



"The Church of St. John"
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Sound Theology and Worshipful Prayer—
**Why the wedding of the Lutheran and Anglican Reformations of the 16th century makes for a
God-glorifying marriage in the 21st century**

The St. John 2018 Lenten Devotional

Introduction

Five hundred years ago God began a work that continues to grow and deepen today for the sake of His kingdom. Such enduring significance is one sure sign of the Lord's hand in it.

But who could have imagined back in the early 16th century that a young Catholic monk's 95 arguments against the sale of indulgences for the forgiveness of sins would explode into a reform movement sweeping first across Germany and then the world? And who could have known then that an English king's issues with a pope would open the door for the *raison d'être* of that reformation to infiltrate and eventually reshape the Church in Great Britain and beyond?

The geneses and developments of the Lutheran Reformation in Germany and the Anglican Reformation in England present a complex and variegated history. But the Triune God has an impressive track record working His way and will through sinful, broken, and redeemed vessels like the reformers. So it was that through Christ's work in the lives of many faithful men and women 500 years ago—including Martin Luther in Germany and Thomas Cranmer in England—the glory of God was magnified through the Protestant Reformation.

Today we stand in thanksgiving to the Lord for what He has done and for what He continues to do in the on-going reformation of His Church in the 21st century. We are the latest recipients of the treasures of the Reformation with its clarion call to the authority of the Word of God, the proclamation of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, the promise of the Sacraments, the recovery of biblical doctrine, the renewal of worship and the Church, and the emphasis on the daily Christian life in congregation, home, business, school, and community.

Moreover, here at St. John we have a front row seat to witness the remarkable development of the ever-closer ties between two of the churches emerging from the Reformation. Today the orthodox Lutheran and Anglican traditions are joining together in mission and ministry like never before in the five centuries of their heritages. As a case in point, Pastor Myles is the first fully ordained priest in the Anglican Church in North America also to be a fully endorsed pastor in the North American Lutheran Church. An Anglican priest serving as a Lutheran pastor in a Lutheran congregation—surely Luther and Cranmer are rejoicing in heaven over it!

The wedding between Christ-glorifying, Bible-believing Anglicans and Lutherans makes for a beautiful marriage. The primary gift from the Reformation the Lutherans brought to the wider Church, chiefly through Luther's teaching and leadership, was a return to strong, biblically grounded doctrine. The main gift the Anglicans brought, largely through the faithfulness of Cranmer, was a renewal of Christ-glorifying worship and prayer. The Lutherans certainly brought robust worship and prayer to the table, and the Anglicans doctrine and teaching. But their respective strengths and emphases, when knit together, make for an even stronger whole.

Sound theology and worshipful prayer, those are the primary gifts we receive from the joining together of the Lutheran and Anglican Reformation traditions.

Of course, we also join in deep appreciation for the 16th century reforming work of John Calvin and those in the Reformed tradition. Today orthodox Presbyterians, the descendants of Calvin's teaching, stand with orthodox Lutherans and Anglicans, too. All three Reformation churches confess together the essentials of the faith. Our 2018 Teaching Weekend Conference visiting theologian, the Rev. Dr. Carl Trueman, is a minister and teacher in that classic Reformed tradition. Dr. Trueman has made a strong, public argument that orthodox Presbyterians and Lutherans should be the closest of ecumenical partners in ministry. He sees the differences between the two groups as nuanced, not substantial. We look forward therefore waiting to see

what the Lord will do further in the 21st century to join all three great Reformation traditions together for His sake—Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Lutherans rooted in Jesus Christ.

But to this 2018 Lenten devotional, we want to focus on those distinctive gifts of doctrine and prayer that Lutherans and Anglicans bring respectively to one another in order to make a stronger whole.

For that aim, we present a total of 40 quotes for the 40 days of Lent* from Martin Luther, primarily describing “sound theology, and Thomas Cranmer, primarily lifting up “worshipful prayer.” Each day, beginning Ash Wednesday, February 14 we will find a statement from one of these two Reformers, a brief reflection on that statement, and then a closing prayer. We hope we will find this devotional guide personally helpful in our Lenten journey and a resource to discuss in our Life Together groups.

In addition to this daily guide, we will be gathering as a church family on Wednesdays over the 40 days of Lent for a simple meal and a study and discussion on one of the foundational Scripture passages of the Reformation, concluding with a quiet time of prayer and worship. A full schedule of our Lenten endeavors is posted on our website, www.stjohnlutheran.org.

In Christ,

Pastors Myles and Mark

To the glory of God!

*Sundays are not counted in the 40 days of Lent.

Day 1, February 14 (Ash Wednesday)

“In the midst of life we are in death, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection.” [Cranmer, from the Rite of Burial]

Death is not a popular topic. We avoid discussing it. We avoid movies that are full of it. We shield our children from it. And we even avoid pondering our own.

Scripture, though, is not so timid. In fact, it wouldn't be too far from the truth to say that the Bible is a book about death. Death is the curse placed upon humanity due to our sin. It is the great “exile” from God that each of us face. Through death, our souls are divorced from our bodies and we leave behind the good creation that has graciously been gifted to us. All that we have—family, friends, work, possessions—are ripped from our hands by the cold curse called death. Surely, this is not the way things are supposed to be. And this is why the Scriptures speak loudly about death. From Genesis to Revelation nearly every book of the Bible speaks of death. It is humanity's greatest enemy, greatest plight, greatest sickness. No matter what we do or how hard we try “in the midst of life we are in death.” Everywhere we look death is close behind. Such a stark realization led one of the wisest men of all time to pen those infamous words, “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity...One generation passes away, and another generation comes” (Eccl. 1:1,4)

Scripture is a book about death, but death does not have the final word. Because, at the center of Scriptures stands the most important death of all—the death of God himself upon the cross. Through this death, God absorbed the sting of death. He paid the penalty that death demanded though he himself owed death nothing. And now, all that is left are life, resurrection, and peace. For those who trust in Christ, death has been transformed. No longer do we fear or dread it; but we mock it. We join with St. Paul in saying, “Oh death! Where is your sting?!” (1 Cor. 15:55).

This is why Cranmer's words from the rite of burial are so poignant for us today. They remind us that death—vile, evil, cursed death—is all around us. We don't ever need to sugarcoat death or make it out to be less than the tragedy is truly is. But at the same time, we live with the “sure and certain hope of the Resurrection.” Every time we encounter death, remember a gone loved one, or even think of our own end, may the hope of resurrection through Christ alone fill our minds. It alone is our comfort, joy, and peace until that great and final day when “he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more” (Rev. 21:4). Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Lord Jesus, by your death you have taken away the sting of death, and by your resurrection you have promised us new and eternal life; give us strength and courage that we may not fear death, but that we may take comfort in coming resurrection of all who trust in you. Amen.

Day 2, February 15

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” [Luther, Thesis 1, from the 95 Theses]

The Reformation was an attempt to purify the Church of many erroneous teachings. At the top of the list was the Medieval Roman Catholic teaching about repentance and forgiveness. Rome taught that for a person to be forgiven, he must confess to a priest and then “make satisfaction” for his sins through certain acts of penance assigned by the priest. So, for example, a person might confess that he stole bread from the bakery. The priest would then tell him that for full forgiveness he needed to recite 10 Hail Marys and attend mass three times that week. If he did this, then God wouldn't punish him in purgatory for his sins. But what if someone committed A LOT of sins? Or, what if someone died before being able to “make satisfaction?” Well, thanks be to God, you could purchase an indulgence—a certificate declaring your sins forgiven!

Luther saw through this money making scheme and labeled it for what it truly was: false teaching. How could he do this? This had been the Church's teaching for so long! Easy—by returning to Scripture. Luther scoured the New Testament for any reference to this system of penance. What he found was that the Medieval Church had promulgated this corrupt system based, not upon the original Greek text, but upon the Latin translation. In the Latin Bible, when translating Jesus' command to repent, it read, “make penance!” And

thus, confusion was able to take deep roots among the clergy and laity. They assumed what Jesus meant and what the Church taught were the same.

Luther, however, wanted to nip the issue in the bud. His very first thesis of the famous *95 Theses* clarified the words of Our Lord: when Jesus told us to repent, he didn't mean a system of confession, merit, purgatory, and satisfaction; he meant that our lives would be transformed into a constant state of repentance. In everything that we do, we must rely upon the mercy and grace of God, recognizing our sins and fault, and never attempting to earn God's favor through our works. Repentance does not equal acts of penance. It equals faith and trust in God for forgiveness.

With this discovery, the whole Medieval system crumbled to the ground. People were freed from the burden of making satisfaction for their sins. They could now rest in the completed satisfaction made by Christ himself on our behalf. What freedom, joy, and comfort it brought those weary souls! And the same is true for us. As we enter into this Lenten season, we do so as already forgiven children of God. As we fast, pray, confess, read devotionals, and do acts of mercy, we understand that none of these things earns God's forgiveness for us. Instead, we do them so that we might better understand the seriousness of our sins. Making repentance a lifestyle, as Jesus would have it, means that every day we confront ourselves with the truth of our sins—that by them we deserve nothing better than hell. Yet, it is at the same time a lifestyle of faith and thanksgiving for the death of Jesus Christ, who defeated hell for us. The more we dwell on our corruption and confess our sins, the sweeter salvation in Jesus Christ becomes. This, says Luther (and Jesus!), is repentance.

Heavenly Father, you desire not the death of a sinner, but that we would turn from our wicked ways and follow you; we give you thanks that in Jesus you have paid the full price for our sins. Give us grace, we pray, that by the Holy Spirit our entire lives might be characterized by heartfelt repentance of our sins, and faithful trust in your forgiveness. Amen.

Day 3, February 16

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures and by clear reason (for I do not trust in the pope or councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.” [Luther, at the Diet of Worms, April 18, 1521, in response to the demand that he recant his writings]

Luther was 35 years old when Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire and papal ambassador Girolamo Aleander called him to appear before them at a Diet (an official church hearing) in Worms, Germany in 1521. Luther's 95 Theses had been published four years earlier, and they demanded that Luther recant that work and all of his writings that criticized and refuted many significant aspects of the Catholic Church's teachings and practices. Germany was on the threshold of a civil war over the arguments and proposals Luther had put forward, and Luther's teaching had ignited a desire for reform and change in the Church that swept across Europe. While Luther enjoyed some political support from one or two of the key German princes, he had no one of influence in the Church coming to his defense. There he stood alone before the assembled powers of the western world, this young college professor and monk facing capital punishment if he did not back down.

But there he stood—and continued to stand without backing down for the rest of his life. Why? Because as Luther famously declared at the Diet, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God...Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”

That declaration probably did more to set the foundation and aim of the Protestant Reformation than any other. What, finally, was the hill that Luther and the reformers who followed were willing and ready to die on? It was for the sake of the Word of God. They were prepared to give up everything, including their own lives, for the truth and authority and the beauty of the Word. God's Word—the Scripture—alone was the “lamp to [their] feet and light to [their] path.” (Ps 119:105)

What is the hill we prepared to die on? Life necessarily is filled with the need to make compromises on any given day, from situation to situation. But eventually we too must take a stand. We too must decide what we will live and die for. Truth demands it.

This Lent, let us reflect upon Luther's example and testimony. We belong to the classic Reformation church tradition that bears his name, after all. So it seems only reasonable that we of all people should be the ones who climb that hill to join him where he stands. We too need to be the people who declare, in the face of great opposition from the powers of the world, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God...Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."

Holy Jesus, incarnate Word of God, give us by the power of your Holy Spirit the strength and conviction to believe and live according to your Word alone. Let us stand for your truth in a world of lies. Let us be willing to forsake all for your sake. We ask this to the glory of your Heavenly Father, Amen.

Day 4, February 17

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. [Cranmer, Collect for the First Second Sunday in Advent]

Sola Scriptura is the Latin phrase used to proclaim the Reformation's bold return to Scripture as the source of authority for the Church. The phrase means "by Scripture alone" and refers to the Reformers' strong conviction that everything needed for salvation is contained within the pages of the Holy Bible. Traditions, though usual good and helpful, are not of the same authority as the plain meaning of Scripture. If a traditional belief or practice is found to be in contradiction to Scripture, then the tradition must either change or be abandoned. Scripture alone is the final authority for the Church in matters of doctrine and belief.

The Scriptures, though, are not just a book of doctrine for the pastors and theologians. They are the very life and source of the "blessed hope of everlasting life" for every believer. Thomas Cranmer wanted the newly reformed Church of England to understand this. He wanted even the illiterate farmer in the pew to crave the Word of God for his comfort. And so, Cranmer penned this prayer as call for all believers to take serious the task of studying the Bible. He paints a picture of the devoted student stewing over the text, carefully reading each word so that he can correctly understand God's plan in Jesus Christ.

"Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest." This is the call set before each of us. It is both our duty and delight to take up this book and devour it. And when we do this, the Holy Spirit moves in our hearts to produce faith, joy, strength, wisdom and comfort. Just as we trust that God works through Baptism and Holy Communion, so also do we boldly trust that through the hearing, reading, and studying of God's Word his grace and life is bestowed upon us.

During this Lent, let us renew our commitment to God's Word. Perhaps we can join a Bible Study, attend a Sunday School class, or purchase a commentary for our personal devotions. Whatever we choose to do, let us be diligent in filling ourselves with the Holy Word God; so that when the world, lost and confused, seeks wisdom in all the wrong places, we will be ready to point them to the only source of wisdom, and yet again echo that ancient cry: *Sola Scriptura!*

Lord Jesus, you are the Word of God made flesh for our salvation; give insight into the written Word, that we may know you and your wisdom, that we may hold fast to the truth, and that we may at last enter into eternal life. Amen.

Sunday, February 18

Prepare for worship by reading ahead today's Scriptures: Genesis 9.8-17; Psalm 25; 1 Peter 3.18-22; Mark 1.9-13.

Day 5, February 19

"I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer." (Luther, emphasizing the importance of prayer in a letter to his barber)

Luther's letter to his barber is amazingly counter-intuitive. After all, the busier we are, we typically think, the less time we have for daily prayer and Bible reading. When we're swamped at work or the laundry's piled high or that project we've putting off just has to get done, who's got time to take 15 minutes during the day for quiet devotion before the Lord? And the thought of taking three hours—THREE HOURS!—crosses into absurdity. How could such a thing even be conceivable?

Somehow, Luther not only conceived of it but did it. In a great paradox, he would look at this calendar each day, and the more he had to do—the more appointments with students and visitors to keep and sermons to write and letters to pen and dishes to wash to help his beloved wife, Katie—the more time he set aside for prayer. His busiest days, in fact, demanded three hours for it.

Deep down, we all would agree that daily prayer with Jesus would be a good habit to have. Most of us would say, it's even an essential one for the Christian life. But how can we make time for it? How in the world did Luther make so much time for it?

First, notice that Luther expresses his frustration and burden—"I have so much to do..." No doubt on many days he felt overwhelmed by his schedule. Visitors from around the world would come to Luther's home for conversation, study, and debate. He preached two or three times a day on most days. He and Katie had a growing family to love and help. He wrote scores of letters, essays, and other documents all through the hours of every day. He studied Scripture constantly and authored lengthy commentaries on most of the books in the Bible.

No one has ever been busier, and Luther realized that without God's help, he would indeed collapse under the weight of the demands on his day. So he apparently learned early on that only by God's grace and strength could he manage. As the old song says, "What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer." This was a great relief to Luther. He began to see his busyness as a way to rely upon Christ, to hand over his burdens to the Lord, and thus to be reminded every day that only by Jesus did he move and work and live.

Second, notice that Luther set aside time for prayer "the first three hours" of each day. He didn't wait until he had time in his schedule for prayer. Time for prayer came before his schedule began each day. It was the only way Luther found it possible to establish as his first daily priority. It simply had to come first.

We often have very good intentions to make time for prayer from day to day. We honestly mean to do it. But then the demands on our time mount and suddenly, the day has passed without it. But if prayer is going to be the priority of our day, it has to come first in our day—as the word "priority" suggests. If prayer comes fifth or sixth on our list of things to accomplish on any given day, can we really say that prayer is our priority?

This Lent, let's not suddenly try to jump to three hours of daily prayer. But let's at the very least make prayer the priority—that is, the first thing—of each day by beginning the day in five or ten or fifteen minutes of prayer and Bible reading with the Lord. Paradoxically, that will not take time away from all the things we need to do but will give us the strength to do them.

Holy God, you created us to be in a loving, trusting relationship with you forever. May our days reflect our desire for that relationship too by the commitment we have to spend time with you in prayer. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Day 6, February 20

Let thy merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of thy humble servants; and that they may obtain their petitions make them to ask such things as shall please thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [Cranmer, Collect for the Tenth Sunday after Trinity]

Prayer is a mysterious act. The Scriptures are clear that we are to pray, and that graciously God answers our prayers. Why then are there so many unanswered prayers? Why should we pray if God only "picks and chooses," as it can seem, those prayers that he wants to answer?

There will probably never be a full answer to these questions on this side of heaven. Prayer will always be shrouded in mystery. But there is one partial answer to these questions that Cranmer offers us today: perhaps our prayers don't align with the will of God.

Have you ever stopped and asked, “Is what I’m praying in line with God’s will?” Most of us assume that if it’s our will, then it’s probably God’s will as well! The truth is God’s will is often even more mysterious than prayers itself. He has revealed much of his will in Scripture, but even still he works in ways that are above and beyond our human ability to understand. And this is why Cranmer’s prayer is important. It is a prayer that asks God to conform our prayer life to his will *so that* our petitions will be answered.

If you had to list your top four or five unanswered prayer requests, what would they be? Could it be that what you are asking for is outside the will of God? Maybe the job, spouse, or even healing you so desperately desire is not part of God’s plan for your life. As we bring our requests before the Lord this Lent, let us pray also that God would conform our prayers to his holy and perfect will and Word. If there is anything we are praying that goes against his will, may he show that to us! Amidst all of this, though, let us continue to trust in his “merciful ears.” Even when our prayers are not perfect, his love and compassion are.

Holy Spirit, enlighten my mind that I may pray those things which align with your will. Remove from my heart any requests that aren’t in accord with your holy, perfect, sovereign will. Amen.

Day 7, February 21

“Therefore, my dear brother, learn Christ and him crucified; learn to pray to him despairing of yourself, saying ‘Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness and I am thy sin. Thou hast taken on thyself what thou wast not, and hast given to me what I am not.’” [Luther, explaining the “sweet exchange” between Christ and the sinner from his essay, “The Freedom of the Christian”]

It became one of the foundational doctrines of the Reformation—Lutheran and otherwise. Luther called it “the sweet exchange,” and that was his famous expression of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the forgiven sinner. The word *imputation* comes directly from the Latin. It is an accounting term; it means “to apply to one’s account.” Expenses are debited and income is credited. The old King James word is “reckon.”

So “the sweet exchange” is Christ imputing—applying—to us the credit of His righteousness and then taking away the debt of our sin upon Himself. The righteousness we have through Christ is thus not our own. It is an “alien righteousness” made ours by grace alone through faith alone in Christ.

If all of this sounds a bit theologically head-spinning, it’s because thinking through the work of sound doctrine takes necessary time and study. It’s essential to put the hard work into it. Yes, on the one hand, the Christian faith is pretty simple—“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” But, on the other hand, exactly how does Jesus love me? What did it take Jesus to do to give me His love? How can I, a broken sinner, really come to receive the love and salvation of the Holy One of God?

The Reformers spent their lives addressing those questions, and they concluded that it was all about what Christ Jesus alone did that made us righteous before God the Father. In the 16th century, Catholic doctrine taught that our righteousness resulted from our faith in what Christ did for us, added to what we then did for Christ by love. But Luther objected strongly on biblical grounds that we added nothing to our righteousness. Such righteousness was all Christ’s that He graciously imputed to us. How does it become ours? By faith alone through trusting in Christ alone. It was the sweetest exchange of all.

Today let us meditate on “the sweet exchange.” May we marvel that Jesus would impute to us what is entirely His, covering us with the righteousness foreign and alien to us and taking from us all the sin and unholiness and baggage that prevents us from entering into the presence of the Holy and Almighty God. How could our hearts not be grateful to Christ for what He alone has done for us—forever?

Lord Jesus Christ, you have imputed to us your righteousness and salvation. You have freely given what we could never earn. May our lives now reflect our deep thanksgiving and joy in your holy and saving name. Amen.

Day 8, February 22

“Nothing helps more powerfully against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts than occupying oneself with God’s Word, having conversations about it, and contemplating it.” [Luther, the Large Catechism]

Luther knew better than most that the mind is the devil's battlefield. He struggled most of his life with a severe feeling of unworthiness before God. If he wasn't careful, he would let his thoughts (i.e. Satan through his thoughts) get the best of him. He would spiral deeply into depression, believing that God could never love him and that he would never be good enough. What liberated him from this despair time and time again was the Word of God. By pondering upon the simple promises of God's Good News through Jesus, Luther would fight off the devil and stand again on the truth. And this is why Luther insisted that every believer should fill her mind, heart, and conversation with God's Word. Only God's word is able to correct the lies of the devil and the world.

The devil knows each of our weaknesses. He knows what thoughts trigger our fears and anxieties. And, if we let him, he will place thought after thought into our mind as an attempt to destroy us. Let us fight against this with the only weapon we have: the Holy Word of God! We must, like the psalmist, hide God's word in our hearts (Ps. 119:11). Through hearing, reading, and memorizing God's Word, we are equipping ourselves to stand against all the false messages of this Satan. In the same vein, we have to be careful about the media that we absorb. Music, movies, TV, news, and books all have an agenda and message. If we aren't careful, our minds will be more influenced by the world and its Prince, than by the Word of God.

When tempted by despair or feed lies by the world that counter the truth of the Gospel, let us learn to dwell in God's Word. Let us surround ourselves with holy conversation about Christ and his work. Let us read about his love for us in the Bible. Let us sing about his grace through hymns and spiritual songs.

May God's Word overflow in our hearts and minds this Lenten season.

Gracious Father, you are the only source of truth and wisdom in this world; lead me daily to your Word that I may learn of you and your will and be protected from the lies of the Evil One. Amen.

Day 9, February 23

Almighty and everlasting God, which art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire or deserve; Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy; forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving unto us that that our prayer dare not presume to ask, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [Cranmer, Collect for the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity]

We often think of prayer as our words directed to God. That is, we easily fall into seeing prayer as that which I do: it's me coming to God with my words and hopes, with the confessions and needs of my life. Prayer, in other words, is then understood as the movement from earth to heaven, from the individual to God.

But Cranmer's Collect refocuses prayer. His prayer begins with God and comes down to us. His prayer is God-centered, not me-centered. And that of course makes all the difference in how we understand prayer and how we then actually pray.

Listen to how he teaches us to pray; listen to the theology behind his words. "Almighty and everlasting God, which art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire or deserve..." Cranmer sees God always a step ahead of us. God is waiting to hear from us, always anticipating our prayers before they're ever formed. The Lord's also prepared to give us more than we could ever think to ask for in prayer. We work to muster up enough words to put together a sentence or two of prayer, fearing all along that we've finally overstepped our asking, that we've prayed for too much. Yet, Cranmer helps us to see the Lord as always "wont to give more than either we desire or deserve." What a great God He is! He's the One who never ceases to amaze us with His ever abundant grace. He's the Heavenly Father always ready—always ready—to give good gifts to His children (Mt 7.11).

So then the second part of the Collect becomes more daring—and more faithful about God. Once we know who we're praying to, our prayer expands dramatically and fearlessly. The petition therefore calls God to "pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy." OK, Lord, you're really full of grace? Then I want all of it—pour it on me, Jesus! But not just mercy. No, understanding the extravagant love of God moves us also to ask that the Lord forgive "us those things whereof our conscience is afraid." Even when our sin is so grave we fear to put it into words, we dare ask the Lord to forgive us. But even that's not all. Once we recognize God's wide mercy and deep forgiveness, we even ask God to give us more than we can possible dare to ask.

Cranmer shows us in this Collect, therefore, that once we understand the character of God properly, our prayer life knows limits. Our outpouring to Him moves from a narrow stream of words into the rushing of a mighty river. How we understand God is how we understand prayer.

Almighty God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we give you thanks and praise for your abundant mercies and for your love which is wider and deeper than we can ever imagine. As our faith and knowledge of your grows, may our prayers unto you know no limits. In your Holy Name we pray, Amen.

Day 10, February 24

O LORD, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights; Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness, and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen. [Cranmer, Collect for First Sunday in Lent]

Fasting has always been a practice familiar to God's people. Moses fasted for 40 days and nights (Exod. 34:28). Israel was called to fast as nation from time to time (1 Sam. 7:6). The prophets fasted for various reasons and in varying degrees (Neh. 1:4; Dan. 1). By the time of Jesus, pious Jews fasted at least twice a day (Tuesday and Thursdays). Jesus himself endorses the practice (Matt. 4:1-11) and assumes that his followers will participate (Matt. 6:16; notice that Jesus says, "When you fast..." not "If you fast..."). Fasting is simply a given in the Bible. But a question still remains: why? Why should we fast?

Through the history of the Church, many answers have been given to this question. Some, out of hatred for their bodies, fasted so that their spirits might "grow." This can't be right, though. The Bible boldly claims that bodies are good, and that the Lord made food as a gift for us to enjoy (Ps. 104:14-15). Because fasting can be associated with repentance in Scripture (Jonah 3:6-9), medieval Christians believed that fasting was a means of securing forgiveness. Again, this goes against the Scripture witness that salvation is by grace alone (Eph. 2:8-9).

