid of the trials of this life.

In the introit we chanted earlier we recited the words of Psalm 112. It says, "Blessed is the man who fears the LORD...He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD". It goes on to say, "His heart is steady; he will not be afraid". When bad news hits: an economic crisis, a sickness or disease in the family, the loss of a job, the fear of the Lord will keep you grounded. You have the Almighty Lord who has brought salvation in Christ. He is with you and will supply everything you need. In the midst of all the bad news of this world, Christ is the Good News. He is the Light that shines in the darkness. As the psalm says, "Light dawns in the darkness for the upright; He is gracious, merciful, and righteous."

Friends, in short, we are to fear and trust in God. And I close with the words of Luther on this matter: "Fear God, Do what is right. Trust in Him. Hope for grace." Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.