So why do we fast? Thomas Cranmer gives the answer in his prayer for the First Sunday of Lent. In short, we fast because our bodies and souls are connected—what we do with one affects the other. When we fast, we are subduing the unruly desires of the flesh. We are teaching our flesh that its passions are not in control; God is. Similarly, fasting disciplines our souls and teaches them to rely upon God for sustenance, not food or drink. Fasting, then, is a two way street that trains both body and spirit for the life of Christian obedience.

This is Cranmer's answer to the question. Notice in his prayer that nothing is said about earning forgiveness or meriting righteousness through fasting. Instead, the act is rooted in Christ's own fasting *for us*. We have already been forgiven by Christ's work on our behalf! Fasting cannot add to this. What remains is to grow closer to Christ and his holiness, not for salvation, but out of love for him and the desire to please him. Fasting is a key disciple in achieving this.

What are you fasting from this Lent? If you've never fasted before, then start small. Perhaps you can give up soda or sweets. Or maybe you can remove one meal a day once a week. Fasting doesn't have to be related to food. You can fast social media, TV, internet, sports, etc. The goal is not to follow a set of rules and then "check off" the spiritual boxes. That would be legalism! Instead, the goal is to give something up so that you might grow closer to Jesus.

May this motivate us this Lent to fast boldly, Scripturally, and to the glory of God alone!

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks that you have redeemed us and forgiveness us by the sacrifice of your Son. May you empower us, by the Holy Spirit, to fast during this Lenten season so that we may come to depend more upon you and less upon this world. Amen.

Sunday, February 25

Prepare for worship by reading ahead today's Scriptures: Genesis 22.1-14; Psalm 16; Romans 8.31-39; Mark 8.31-38.

Day 11, February 26

“You have the Apostle Paul who shows to you a garden, or paradise, which is full of comfort, when he says: ‘Whatever was written, was written for our instruction, so that through patience and the consolation of the Scriptures we might have hope’ (Rom. 15:4). Here he attributes to Holy Scripture the function of comforting. Who may dare to seek or ask for comfort anywhere else?” [Luther, in his commentary on the Letter to the Romans]

Martin Luther knew suffering. As a young monk, he was tormented by the thoughts of an angry, vengeful God who would never forgive and accept him. As a husband and father, he mourned the deaths of four of his six children. As a reformer, he experienced constant stress and criticism and endured many years under the threat of imprisonment and execution. As a human being, he gritted his teeth through many stretches of days spent in physical and emotional pain—from intestinal issues to depression to insomnia to gout.

How did Luther cope? Where did he find hope through all those trials? He turned to the Scriptures. “Who may dare to seek or ask for comfort anywhere else?” Luther asks rhetorically. The Bible is “a garden, or paradise, which is full of comfort,” Luther learns from Romans 15.4. It was always where he went to find his sustenance through his suffering—and his joys.

We readily think of the Bible as the source of God’s truth for holy living. Or the resource to teach us about the Triune God. Or the history of God’s work in creation. Or the eyewitness accounts of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. And of course the Bible is all of things.

But the Bible as our primary go-to for comfort in times of suffering? That may not be our first thought. Jesus, however, as He speaks through the Apostle Paul, invites us to receive the Scriptures in that important light. “Comfort, comfort, my people” says the Lord in Isaiah 40.1. “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me,” proclaims David in Psalm 23. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,” Jesus promises in Matthew 5.4.

In times of suffering, as in every time, the Lord invites His people to find help and comfort in His Word. Paul learned this hard way, as did Luther. We can now trust them that the Bible is indeed that garden planted by Christ for our healing, hope, and joy. The Psalms are a particularly wonderful place to seek God’s comfort. Paul’s letter to the Philippians has been a source of encouragement for countless over the years. The Gospels present Jesus as our Healer and Helper on almost every page. Isaiah is a book deep in comfort and strength. Every book of the Bible is that, and more.

Today, the Lord invites you to come to Him through His Word. There He will meet you.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, may we find comfort and strength in your Holy Word and especially through the hope of your death and resurrection for us. Amen.

Day 12, February 27

“Truly, then, we are saved by grace alone, without works or other merit...Notice [from John 3:16], all who believe have eternal life. That being true, believers certainly are just and holy without works. Works contribute nothing to justification. It is effected by pure grace richly poured out upon us...We receive forgiveness and grace at no cost or labor on our part, but not without cost and labor on the part of Christ... Our salvation must exist, not in our righteousness, but...in Christ’s righteousness. ...Let his righteousness and grace, not yours, be your refuge.” [Luther, from a sermon on Titus 3:4-8]

This quote from Luther sums up the very center of the Reformation: we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. This is the Good News that liberates us from tyranny of works and merit—of trying to earn God’s love rather than just receive it as pure gift.

The key phrase in this quote is “Works contribute nothing to justification.” Justification is a biblical and theological term that refers to our “right standing” before God. To be justified means that we are declared, by

God, “in the right.” Think of a court case. When the judge delivers her verdict, the person who wins the case is “justified,” or declared “right.” God is the perfect judge and his ruling is never wrong. One day we will stand before his judgment seat and he will declare us either right (heaven bound) or wrong (hell bound). The amazing gift from God through Christ is that now, in this present moment, we have already received that final verdict from God. Through faith in Christ’s work on our behalf, God declares us right. “Believers,” says Luther, “certainly are just [right] and holy without works....It is effected by pure grace...Our salvation must exist, not in our righteousness, but in Christ’s righteousness.”

We are holy, just, right, and pure before God because he looks not upon our sins, but upon the sacrifice of Christ. Even on that great and final day, when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, it will not be on the basis of our works that we enter heaven. We will of course have plenty of good work, but not one of them will contribute to our right standing before God. All they will do is serve as evidences in support of our faith and trust in Christ.

This alone is able to give us joy and comfort. If we were to peer into our hearts and evaluate our good works, even the most “holy” among us would see some pretty awful things. We would find plenty of sins, and even our “good works” would be tainted by impure motives and selfish desires. Salvation must be outside of ourselves. And thanks be to God, in Christ, it is!

Holy God, because of my many sins I am not worthy to be saved; and so, look not upon me, but upon Christ. Instead of my sinful life, see his perfect obedience; instead of my lustful heart; see his purity; instead of my shallow worship; see his sufficient sacrifice on the cross. Amen.

Day 13, February 28

**I N. take thee N. to my wedded wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.
[Cranmer, Vows from the Rite of Holy Matrimony]**

Marriage is one of the greatest blessings and gifts God has given humanity. Through this holy rite, a man and a woman make a covenant before God and witnesses “to have and to hold from this day forward.” This sacred union is God’s plan to bring about children, comfort, and companionship in the world.

Marriage has a still deeper meaning. St. Paul teaches us in Eph 5:32 that the union between man and woman is a window into the divine reality of Christ and his church. Through marriage, we have the best picture of our relationship with Jesus. Like a loving husband, he has sacrificed himself for our sake. He has taken upon himself our burden so that he might redeem us forever. He has, in the words of Cranmer, “plight[ed] thee my troth,” meaning he has wholly given his loyalty to us. He will not seek out another: the Church is, and forever will be, his one and only bride.

We are the bride. But unlike the perfect husband, Jesus Christ, we resemble more the harlot Gomer from the book of Hosea. Though washed and purchased by our groom, we live in the tension of already/not yet. We struggle to remain faithful—to stay true to our wedding vows. Because of this, it is necessary that we renew our covenant and commitment to him often, and this happens every Sunday through the Eucharist.

In the Eucharist Christ our groom is made present for us. He offers us the forgiveness of our sins, and he pledges to us his troth anew. And, in the most profound of mysteries, we enter again into that which marriage is only but a shadow: through eating the elements, we become one flesh with our Lord.

Marriage is an amazing gift, but ultimately it is a shadow of the true marriage between Christ and his Church. This is why even the single brothers and sisters in our congregation can boldly claim marriage as their own, for they too are the bride of Christ.

During this Lent, let us focus on the mystery of marriage. Let us give thanks to God for this gift and for its portrayal of Christ’s love for his Church. Let us also drive deeper into our identity as the bride of Christ. Let us renew our vows of faithfulness every Sunday as we partake of the Blessed Sacrament. But most of all, let us dwell under the great love of our bride groom, Jesus. Let hear the vows written by Cranmer as more than mere human promises: let us read them as Christ’s very promise to us.

Jesus, though I am often unfaithful, you love me still. Cleanse me and all your Church by your Word that we may be a spotless bride when you return. Amen.

Day 14, March 1

“At last, as I meditated day and night on the relation of the words ‘the righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written, the righteous person shall live by faith,’ I began to understand that ‘righteousness of God’ as that by which the righteous person lives by the gift of God; and this sentence, ‘the righteousness of God is revealed,’ to refer to a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘the righteous person lives by faith.’ This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From that moment, I saw the whole face of Scripture in a new light. ... And now, where I had once hated the phrase, ‘the righteousness of God,’ I began to love and extol it as the sweetest of phrases, so that this passage in Paul became the very gate of paradise to me.” [Luther, from his study of Romans 1:17]

It was Luther’s eureka moment. Sitting at his desk deep into the study of the Letter to the Romans, tormented by a holy God who demanded righteousness, but without any hope of ever attaining such righteousness, no matter how many times a day he mortified his flesh or confessed his sins or did other acts of penance, Luther was suddenly, by the grace of God through the power of the Word, “born again.” That is, Luther died to the belief that righteousness was dependent on him and his works and was born anew through the birth canal of biblical truth that righteousness was entirely a gift to him from Christ. “The righteous shall live by faith,” Luther now realized. It was God’s work alone.

Justification—righteousness—by faith in Christ became the banner Luther waved to the world. He called it “a passive righteousness” which means we simply receive it by faith in Christ. It’s Christ’s righteousness and Christ’s alone that we trust in and cling to and receive with thanksgiving. Our acts of contrition and deeds of good works add nothing to it. It’s only after we receive by faith Christ’s passive righteousness that we then in response aim to live in faithful obedience to Christ by our “active righteousness.” It’s the movement from justification (what Christ alone does for us) to sanctification (what we do by the power of the Holy Spirit in grateful response, seeking to live a holy life for God’s glory).

The Word of God’s revelation of passive righteousness liberated Martin Luther from the depths of despair. He went from a man convinced he was doomed to hell to a man convinced that Jesus had done everything needed for Luther to be received by God into heaven. Describing this change in understanding and faith as a born-again experience was the only way Luther could explain.

The central tenet of the Reformation was the proclamation that we are saved—justified, made right—by faith in the work of Christ’s death and resurrection alone. We add nothing to it, absolutely nothing at all. It was not “Jesus’ work plus ours” but “Jesus and Jesus alone.” It was this announcement that drove the Reformation and became the born again power for millions of believers across Europe in the 16th century and then to all parts of the world over the centuries that followed.

Five hundred years later this is not a new proclamation. We may even have grown dull to it. We simply accept the gift of the passive righteousness of God as a given rather than as “the sweetest of phrases...the very gate of paradise.” But we must resist Satan’s temptation to lull us into complacency about it. It is still the greatest news ever. Look at what Christ has done! It’s not about us at all but all about Jesus Christ! Trust in Him and His righteousness for your hope and joy and salvation!

May the banner of the Reformation’s reclamation of the authority of Scripture wave in our lives, our homes, and our congregation, and, indeed, throughout our world.

Jesus, you’ve done it all for me. You did all the work. You died for me. You freely forgave me all my sins. It’s all about you and you alone. I rejoice in you, Jesus! And I trust in you for my righteousness before your Father and my eternal life. Amen.

Day 15, March 2

May a merciful God preserve me from a Christian Church in which everyone is a saint! I want to be and remain in the church and little flock of the fainthearted, the feeble and the ailing, who feel and recognize the wretchedness of their sins, who sigh and cry to God incessantly for comfort and help, who believe in the forgiveness of sins.” [Luther, from a sermon]

There’s a modern saying that goes like this: “The Church is not a museum of saints, but a hospital for sinners.” Luther is echoing this same idea in his quote above. He is reminding us that the Church was established to save sinners from death and hell. Indeed, its primary ministry is proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments *for* the healing and forgiveness of sins. If the Church has no more sinners in it—if everyone is perfect and holy—then why even have a Church? Why preach the Gospel? Why baptize and celebrate Holy Communion? Without sinners filling its pews, the Church ceases to be necessary

To state it another way, Luther’s point is simply this: as Christians, we should never be afraid to acknowledge our sins. We should boldly confess our sins before God and our neighbors, because by doing so we highlight the great mercy and grace of God. We extol Jesus’ saving work on the cross every time we cry out, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13).

Similarly, we shouldn’t be shocked when our brothers and sisters in the faith commit sin. When another Christian lies or steals or commits adultery, our response should be prayers for God’s mercy and forgiveness, not the question “How could so-and-so do such an awful things?!” We should already know the answer: we are sinners.

Luther famously quipped to his best friend, Philip Melancthon, that we should “sin boldly.” Many have misinterpreted Luther to mean that he was giving his friend license to go sin. Instead, what Luther meant was that Philip should let his “sins be bold” [a better translation of his German words] before the Lord. In other words, he shouldn’t skittishly confess his sins—he should be afraid of God’s wrath—but rather he should loudly proclaim, “I am a sinner!” For it is God’s delight and joy to forgive sinners!

Luther’s advice should extend to the entire Church. May our congregations be loud about our sins. May we never shy away from owning our sinfulness before God and man. By doing this, we pave a way for God’s love and forgiveness to be magnified in our community.

Lord, preserve me from ever believing that I no longer sin or no longer need your forgiveness. Daily remind me of your Son’s sacrifice for me—that by his death my sins have been wiped away. Amen.

Day 16, March 3

O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed; Give unto thy servants that peace which the world cannot give, that both our hearts may be set to obey the commandments, and also that by thee we being defended from the fear of our enemies, may pass our time in rest and quietness, through the merits of Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen. [Cranmer, the First Collect at Evening Prayer]

Thomas Cranmer, the first Protestant Archbishop of the Church of England, had one simple goal: transform a Roman Catholic nation into a Protestant nation. How on earth was he going to do this? Most of the bishops and priests were still heavily Roman in their theology. Most of the laity and nobility also cared nothing about this new “Reformation” coming over from Germany. Everyone was quite happy to keep Latin masses, statues of Mary, and indulgences. But Cranmer knew that the truth of God’s Word needed to infiltrate his beloved Church. But how? His answer was by liturgy and prayer.

Cranmer knew that the best way to teach Protestant theology to England was to give them Protestant liturgy, and so he set out to create one of the most impressive works ever crafted, the Book of Common Prayer. This new, Lutheran/Protestant worship book took the theology of the Reformation and transformed it into daily prayers, baptism services, and Holy Communion liturgies.

Take for example the above prayer. Cranmer assigned this short prayer to be said daily during the service of Evening Prayer. Notice how subtly it teaches Protestant theology! First, it ascribes “holy desires” and “just works” to God, not to us. Even when we perform good deeds, they find their source in God’s work in us. We cannot claim them. Second, Cranmer places peace from God as the source of our ability to obey God’s commands. We do not follow God’s Law to earn his peace; we follow it because we already have peace by the blood of Jesus. Finally, the prayer ends by appealing solely to the merit of Christ. We have no merit of our own by which we can appeal to God for him to listen to our prayers. Christ alone has earned for us a hearing before the Father.

By placing good, biblical prayers and liturgies into the hands of English Christians, Cranmer was able to catechize an entire nation. This is why what we say, sing, and pray during worship matters significantly. Liturgy forms and shapes our understanding of God: his character, his works, and his love. It teaches us truth about God, even if we are unaware.

The problem, though, is that often we say the words of the Liturgy on Sunday morning so routinely that any meaning zips past us. Let us renew our commitment to the Liturgy. Let us hang onto every word we say on Sundays, and ask the Lord to teach new truths about him and his Gospel.

Lord Jesus, teach me how to pray well, so that my whole life might conform to your will and image. Amen.

March 4, Sunday

Prepare for worship by reading ahead today’s Scriptures: Exodus 20.1-21; Psalm 19; Romans 7.12-25; John 2.13-22. Today we’re honored to welcome at church the Rev. John Bradosky, the bishop of the North American Lutheran Church. Bishop Bradosky will preach at both services and engage with us in an informal Q & A during the Sunday School hour.

Day 17, March 5

“Who can understand the riches of the glory of this grace? Here this rich and divine bridegroom Christ marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her with all his goodness. Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, of which she may boast as of her own and which she can confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell and say, ‘If I have sinned, yet my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned, and all his is mine and all mine is his.’” [Luther, from his essay, *The Freedom of a Christian*]

When a man and woman are married, the Bible says that the two “become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). This refers to more than just their sexual union--they are united on a deep, mysterious and spiritual level. What belongs to the husband, now belongs to the wife. What belongs to the wife, now belongs to the husband. They have become a single entity in a profound way.

The same is true of Christ and his Church. In the most gracious of acts, Christ willingly unites himself to sinful humans and he gives to them what belongs to him. His righteousness, eternal life, and spotless obedience is freely offered to his beloved bride. She receives these gifts of love because she is “one flesh” with her groom. Likewise, Christ freely received what belong to the bride: punishment, penalty, wrath, condemnation, judgment, and scorn. Christ on the cross has become “one flesh” with his sinful bride, the Church.

Luther labeled this teaching about the union of Christ and the Church the “blessed exchange.” And he saw within it the greatest comfort when faced with the cruel reality of our sins. Our salvation is not based upon our sins, but upon Christ’s sinlessness, which now belongs to us. When God looks at us, he does not see our filth. He sees his perfect son, for the two have become one flesh.

What past sins still plague you? Dwelling on them can only lead to despair, anxiety, and doubts about your salvation. Instead, give them to Jesus, your bridegroom. And receive from him sinlessness and perfection before the Father in heaven. May we boldly echo Luther’s words, “All his is mine and all mine is his.”

Lord Jesus, thank you for taking my place upon the cross; you have graciously given me what I could never have earned. Take away from me the burden of my sins and help me cling more fully to your righteousness alone. Amen.

Day 18, March 6

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen. [Cranmer, the Prayer of Humble Access prior to receiving Holy Communion]

It is one of the most Christ-glorifying, Scripture-proclaiming, and personally-startling prayers ever written. Cranmer's "Prayer of Humble Access" has been over the generations both beloved and reviled. That's not so surprising. The key biblical passage it draws upon is also one of the most beloved and reviled statements our Lord ever made. Because of it, "many of his [Jesus'] disciples turned back and no longer walked with him."

John records his eyewitness testimony of it in John 6.25-59. A large crowd surrounds Jesus, including Jewish leaders and a large group of His disciples (this group encompasses both His apostles and many unnamed other followers). He tells them that He is the Bread of Life. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (Jn 6.51) The Jewish leaders object to this, disputing that Jesus can give His flesh to eat. We almost certainly can appreciate their discomfort and objection.

Then Jesus gets even more graphic—and controversial. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life..." (Jn 6.53-54)

Cannibalism? Is our Lord talking about cannibalism? The first Christians were accused of it by their pagan Roman neighbors. The neighbors would eavesdrop on a worship service, the words and prayers spilling over the wall of the house's atrium where the believers had gathered for Scripture, teaching, prayer, and communion, and hear the presiding minister say, "The body of Christ given for you. The blood of Christ shed for you." "Ah! There you go. What did we tell you?" the neighbors would say. "These Christians are all a bunch of cannibals." Even many of Jesus' disciples agreed with the pagans. They too turned back. Then comes along Cranmer who scripts this Prayer of Humble Access right from the heart of our Lord's controversial teaching about His flesh and blood. Cranmer was a bold man of prayer. Where others would shy away from the harder sayings of Jesus, Cranmer embraced them for public worship, confession, and prayer. What then are we to make of Jesus' teaching and Cranmer's Prayer?

First, let's be clear. Jesus is *not* proposing cannibalism. He is the "Holy One of God," as Peter confesses in Jn 6.59 when Jesus asks if Peter and the other apostles also intended to abandon Him. So no Holy One would suggest such a thing as unholy and vile as cannibalism.

On the one hand, therefore, Jesus is teaching us a deeply spiritual message about the importance of *believing*. Taking this passage in its context, we find that Jesus is emphasizing over and over the eternal significance of our believing in Him—and especially in His atoning work of the Cross where He gives His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. For Jesus, believing is eating, and eating is believing. It's putting one's whole trust in Jesus alone. It's Jesus illustrating what it means to put our trust really and truly in Him and in His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins and for our eternal life.

However, on the other hand, Jesus is at the same time also teaching us that in the Holy Communion He is really and truly present—both His divinity and His humanity, His body and blood really present and really given and shed for us. As He says in His institution of the Eucharist, "this is my body...this is my blood." (Mt 26.26-29) To believe therefore that we really receive Him in the Sacrament of the Altar is to trust really in the plain truth of the Word of God. Jesus says it; we believe it.

Such a challenging teaching here in John 6 therefore leads to great comfort. In the Eucharist, we are not merely remembering what happened at that last Passover meal between Jesus and His apostles 2,000 years ago. We are not just participating in a symbolic act. Rather, we are taking Jesus—the real and true presence of His flesh and blood, just as He said we must to have eternal life in Him—into ourselves by faith, that is, by trusting in Jesus and in His Word.

Along then comes Cranmer sixteen hundred years later and writes this gripping prayer straight from John 6. Why? Because this faithful reformer and man of prayer wants us to be assured that because the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ are really present in the Eucharist, we can trust that indeed “our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.” In other words, Cranmer’s prayer leads us to faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us. We pray it to believe it, even as we believe it to pray it.

The Prayer of Humble Access invites all baptized Christians to receive the Eucharist by believing in the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ’s real presence of His flesh and blood “given and shed for you.” Indeed, to believe that is to have eternal life, “for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” (Jn 6.55-56)

Jesus, our Lord and Savior, we can never thank you enough for the giving of your flesh and blood for us and for the forgiveness of our sins. By your Holy Spirit, give us the faith to trust in you and in your promises in the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Amen.

Day 19, March 7

“The Sacrament of the Altar is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, in and under the bread and wine which we Christians are commanded by the Word of Christ to eat and to drink...the Sacrament is bread and wine... comprehended in, and connected with, the Word of God.” [Luther, from his commentary on the Sacraments]

When people think of Luther, Lutheranism, and the Reformation, their minds jump to doctrines like *Sola Scriptura* or justification by faith alone. And rightly so! Luther spent his life fighting for the truth of the Gospel, founded upon the Bible alone, that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. Returning the Church to this basic truth is his greatest legacy and gift to the world. But there is more to Luther than just faith and justification. At his core, Luther was a theologian of the Sacraments. How could he not be?! In his mind, the Word of God clearly commanded the Sacraments and promised that God’s love and grace would be manifested through them. To receive the Sacraments by *faith alone* was the same as receiving Jesus Christ himself, for through the water, bread, and wine Christ gives himself to us. Luther never pitted faith or Scripture against the Sacrament. They were all connected truths meant to deliver God’s salvation to us.

But this doesn’t mean that Luther simply accepted the Roman Catholic teaching of his day on the Sacraments. Far from it! Nor did Luther give up his strong sacramental views when later Reformers felt he was still “too Catholic.” Of course not! Luther refused to let anything or anyone but the Word of God influence his beliefs.

So what did he believe? In the quote above, we see Luther’s “middle way” between Rome and more radical reformers. First, he boldly confessed that in the Eucharist Christ’s Body and Blood are actually present. The same body that was scorn for you, and the same blood that was spilled for you, is delivered to you “in and under the bread and wine.” This rubbed the later Reformers the wrong way. They wanted to see Holy Communion as a pure symbol, but Luther refused to give up his belief in the Real Presence. Why? Because Jesus said at the Last Supper, “This is my body...this is my blood...” To assert anything less than the Real Presence would be to rob Jesus’ words of any true meaning.

Towards this, the Roman Catholic would loudly say, “Amen! We too profess that Christ is present in the Eucharist!” But Luther also makes a second point: the Sacrament is truly bread and wine. In Rome’s understanding, the elements of communion cease to be bread and wine when they are “transformed” into Body and Blood. Again, Luther saw this as contradicting the Word of God. In the incarnation, humanity and divinity came to fully exist in Jesus Christ. This “union” must also apply to the Eucharist: Jesus’ body and blood *and* the bread and wine are all fully, equally present.

How does all of this impact our walk with Jesus? Why does it matter if the sacrament is the “true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ” or if it’s just a memorial feast? As you can probably guess, the answer for Luther goes back to God’s Word. Are we going to believe Jesus, even when we can’t fully comprehend, or are we going to theologize our way to a more “palpable” position? It takes faith to look at that little piece of bread and say, “This truly is the body of Christ, given for me and my forgiveness.” It takes faith in God’s Word to see in that cup more than just sweet wine, but instead the very blood of Christ poured out for our redemption. But when we have this faith, what joy and comfort surrounds us! Christ, as he promised, has not left us as orphans! He is with us—really, truly, actually—in that bread and wine. He is here to love us, nourish us, and save us! Even when we don’t “feel” Jesus—when we are in a “dry patch” in our faith—he is still present, ready to take away your sins.

As we approach the Lord’s Table in the weeks to come, may we boldly believe that Christ is present; may all doubt flee from our minds as we behold that bread and wine, confessing like St. Thomas in full faith: “My lord and my God!” (John 20:28).

Lord, we give you thanks that you so graciously give us the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion. We are not worthy to partake of such a priceless offering, but you delight in saving us and forgiving our sins. Give us faith to cling to the promises delivered to us in that Holy Supper. Amen.

Day 20, March 8

“Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the Amen firmly. Never doubt that God in his mercy will surely hear you and say ‘yes’ to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, ‘Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.’ That is what Amen means.” [Luther, advising his barber on prayer]

Martin Luther had a barber. When he was a monk, keeping his hair stylish was not a problem. A straight razor around the head once a week did the job. But after marrying his dear Katie, well, Martin needed to lose that monkish look. So he struck up a meaningful friendship with his local barber in Wittenberg, Master Peter.

Peter confessed a problem as Martin sat in his barber’s chair. He told Martin how difficult it was for him to pray. His mind kept meandering into other thoughts, and he often forgot what he intended to pray for. Could Martin give him some pastoral advice?

Martin not only gave Peter some advice, but he left behind advice for all of us in a letter to Peter that’s been published into a little booklet titled, *A Simple Way to Pray*. Page for page, it may be the best guide to prayer we could ever have.

Martin told Peter how he prayed, and as we’ve already read, Martin prayed regularly three hours each day. How could anyone concentrate that long in prayer? He did so because he relied on God’s strength and not his own. Martin told Peter that each day in prayer, he recited the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, each one line by line, thought by thought, pausing at each step to allow the Holy Spirit to form and shape his prayers that day according to the Word of God. This provided “a scaffolding” for Martin to hang his prayers and gave him a liturgy by which he could worship and pray to his Lord. This beautiful template for prayer gave Martin the platform to pray for hours at a time. It kept him focused.

At the end of each prayer, Martin then advised Peter to say a strong and faithful “Amen.” That’s because he told Peter that he must not conclude his prayer “without having said or thought, ‘Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.’ That is what Amen means.”

Martin Luther’s advice to his barber, Master Peter, resounds in power and helpfulness to this day. We too can learn much from Martin’s prayer life. But most of all, Martin teaches us to believe in the Lord who hears all our prayers, to trust that our Heavenly Father cares for His children and listens to them. In that childlike faith, we then exclaim, “Amen! God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.”

God our Father, we pray to you through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit in great praise and thanksgiving for your never-tiring love and mercy for us. We praise you especially this day that you hear our pleas and petitions of prayer. May we always hold to that truth and promise. We say, Amen!

Day 21, March 9

“We are in truth and totally sinners, with regard to ourselves and our first birth. Contrariwise, in so far as Christ has been given for us, we are holy and just totally. Hence from different aspects we are said to be just and sinners at one and the same time.” [Luther, from an essay]

Simul justus et peccator. “At the same time just (saint) and sinners.” In a nutshell, this sums up the Gospel message. By the fact that we are children of Adam and Eve, we have inherited a sin nature. We are corrupt and wicked. Our hearts desire unholy things, our wills naturally choose evil actions, and our minds entertain vile and hateful thoughts. From the moment of conception, we are sinners in need of a savior. And because of this, as the psalmist says, we have no hope to be saved in our own right (Ps. 130:3).

This is why we need a righteousness that comes from outside of ourselves--we need the righteousness of a perfect, spotless human. Through our union with Christ we get exactly that. We become sharers in his holy life, death, and resurrection. Our sins are forgiven and his righteousness is credited to our account. Before God, then, we become saints.

The word “saint” simply means “holy one.” Often when we think of saints, we think of those heroes of the faith that did extraordinary things for God and the Church, and who have so grown in Christ-likeness that they hardly sin (if ever!). But this isn’t how the term is used in Scripture. In Ephesians 1:1, Paul addresses normal, everyday Christians as “saints.” By their faith in Christ and their reception of Christ’s righteousness, they have truly and fully become saints, holy ones.

What is amazing, though, is that later in the same letter Paul warns these saints from falling into sin (Eph. 4:25-32). Even though Christians are saints--even though they are holy before the Lord and destined for salvation--they are still sinners. Of course Christians who have the Holy Spirit are able to wage war against sins, but the fact remains: in this life we will struggle against sin. We will never reach a stage in our walk with Jesus where we “leave behind” sinning. And even in eternity, though we won’t commit sins, our identity will forever be that of forgiven sinner. In 10,000 years we will still sing God’s praises. Why? Because he saved a wretch like me! Our everlasting praises will be fueled by this one simple fact: we are at the same time saints and sinners.

Heavenly Father, through faith in Christ you regard me as holy and pure, yet I am chief among sinners. For this, I am eternally grateful. Amen.

Day 22, March 10

Let us learn, therefore, in great and horrible terrors, when our conscience feels nothing but sin and judges that God is angry with us, and that Christ has turned His face from us, not to follow the sense and feeling of our own heart, but to stick to the Word of God.” [Luther, from his commentary on the Letter to the Galatians]

Our feelings are untrustworthy. We never know from one day to the next, or even from moment to moment, what we will be feeling about life or faith. As the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah, “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*” (Jer 17:9) This is especially a truth and a caution to bear in mind when it comes to our relationship with God.

Not a small number of us bear a fear of God. Not a proper fear as in reverence and awe, but a raw, terrifying fear. We hear on Sundays and read in the Scriptures that God the Father loved us so much that He gave His only Son, Jesus Christ, for us. We hear and to some degree, believe, that Jesus died for our sins and invites us by faith into eternal fellowship with Him. We nod our heads in assent and move our lips in acknowledgment to this gospel. But deep down, in our hearts, where our feelings lie under the weight of fear and sin and guilt and suspicion that God couldn’t really love us, we feel nothing but “that God is angry with us, and that Christ has turned His face from us.”

That's why Luther urges us not to trust in our own feelings "but to stick to the Word of God." It's the great difference between subjective and objective truth. Subjective truth of our hearts is premised on "what I feel and what I think and what I believe and what I have done." The objective truth of the Word of God is premised instead on "what Christ says and what Christ thinks and what Christ's Word says about us and what Christ has done." It's the eternal chasm between I and Thou.

To stick to the Word of God is therefore to stick to Christ alone. He is the Eternal Truth who does not change from day to day or from moment to moment. He is eternally constant, and His love and mercy and forgiveness are not predicated on what we've done or have failed to do but only and entirely on what He has done for us. That's the eternal truth and facts of the matter.

As the Gettys' beloved hymn, *In Christ alone*, proclaims,

In Christ alone my hope is found;
He is my light, my strength, my song;
This cornerstone, this solid ground,
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My comforter, my all in all—
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

Stick to the Word of God. That's the only way to believe and live on any given day.

Holy Spirit, lead us to depend, not in part but in full, on Jesus our Lord. Instill in us a confidence in the Word of God and save us from relying on our own feelings and thoughts. May all of this yield greater glory to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

March 11, Sunday

Prepare for worship by reading ahead today's Scriptures: 2 Chronicles 36.14-23; Psalm 122; Ephesians 2.4-10; John 6.1-15.

Day 23, March 12

"Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished, by the comfort of thy grace may mercifully be relieved; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen." [Cranmer, Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Lent]

We deserve hell. When we collectively with our first parents sinned by disobeying the Word of God in the Garden (Genesis 3), we were rightly condemned to die and to be cast way from God's presence into eternal punishment. As Cranmer teaches us to pray, "for our evil deeds [we] do worthily deserve to be punished." But thanks be to God that we don't always get what we deserve!

After Moses in Genesis 1-11 details graphically the ravages of our sin—murder, the disintegration of families, nations in turmoil, heaven and earth split, and most of all, our relationship with the Lord severed, he then begins the account of the gracious and merciful Lord God Almighty's work to save us from our sin, to save us from ourselves. From Genesis 12 all the way through to Revelation 22, we read the amazing story of the God who came to save us by grace through faith.

Consider the Garden in Genesis 3, the setting of humanity's original sin and downfall. Rightfully so, God drove us out of the Garden and "placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life." (Gen 3.24) The Garden of Eden, Paradise on earth, and the tree of life, were closed to us.

Now turn to John 20. It's the morning of the third after Jesus' death on the tree of the cross. Mary Magdalene comes to the Garden early that day, weeping outside His tomb. She stoops to look in and discovers that Jesus' body is missing. Weeping, she stands, turns around, and sees through the morning gloom the resurrected Jesus. But Mary supposes Jesus to be...the Gardener.

Ah! The Risen Gardener has reopened the Garden to us! By His atoning death on the tree of the cross, it has become for us the tree of life, that all who by faith eat from the fruit of this tree will not perish but will have eternal life. All the dots are now connected. The Lord has completed His work of our salvation. He does not give us now what we deserve, but what He alone has earned for us.

Therefore, only but entirely “by the comfort of thy grace may [we] be mercifully relieved.” It has always been about God’s grace “through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” Always. And that’s what Thomas Cranmer puts in our hearts and on our lips to pray. To that we say a grateful “Amen.”

Jesus, it’s always been about your saving life, death, and resurrection for us. You alone, O Lord, turned the tree of death into the tree of life for us. May we eat by faith in you from the fruit of your salvation for us now and forever. Amen.

Day 24, March 13

“So when the devil throws your sins in your face and declares that you deserve death and hell, tell him this: ‘I admit that I deserve death and hell, what of it? For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God, and where He is there I shall be also!’” [Luther from Letters of Spiritual Counsel]

Our devotional reading today follows closely from yesterday’s. Isn’t it interesting how Cranmer’s prayers and Luther’s theology always fall into close agreement and alignment? That alone is instructive to us. Our prayer flows from what we believe. Our belief flows from what we pray. Everything is interconnected and dependent on the other in Christ.

Martin Luther certainly had a robust awareness of sin, death, and the devil. Those were the great “unholy trinity” that he professed Christ came to save us from. The stain on Luther’s monastery cell wall in Wittenberg, Germany from the time he threw his ink well at the devil certainly shows us that he knew all too well the “foul breath” of the devil on his neck. Luther hated sin, death, and the devil.

That’s why he loved forgiveness, eternal life, and the Lord so deeply. Because Luther knew the realities of evil, in his own life and all around him, he knew all the more the realities of God’s saving work through Jesus Christ. Luther proclaimed that it was Christ and Christ alone “who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf.” For that reason, Luther trusted that eternally “where He [Jesus] is there I shall be also!” Luther helps us to understand that only by acknowledging and confessing the reality of evil and the evil one can we really understand the amazing, saving grace of Christ’s atoning death for sinners like us. We indeed deserve death and hell, and the devil seeks to remind us of that every day. But Jesus Christ, the Son of God, made satisfaction for our sins, gives us eternal life through His death, and has defeated the devil by His victory on the cross. Everything is interconnected and dependent on Christ.

But we need to press forward in this belief and prayer every day. The victory has been won by Jesus Christ even as the battle continues for this time being against the devil. That’s why Luther translated from the Greek Jesus’ Lord’s Prayer in Mt 6 to say, “deliver us from the evil one.” First, that was the best translation from the original language, Luther argued. And second, to pray specifically against “the evil one” and not just generically against “evil” focuses the Prayer against the devil and all his evil ways. For those reasons, we have followed suit here at St. John to pray in the Lord’s Prayer that God will deliver us “from the evil one.”

To remember the reality of sin, death, and the devil is to be ever more reminded of the reality of Jesus’ victory over that great unholy trinity of foes. May our believing and praying always hold to this.

Holy Jesus, you are the Victor in the great and eternal spiritual war for our bodies and souls. By the power of your Holy Spirit, may we live and pray and trust in your victory now and forever, to the glory of your Father. Amen.

Day 25, March 14

“This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.” [Luther, from Defense of All the Articles]

The Apostle Paul says in Eph. 2:10 that we, the Church, were “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” Paul is teaching us a very basic truth: God has saved us *so that* our lives, by the work of the Holy Spirit, might be transformed and conformed to image of his Son. But as we all know, becoming a Christian isn’t some sort of magical moment that zaps the sin out of you! I can remember one man (not a member of St. John) telling me that after his conversion to Christ, he was so excited that he went to the local pub and got drunk as could be! He was so new to the faith that he had no idea drunkenness was a serious sin according to Scripture!

We can laugh at this story, but the truth is all of us have been (and still are!) that man. Each of us is on a journey of growth in holiness and righteousness. It’s called *sanctification*, and it’s what Luther is talking about in this quote. The main point that he is driving home for us is the fact that, in this life, sanctification is never complete. Until Jesus returns and wipes away sin forever, we will continue to grow in holiness. We will always return to God’s Law and ask the question, “What does the Lord require of me today?”

Everyone of us is on a journey. We are traveling, in the words of C.S. Lewis from *The Last Battle*, “further up and further in” the mystery that is Christ. The fact that we can grow in holiness during this life means that we actually participate in the world to come *now*. We strive, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to put away our sins, because a sinless life is our future.

What a joy it will be on that day when growth in righteousness becomes full righteousness, when healing becomes full health, when the process is forever finished! Until that day, though, we have our work cut out for us. Let us continue to strive for more and more holiness, shutting out impure thoughts, words, and deed from our lives. We do this not to be saved, but because we are saved and we long for that day when our Lord will look us in the eye and say, “Well done, my *good and faithful* servant.”

Holy God, grant me grace to grow in the good works that you have prepared for me. Help me not to become discouraged when I fall into sin, but lead me again to the cross for forgiveness, justification, and sanctification. Amen.

Day 26, March 15

“Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us, in sundry places, to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness; and that we should not dissemble nor cloak them before the face of Almighty God our heavenly Father; but confess them with an humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart; to the end that we may obtain forgiveness of the same, by his infinite goodness and mercy. And although we ought, at all times, humbly to acknowledge our sins before God; yet ought we chiefly so to do, when we assemble and meet together to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his most holy Word, and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul. Wherefore I pray and beseech you, as many as are here present, to accompany me with a pure heart, and humble voice, unto the throne of the heavenly grace, saying after me...” [Cranmer, the Invitation to Confession from Morning and Evening Prayer]

Every time we gather for worship, we begin with a confession of sins. Whether it is a Sunday service, a chapel service of Morning or Evening Prayer, or a midweek Advent/Lent service, confession of sin leads us into our time of worship. Why? Why can’t we simply sing praises and take communion and go home?

Cranmer gives the answer his Invitation of Confession. He reminds the newly reformed Church of England that we confess seriously and often “to the end that we may obtain forgiveness” of our sins “by his infinite goodness and mercy.” It’s that simple. We confess our sins so that God will forgive us. Through the corporate confession we acknowledge with one voice the common plight of humanity: “we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed.”

No one in the pew is able to “opt out” of this part of worship. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). What we need more than anything else in this world—more than food or clothing or shelter—is forgiveness from God. And thanks be to him, we actually, truly receive it! From the mouth of minister, we hear God’s Word announced to us: “By the authority of Christ, you are forgiven!” It is real. It is objective. And through faith we can cling to it for comfort and assurance.

Why do we confess our sins before every service? That we may receive again God’s mercy and forgiveness through the words of absolution. In other words, we confess so that God may pour his love and grace on to us. Confession opens up the floodgate of God’s mercy.

As you confess this coming Sunday, take a moment and let your heart sink into the words. Don’t let them fly past you! Speak them and mean them. And then, with your heart raise to “the throne of heavenly grace,” receive again the greatest gift ever offered to mankind: the free forgiveness of your sins, through Jesus Christ!

God our Father, teach me to number my sins that I may marvel all the more in your grace and forgiveness. Amen.

Day 27, March 16

“...faith is God’s work in us, that changes us and gives new birth from God. (John 1:13). It kills the Old Adam and makes us completely different people. It changes our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts and all our powers. It brings the Holy Spirit with it. Yes, it is a living, creative, active and powerful thing, this faith. Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn’t stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing....Faith is a living, bold trust in God’s grace, so certain of God’s favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God’s grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace. Thus, it is just as impossible to separate faith and works as it is to separate heat and light from fire!” [Luther, from his introduction to the Letter to the Romans]

Justification by faith alone in Jesus alone, apart from any works of our own, is the core of Paul’s teaching in Romans. Moreover, faith itself is a gift and work of the Holy Spirit. So God gets all the credit and glory for our salvation. It’s all His work! This was the central biblical truth that captured the hearts and minds of Luther, Cranmer, and the other reformers, and it became the overarching theme of the Reformation.

The reformers’ opponents pushed back against them, arguing that Luther and the others were denigrating the Christian life of love. Doesn’t God expect, and in fact, command us to do good works? Catholic dogma taught that faith plus love equated to justification. The reformers said it was faith alone that justified a person. Did Luther—indeed, more importantly, did the Apostle Paul—give us a free pass to live any way that we wanted after trusting for our salvation by faith in Jesus? Does grace give us the ticket to live a libertine life, free of God’s commandments for holy living?

We would obviously say, no! Listen again to what Luther writes in his preface to his commentary on Romans (the preface alone is worth reading; while reading it, John Wesley said he had his born-again experience): ...confidence in God’s grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace. Thus, it is just as impossible to separate faith and works as it is to separate heat and light from fire!”

So the Scripture reveals, and Luther affirms, that those who are truly born again by the Holy Spirit and have been given the gift of faith in Christ always respond with joyful eagerness to live obediently to the glory of God and for the blessing of others. It’s what Paul writes in Romans, in obedience to what the Lord says of His followers, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (Jn 13:35) And, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (Jn 14:15) And, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.” (Jn 15:16)

Clearly, then, faith leads to love, of God and neighbor. Fruit always blossoms on the branch grafted into the Vine who is the Messiah. Once saved, therefore, we can't ever do enough to show our gratitude to the Lord. But it's this particular movement "from faith to love" that makes all the difference on earth and in heaven. That is, the only reason we can love God is that He first loved us. The only way we can ever do any good works for the sake of Jesus is that He has first done all the work necessary for our salvation.

Here Paul in Romans, and later Luther, emphasizes the difference between justification and sanctification. Justification is all Christ's work. He alone saves us. We add nothing. We simply trust—put our faith—in Jesus, believing that He had done it all "for me." Sanctification follows justification. Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in us shaping and guiding and growing our lives of faith so that it becomes impossible not to do good works. As Luther puts it elsewhere, we are saved by faith alone but faith is never left alone. Good works always flow from true and saving faith.

Jesus says "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8.32), and the truth that Jesus Christ saves us entirely—apart from anything we do—so that we can live for Him entirely—doing all that we can for Him, is the Gospel truth that indeed sets us free in this life and the next.

God our Father, we pray to you through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit in great thanksgiving for the work of our salvation you have accomplished for us. Find us now as your disciples ready always to live by love, that our lives might bear much fruit for your kingdom and to your glory. Amen.

Day 28, March 17

"Faith, if it is to be sure and steadfast, must lay hold upon nothing else but Christ alone, and in the conflict and terrors of conscience it has nothing else to lean on but this precious pearl Christ Jesus. So, he who apprehends Christ by faith, although he be terrified with the law and oppressed with the weight of his sins, yet he may be bold to glory that he is righteous. How? Even by that precious jewel Christ Jesus, whom he possesses by faith." [Luther, from his commentary on the Letter to the Galatians]

From yesterday's devotion from Romans to today's from Galatians, we see a pattern—a liturgy—emerging. Luther, following Paul, sees the whole Bible announcing this chief proclamation: faith laying hold of nothing else but Christ alone is the most beautiful, glorifying, and assuring gift of all. Faith that apprehends Christ causes all "terrors of conscience" to flee and casts off the oppressive weight of one's sins.

How can this be? Because by faith, we possess "that precious jewel Christ Jesus." Is this a new way of looking at it for us? By faith, *we possess Christ*. The implications of Luther's statement are far and deep.

It means, first, that faith is not simply an abstract principle that resides only in our thoughts and minds and imaginations. Rather, faith clings to the Person of Christ. Faith holds on to Jesus. Faith grasps the real presence of the Lord, which informs Luther's teaching about the real presence of Jesus Christ's body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion, too. Faith is tangible, for it possesses Christ.

And second, it means that faith brings Christ to us up close and personally. That is, we don't put our faith in a Lord far away, up there in the heavenly clouds somewhere. Rather, by faith we trust in the One who is right beside us and with us and near. Everything changes when we understand that by faith we have an intimate, personal relationship with the Savior right now—and forever. Christianity is never a private faith; it is meant to lived in community and publicly and with others. But it is always a deeply personal faith, for by faith, we possess Christ.

Believing this truth turns our prayer from "wishful thinking" to a petition to the Person right beside us. Believing this truth transforms our worship from a "pie in the sky hope" to an expression of praise and thanksgiving, confession and profession to the Person who is really present with us in Word and Sacrament. Believing this truth opens our eyes to see Jesus in every person who clings to Him by faith, reshaping our congregation from a group of strangers to a family of brothers and sisters.

By faith, we possess Christ. From a general kind of faith to one very particular and personal, that's what the gift of faith truly brings.

Jesus, our Lord and Savior, you walked the shores of Galilee. You died on a cross outside Jerusalem. You are with us now as the Risen and Eternal King of kings, drawing us ever closer to you through faith. Lord Jesus, thank you that you allow us to possess you by faith. Amen.

March 18, Sunday

Prepare for worship by reading ahead today's Scriptures: Jeremiah 31.31-34; Psalm 51; Hebrews 4.14-5.10; John 12.20-36.

Day 29, March 19

“Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light now in the time of this mortal lie, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.” [Cranmer]

One of my [Myles'] former pastors drew richly from the Bible's "war" imagery in his preaching and teaching. With fire in his eyes and passion in his voice, he would often charge the congregation to live out their calling as soldiers of Christ: "You're in a war, church! It's time to put on your boots and kick in the gates of Hell!"

We are indeed waging war, and now is the time to put on the armor. And the the above prayer from Cranmer says as much.

The prayer draws our attention to the war that each Christian is caught up in. It is the ancient feud between good and evil, flesh and spirit, light and darkness. But unlike much of the modern rhetoric on "Spiritual Warfare," which focuses on evil spirits and dark forces "out there," Cranmer draws us into the deeper, more intimate spiritual war that each of us wage: the war against *our own* sin and darkness.

St. Paul pulls back the curtain on this war in Romans 7. In words that resonate with any believer attempting to "cast away the works of darkness," he says, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing" (Rom. 7:18-19). This is the spiritual war that each "soldier of Christ" must fight daily. It is the battle against our own flesh--our own sinful darkness. It is real. It is dangerous. And if left to our own devices, we would surely fail. "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom. 7:24-25)"

God in his grace, though, has provided for us an "armor of light!" Galatians 3:27 tells us, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have *put on* Christ." Through the waters of baptism, God has dressed us for war. We have received as our armor the precious gift of Christ himself--his death has become our death, and his resurrection has become our very own. Jesus, who took on our flesh and "came to visit us in great humility" has vanquished Sin, Death, and the Devil by his cross and resurrection. The darkness of that tomb could not hold him, and the good news for this world is that neither will the darkness of our own evil deeds hold us. The promise of baptism is that on the great and final day, we too will rise from our tomb, forever casting off the evil that has haunted us for so long.

Until that day, though, we are caught in the "in-between." We are in this life "sinners and saints." Through baptism, we have been gifted with the impenetrable armor of Christ's righteousness. But even still, the darkness of our flesh still wages war against us.

This is why Cranmer's prayer is so meaningful. It calls us to return again to the fountain of baptism so that, having drunk deeply of God's grace, mercy, and victory, we may fight the good fight against sin and the flesh.

Put on your armor, Church! Remember your baptism! It's time to kick in the gates of Hell!

Lord of Hosts and Commander of Angel Armies, through baptism you have enlisted me in the war against sin and Satan. Give me the strength to cast away the works of darkness in my life, so that my life might be a pure offering to you. Amen.

Day 30, March 20

“...no one may doubt that baptism is of divine origin, not something devised or invented by human beings...baptism is no human plaything but is instituted by God himself [Mt 28:19; Mk 16:16]...it is not simply plain water, but water placed in the setting of God’s Word and commandment and made holy by them...For the real distinction lies in God’s Word and God’s name, and this treasure is greater and nobler than heaven and earth...let us observe further who the person is who receives these gifts and benefits of baptism. This again is most beautifully and clearly expressed in these same words, “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved,” that is, faith alone makes the person worthy to receive the saving, divine water profitably. Because such blessings are offered and promised in the words that accompany the water, they cannot be received unless we believe them from the heart. Without faith baptism is of no use, although in itself it is an infinite, divine treasure. So this single expression, “The one who believes,” is so powerful that it excludes and drives out all works that we may do with the intention of gaining and meriting salvation through them... Baptism...is not our work, but God’s work. God’s works are salutary and necessary for salvation, and they do not exclude but rather demand faith, for without faith one cannot grasp them. Just by allowing the water to be poured over you, you do not receive or retain baptism in such a manner that it does you any good. But it becomes beneficial to you if you accept it as God’s command and ordinance, so that, baptized in God’s name, you may receive in the water the promised salvation. Neither the hand nor the body can do this, but rather the heart must believe it. Thus you see plainly that baptism is not a work that we do but that it is a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps, just as the LORD Christ upon the cross is not a work but a treasure placed in the setting of the Word and offered to us in the Word and received by faith.” [Luther, from the Large Catechism]

Few things can stir up debate in the church like baptism. Paul teaches us in Ephesians that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” for all believers (Eph 4.5) But exactly what that one baptism means and entails has been hotly contested since the first days of the faith. The debate continued loudly in the time of the Reformation, too.

When the Catholic Church excommunicated Luther and the Reformation expanded quickly across Germany, many jumped on Luther’s bandwagon. But differences over baptism, among other serious matters, began to divide them. The Reformation was not a uniform reform. What brought their differences over baptism into sharp focus was their conflicting beliefs about baptizing the infants and children of Christian parents.

On the one hand, some insisted on distancing themselves as far as possible from Catholic teaching and practice. This distancing included their rejection of baptizing infants and children. They argued that one had to confess faith in Christ first and then be baptized, as a sign of obedience. They called this “believer’s baptism,” and it continues to be the theological position of many churches today.

On the other hand, Luther, Cranmer, and Calvin among many more, strongly held to the appropriateness of baptizing even newborns of believing families. Why? Because they said baptism is not our work of faith for God but God’s work of faith in us.

Luther writes extensively about baptism in his Large Catechism, the instruction manual he wrote for pastors. Here he emphasizes that God makes the first and greater move in baptism. “Baptism...is not our work, but God’s work,” Luther says. That’s the guiding theological and biblical understanding of baptism for us. It is God’s work, and in our baptism, He is fully active and working.

Consider Jesus’ own baptism in Mt 3.13-17. There the fullness of the Holy Trinity is present and acting. The Father speaks from heaven. The Son is in the water. The Holy Spirit descends. Such transformative, divine power in baptism! It’s all about God and what He does. This is how God saves us. It is by grace, God taking the initiative, through faith, our trusting in Him and in His Word.

But what about faith when it comes to baptism, especially the baptism of an infant or young child? Since faith itself is a gift from God, and we can only be born again by “water and the Spirit,” (Jn 3.5), we say that in baptism the Holy Spirit plants that seed of faith in the child, joining the child to Christ, even as the Father declares from heaven, “This is my beloved child!” That’s justification by grace. That’s trusting in Jesus and Jesus alone for salvation.

Yet, God's grace does indeed need to be met with faith in the life of the one baptized for the covenant of salvation to be completed and ratified. That's why Luther makes it clear that "[just] by allowing the water to be poured over you, you do not receive or retain baptism in such a manner that it does you any good. But it becomes beneficial to you if you accept it as God's command and ordinance, so that, baptized in God's name, you may receive in the water the promised salvation. Neither the hand nor the body can do this, but rather the heart must believe it. Thus you see plainly that baptism is not a work that we do but that it is a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps, just as the LORD Christ upon the cross is not a work but a treasure placed in the setting of the Word and offered to us in the Word and received by faith."

That is to say, if that infant who is baptized, his or her parents trusting in the promises of God for their child (Acts 2.39), fails to confess faith in Christ after growing up, we sadly must say that the child's baptism has no saving effects. Baptism is never simply a matter of getting wet. It is the way God always brings us into His covenant: by grace through faith. Both grace, God's first step and initiative, and faith, our response of trust in Him, must be present.

That's why our Lord's last words to His church right before His ascension are these, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Mt 28.19-20). How are disciples made? Through God's work of baptism, He initiates and begins a relationship with them by grace. And then the baptized grow to learn and obey by faith everything Jesus has commanded them.

Following this biblical truth, Luther teaches two essential points about baptism. First, baptism is God's work. Out of His love for us and His desire that we be saved, He initiates a relationship with us through baptism. We see how active and powerful He is in it! This is all by His grace. Since baptism is God's doing, the children of Christian parents are welcomed and encouraged to be brought to the waters and promises of baptism so that Christ can begin His work of faith in them as soon as possible. Second, faith then must take hold of baptism, which is to say, the one baptized must take hold of Christ into whose death and resurrection earth or she is baptized (Rom 6.3-4).

Saved by grace through faith. This is the baptismal way.

Lord God Almighty, we remember all those who have been baptized that they might take hold of you by faith each day. And we ask your favor upon all those around the world preparing for baptism, that your Holy Spirit will lead them into the water of saving faith in you. Amen.

Day 31, March 21

"Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves; Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." [Cranmer, Collect for the Second Sunday in Lent]

God creates us wholly and keeps us holy unto Him. So our total being—mind, body, and soul—comes from God to us and belongs to God forever. That's why Thomas Cranmer's prayer puts in our hearts and minds the importance of calling upon the Lord to watch over both our bodies and our souls.

This doesn't sound like any kind of radical new idea. Why, of course we ask the Lord's power over us. But these 500 years after Cranmer wrote this prayer for the Second Sunday in Lent, his prayer sounds more and more unusual.

Many today talk about being "spiritual" but not "religious." So most folks, Christian and otherwise, get the soul part of our being. That's the spiritual part, but unmoored from the anchor of Scripture, it can drift and float away into all sorts of troubled waters. One of the most troubling of those waters is the gravely mistaken assumption that our bodies belong to us, having nothing to do with God or our spirituality. So what we do with bodies is our business alone. But the Apostle Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 6 that our bodies belong to God and to Him alone. We have them as gifts from God, and they are to be used for His glory, in obedience to the ways He has commanded us to use them.

While some may view this as too restrictive and contrary to self autonomy, it is actually really good news. Since our bodies belong to God, since all that we are comes from Him and will return to Him, we of course celebrate that God wants to watch our bodies, along with our souls, so that He may keep us wholly and holy to Him forever. It means we belong to God not in part but in full.

Think of all the healing miracles in the Bible. God's healing is one of the grand themes sweeping through Scripture. Why would God devote such attention to our bodies, Jesus spending hours upon hours healing those afflicted in body, mind, and soul? It's because He made us and redeemed us completely. He's the Heavenly Father who cares for us in every way. So it is that Cranmer teaches us to remember in our prayers.

God our Father, as your Word declares, we are fearfully and wonderfully made by you. What a joy and comfort it is, Lord, knowing that we belong to you wholly and you watch over us completely. Amen.

Day 32, March 22

“Whenever you hear anyone boast that he has something by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and it has no basis in God’s Word, no matter what it may be, tell him that this is the work of the devil.” [Luther, commenting on the authority of the Bible]

The Bible is an amazing gift from God for many reasons. It reveals to us God's Law and holy requirements. It exposes our sins, so that we may confess them. It teaches us about the love and grace of the Trinity manifested in Jesus Christ on the cross. And it gives us hope for a new, resurrected creation where sin and death are no more.

Alongside this list, we could add yet another very important reason to cherish the Scriptures: the Bible sufficiently teaches us God's truth. During the Reformation, the reformers fought against the idea that human tradition could be elevated to the level of Holy Scripture. To answer the question, “What is necessary to believe for salvation?” The reformers unanimously responded, “That which is clearly taught in Scripture.”

This was a huge comfort for many reasons. It means that so-call “new” revelations from the Lord will never change the Gospel truth. Perhaps teachers and theologians will have new *insight* into Scripture, but the message of Christ crucified can never change. Not even pope or prophet can add to the requirements for salvation.

Similarly, it also means that we have a tool with which to measure claims of truth. If someone claims to have a “word” or “vision” from God, yet it doesn't align with Scripture, then they are wrong. Period. If someone claims, like so many today do, that Scripture no longer applies in matters of certain social and moral issues, then we can boldly oppose their falsehood.

God's truth doesn't change, because the Scriptures don't change. What a gift and comfort this is!

What should we do in light of this fact? If you were ever to work in a bank, you would be warned about the high number of counterfeit bills that may come through your till. Before you can work your first day, you will be trained on how to spot a fake. What does this training look like? The bank does not, as you might think, teach you all of the marks and characteristics of a counterfeit bill. Instead, the bank makes you learn the real thing so well, that when you see or even touch a fake, you will immediately recognize it!

What a perfect analogy for truth and Holy Scripture. If we were to try and learn all the falsehoods in the world, then we would never master anything. Instead, let us dive deeply into the truth of Scripture. Let us know the biblical text so well, that when false teaching grazes across our ears we can immediately proclaim, “This is the work of the devil!”

Lord God, thank you for the gift of your Word! Help me to learn and understand it, that I might be protected from false teaching. Amen.

Day 33, March 23

“The highest of all God’s commands is this, that we hold up before our eyes the image of his dear son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Every day he should be the excellent mirror wherein we behold how much God loves us and how well, in his infinite goodness, he has cared for us in that he gave his dear Son for us. ... Contemplate Christ given for us. Then, God willing, you will feel better.” [Luther, from a letter to a friend who worried she was not among God’s elect]

Barbara Lisskirchen was a pious Christian who had connections with Katie and Martin Luther through her brother. Barbara had been a tutor to the Queen of Hungary, and after her retirement back to Germany, she became well known in German Christian circles as a devout woman who joined the Protestant movement early in its formation.

Luther heard through her brother that she was deeply troubled—physically ill, even—over worrying that she was not among God’s elect, that she had not been predestined by God for salvation. Luther could relate very personally to Barbara’s plight. He too had once suffered mightily over the uncertainties he felt about his eternal destination. So Luther did what he always did. He reached out as a faithful pastor to offer spiritual counsel and help to this dear woman. Whatever else we might say about Martin Luther, we must say this. He had a pastor’s heart. He was a faithful and loving shepherd of the flock.

In his letter to Barbara Lisskirchen, Luther urges her to keep her focus on Christ and Christ alone. But it wasn’t just any vision of Christ that Luther advised Barbara to keep. It was singularly on the image of Christ crucified. There, on the cross, Christ giving His life for her, and there and there alone, will she find the peace she seeks and needs, Luther tells her. “Contemplate Christ given for us. Then, God willing, you will feel better,” Luther concludes his letter. It’s the very same reason the Apostle Paul tells the Corinthians that “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Cor 2.2)

The cross of Christ is God’s answer to any of us troubled about our eternal hope and destiny. The death of the Son of God for the forgiveness of our sins leaves no doubt that God the Father loves us. We simply by faith hold to Christ and the cross. We cry out, “You did this *for me!*” And just like that, the devil can no longer torment us about hell. We know we belong to God.

This coming Sunday, when we receive the real presence of the body and the blood of our Savior, listen to and believe in what the Lord says to us, “my body, given *for you*, and my blood, shed *for you*.” Do not doubt but believe—and be relieved.

Lord, on your cross you died for me. You crucified my sins. You died my death in my place. You did this for me. Don’t let me ever doubt your love for me, Jesus, and let me rest in you forever. Amen.

Day 34, March 24

“O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” [Cranmer, the Collect for the Fourth Sunday after Easter]

Life is transitory. Everything is changing. We stick our toes in a river, and return the next day to do it again, only to realize we are putting our toes in a whole new river of water as we do. Every moment of every day flows quickly along. This awareness can cause us to fear, seemingly being buffeted by every wind of change. How can we even pray “among the sundry and manifold changes of the world”?

We pray just as the Lord calls us to live and believe: by fixing our hearts on what God has commanded and desiring what God has promised. God’s commandments and promise—what Lutherans classically call, Law and Gospel, these are the divinely appointed, unchanging, life-giving bastions to which we hold by faith and upon which we pray with confidence.

On our pilgrimages through this world to our final home that awaits us with the Lord, God knows we need assurance and stability. His commandments for right living—*live this way, not that way*—and His promise of the forgiveness of our sins and life everlasting through faith in Jesus Christ—*“Through Christ . . . we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Rom 5.2)*—are the means by which we hold fast. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever,” the writer of Hebrews says. His love and mercy never change. He is our Rock.

And we only have to hold on for this brief time of this life. Now we live by “faith, hope, and love,” as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13. But one day, on that Day of Days when we are raised with Christ in the final resurrection, we will no longer need faith, for we will see Christ face-to-face. And we will no longer need to cling to hope, for our hope will be fulfilled. Love alone will remain, constant and eternal. For in that day “the dwelling place of God [will be with us] . . . He will dwell with [us] and [we] will be his people, and God himself will be with [us] as [our] God. He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things [will have] passed away.” (Rev 21.3-4)

For now, let us hold to God’s unchanging commandments and promise, dear brothers and sisters. One day, all the changes will come to an end. Life and love in the Lord will remain forever.

Holy God, help us to hold to you alone with confident, trusting faith. Even as the world changes constantly, never knowing from the one day to the next what might befall us, we give you great thanks that you are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. By your commandments, find us obedient, and holding to your promise of eternal life, keep us steady. Amen.

March 25, Sunday

Prepare for worship by reading ahead today’s Scriptures: Isaiah 52.13-53.12; Psalm 22.1-11; Philippians 2.5-11; Mark 11.1-11.

Day 35, March 26

“Almighty and everlasting God, who, of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility; Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” [Cranmer, the Collect for the Sixth Sunday in Lent]

It is common to hear all sorts of people—even non-Christians—say “God is love.” The line comes from John’s first epistle. In this letter, he urges his readers to act in love towards one another. Why? Because God himself is love. He isn’t just *loving*, meaning he acts in love; but he is the very *essence* and model of love. All love flows from God’s very nature.

Often, people stop at this point. They claim “God is love” and then insist that we too should be loving. The problem with this is that “love” never gets defined *biblically*. Instead, whatever the culture labels as “love” gets imported into this definition. Most of the time, God as love ends up looking like radical tolerance and acceptance of all life styles.

John, however, has more to say. “God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn. 4:8-10). God’s love is not some abstract feeling or culturally defined value. It is the story of Christ incarnate, crucified, and resurrected for the forgiveness of our sins and the transformation of our lives.

It’s that final part that most of us tend to forget. We love to talk about Christ crucified for our forgiveness, but, as Cranmer points out in this prayer, Jesus also suffered “death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility.” By dying in our place, Jesus gives us the model of holy living. Our call as Christians is to imitate Jesus’ sacrifice of selfless love in all that we do. St. Paul sums it up in Philippians like this: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who . . . humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:5, 8).

How often do you look at Jesus sacrifice as an example of love meant to be followed? What would it look like for us to take seriously John's words "God is love," and live it out to the fullest by offering ourselves in sacrifice to our neighbors? May our prayer echo Cranmer's:

Lord, grant me grace that, having been redeemed by Christ's sacrifice, I might offer my own life as a selfless sacrifice to you by humbling serving those around me. Amen.

Day 36, March 27

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true. [Luther, the Small Catechism, his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed]

How are we saved?

If there was one question that Luther sought to answer through the Reformation, surely this is it. The Medieval Church taught that we were saved by grace, but this grace was not something freely given. Instead, it required our effort and cooperation. God would give us grace, but unless we "took it and ran with," so to speak, it was ineffective. Salvation ultimately rested in our hands. We had to choose God, obey him, and remain faithful until death. God would then grant us eternal life.

Notice now the difference between this explanation and Luther's. Rather than saying "I" must do this and that for salvation, Luther places all the "work" in God's hands: "the Holy Ghost has called me...enlightened me...sanctified me...and kept me in the true faith." Luther's words beautifully expound St. Paul's words in Ephesians: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Salvation is purely God's gift of grace.

From beginning to end, God is the worker, not us. All that is required of us is to believe and have faith. But even what we believe is that "by my own reason or strength [I cannot] believe in Jesus Christ, or come to him!" We are so dead in our sins that we are incapable of even contributing faith! It too is a divine gift from God given to us by the preached Word and Holy Sacraments. This is such an important teaching. The "Old Adam (and Eve)" that still lives inside of us desperately wants some claim on salvation. It wants to be able to point to something--even if it's insignificant--and say, "Aha! You see that? I did it! I did it all by myself, and now God has saved me because of it!"

To this, and all other teachings that give us credit for salvation, we must boldly shout, "*Solus Christus!*" It is by *Christ Alone* that we are saved, sanctified, and preserved until death. What a comfort this is! We do not have to worry about us "losing" our salvation because we never "earned" in the first place. We can rest in the knowledge that Jesus holds us, from beginning to end, in grace and faith.

We contribute nothing to our salvation. "This is most certainly true."

Thank you, most gracious Father, for calling me, saving me, and granting me faith. You alone are the worker of my salvation, and for this I will eternally praise you. Amen.

Day 37, March 28

"Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen."
[Cranmer, the Collect for Purity]

God reads us like an open book. No hidden passages. No closed thoughts. No secrets. He knows us and knows everything we've thought and done and everything we've failed to do.

We probably realize this on the surface. “Of course God knows all things. That’s part of what it means that He’s God.” Yet, to pray this truth aloud, in the public setting of worship, can still be startling, when we hear our voices and all those around us confessing this truth, and that is a good and spiritually important wake-up call to have. So begins Cranmer’s Collect for Purity that we pray every Sunday at the beginning of worship: “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid...”

Cranmer’s prayers have made their way into the liturgies of Christian churches of many denominations. But Anglicans and Lutherans in particular draw upon his rich treasury of prayer for public worship. He puts the right words into our mouths every time.

So we acknowledge week by week, as a first act of worship, that we are sinners and that God knows all about our sin fully. So what’s the next act of prayer, then? Do we pray, “But, Lord, I promise I’ll do better! I will try harder this week, Lord, not to sin.”

No, that would miss the point entirely and put us right back into “works righteousness.” That would be saying we can get ourselves out of our sin. So Cranmer rightly teaches us to pray, “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit...” God knows our sin, and only God can wipe that sin away. This truth should also startle us every Sunday. How merciful is our Lord! He sees our sins, but He doesn’t recoil in disgust. He cleanses them away. It’s all about Christ and Christ alone.

Then, Cranmer’s prayer leads us to a third step as our opening act of worship. What is the ultimate purpose of having our sins cleansed? It’s not for our glory but God’s. We pray, “that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name...” All life and love come from God and are to be returned perfectly to Him. God washes our sins away so that we can enter into ever deeper worship before Him.

Finally, how can such cleansing happen? How does God the Holy Spirit wash away our sins every time we confess and repent of them? It’s all “through Christ our Lord.” By the blood of Jesus, by His perfect sacrifice on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, we are made clean. It’s all about Christ and Christ alone.

To this we say, Amen!

Today we come before you, Lord, with full recognition of our sins, both things we’ve said and done and things we have failed to do. We confess them to you, Jesus, and we are truly sorry of them. By the power of your Holy Spirit, wipe our sins clean by the washing of your blood, O Savior, that today we worship you more perfectly in the sacrifice of our lives for you. Amen.

Day 38, March 29

“You cast your sins from yourself and onto Christ when you firmly believe that his wounds and sufferings are you sins, to be borne and paid for by him.” [Luther, from A Meditation on Christ’s Passion]

The idea that God the Father placed his wrath and our punishment upon his Son as he hung upon the cross (called the “Penal Substitution” theory of atonement) has fallen on hard times recently. Many Christians critique this understanding of the cross by calling it “divine child abuse.” They say that God punishing his Son is unjust. Instead, the cross is simply an act of love by Jesus and has nothing to do with punishment for sins. This, however, couldn’t be further from the truth.

The Bible teaches that our sins have incurred a curse and punishment from God: death (Gen. 3). Everyone of us must die because we are sinners. But Christ, who is perfect and sinless, does not deserve death. He alone deserves life everlasting. Yet, out of love, he willingly suffered death, the curse of God, for our sake. He overcame the power of death and transformed his suffering on the cross into life and resurrection. And now, all that believe in him, share in this same life.

These truths transform the image of Jesus bloody and beaten, nailed to a cross, from something grotesque and unjust to something beautiful and kind. For, as Luther says in today’s quote, we see his wounds as belonging to us. It should be *us* with nails in our hands, thorns in our brow, and a spear in our side. But it’s not and never will be! Christ has paid the price. God’s wrath against sin has been fulfilled. Death no longer has a hold.

This has a powerful application for us today. Do you feel like God is angry with you? That he wants to pour his wrath on you? Look to Christ! See in his wounds the payment for your sins! There is no more wrath from God, only love, grace, and peace.

This is good news indeed.

Lord Jesus, I see in your scars the price for my sins. I see in your crown of thorns the wrath of God for my iniquities. I see in your pierced side the punishment that was fully due to me. What more is there to say but "thank you." May this be my anthem, now and forever. Amen.

Day 39, March 30, Good Friday

"He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. God can be found only in suffering and the cross." [Luther, from the Heidelberg Disputation]

We come today to the cross, the terrible, awful, murderous, wondrous, saving, beautiful cross. We call this "Good Friday" in full recognition that the day is good only for us and for our salvation. For Jesus, it was only a day of most horrible suffering in history. Mankind today crucifies the Son of Man.

Today we come to the Cross of Christ, and it's here that Martin Luther says it's the only place we can come if we want to know God. "God can be found only in suffering and the cross," writes Luther. It is counter intuitive, and that's the whole point. We only know God as He reveals Himself to us, not as we desire or imagine Him to be. And He reveals Himself most clearly here, on the cross.

This is the heart of Luther's "theology of the cross," and it is the heart of his whole theology. The "theology of the cross," God's revelation that we only truly know Him as we know Him "hidden in suffering" on the Cross of Calvary, stands in contrast to the "theology of glory." Theologians of glory only see God as they want Him to be—strong, victorious, full of blessing and magnificence—because deep down, that's how they want to see themselves. They want a God of glory because they seek a life of glory for themselves.

But the theology of the cross points only and always to Good Friday: There, there is our God! There we may find Him and know Him fully, in His death for us.

The Rev. Dr. Carl Trueman was of course our guest theologian for the 2018 Teaching Weekend Conference in February. He set the tone for our whole Lenten journey this year by his teaching on the history and continuing meaning of the Reformation. Dr. Trueman has written extensively on Luther's theology and especially on Luther's theology of the cross. From an essay on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, where Luther writes extensively on his "theology of the cross," Dr. Trueman notes the following implications of the "theology of the cross:"

The implications of this position are revolutionary. For a start, Luther is demanding that the entire theological vocabulary be revised in light of the cross. Take for example the word *power*. When theologians of glory read about divine power in the Bible, or use the term in their own theology, they assume that it is analogous to human power. They suppose that they can arrive at an understanding of divine power by magnifying to an infinite degree the most powerful thing of which they can think.

In light of the cross, however, this understanding of divine power is the very opposite of what divine power is all about. Divine power is revealed in the weakness of the cross, for it is in his apparent defeat at the hands of evil powers and corrupt earthly authorities that Jesus shows his divine power in the conquest of death and of all the powers of evil. So when a Christian talks about divine power, or even about church or Christian power, it is to be conceived of in terms of the cross—power hidden in the form of weakness.

For Luther, the same procedure must be applied to other theological terms. For example, God's wisdom is demonstrated in the foolishness of the cross. Who would have thought up the foolish idea of God taking human flesh in order to die a horrendous death on behalf of sinners who had deliberately defied him, or God making sinners pure by himself becoming sin for them, or God himself raising up a people to newness of life by himself submitting to death? We could go on, looking at such terms as *life*, *blessing*, *holiness*, and *righteousness*. Every single one must be reconceived in

the light of the cross. All are important theological concepts; all are susceptible to human beings casting them in their own image; and all must be recast in the light of the cross.

This insight is one of the factors in Luther's thinking that gives his theology an inner logic and coherence. Take, for example, his understanding of justification, whereby God declares the believer to be righteous in his sight, not by virtue of any intrinsic righteousness (anything that the believer has done or acquired), but on the basis of an *alien* righteousness, the righteousness of Christ that remains external to the believer. Is this not typical of the strange but wonderful logic of the God of the cross? The person who is really unrighteous, really mired in sin, is actually declared by God to be pure and righteous! Such a truth is incomprehensible to human logic, but makes perfect sense in light of the logic of the cross.

And what of the idea of a God who comes down and loves the unlovely and the unrighteous before the objects of his love have any inclination to love him or do good? Such is incomprehensible to the theologians of glory, who assume that God is like them, like other human beings, and thus only responds to those who are intrinsically attractive or good, or who first earn his favor in some way. But the cross shows that God is not like that: against every assumption that human beings might make about who God is and how he acts, he requires no prior loveliness in the objects of his love; rather, his prior love creates that loveliness without laying down preconditions. Such a God is revealed with amazing and unexpected tenderness and beauty in the ugly and violent drama of the cross.

We come today to the cross. It's the only place we can come to find God. Thanks be to Him.

Jesus, by your suffering, we are saved. We bless and praise you, O Lord, that you would love us this much. We thank you that in our suffering too, there you are revealed, the God of the cross for all of the crosses we bear. Amen.

Day 40, March 31

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true. [Luther, the Small Catechism, his explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed]

It's now the day in-between. Jesus Christ has died for us, to save us from hell, to make the one perfect and final sacrifice before His Father for the forgiveness of our sins, His death in the place of ours. Joseph of Arimathea and several of the women from Jesus' group of followers have taken Jesus' body down from the cross, anointed His body for burial, and placed Him in the tomb.

Now we wait on this Sabbath Day. We wait in prayer and worship. We wait in remembrance of our Lord and what He has done for us. We wait as Jesus descends into hell on this day to announce His victory over sin, death, and the devil, proclaiming "to the spirits in prison" (1 Peter 3.19). We wait now in hope. We pray yet again for the dawn of Easter's promise, the resurrection from the dead of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we wait, let us think on Jesus. Luther's explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed gives us an ideal devotion for this Holy Saturday. Let us read it several times and stop to ponder the One who has died for our sins that we may be one in Him forever.

Maranatha, Come, Lord Jesus.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have given your most precious blood for the forgiveness of our sins. You have died the death we deserved. By your stripes, we are healed. Find us faithful to you this day, O Lord, as we wait and long for your resurrection. All glory and power to you, O Savior, all honor is yours. Amen.