

11-6-11

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER, AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST. The text is Ep 2:8 – BY GRACE YOU ARE SAVED THROUGH FAITH.

“Scripture Alone! Grace Alone! Faith Alone! Christ Alone!” Unfortunately, there are tons of imitation Lutherans who hear that and, apparently, to them it sounds like, “Nothin’ but Scripture, nothin’ but grace, nothin’ but faith, nothin’ but Christ – all just nothing but that,” which is fine by them, so they can get on with their other interests. But in each of those phrases, the important word is *not* “Alone.” It’s, “Scripture! Grace! Faith! Christ!”

You know, from the time that Martin Luther found Scripture, Grace, Faith, and Christ – from that time on, by law anybody who ran into him could kill him; by law anybody who ran into him was *supposed* to kill him. And Luther could’ve said, “Well, then, I take it back. Let it go.” Instead, he lived every day under a death sentence, when he *could’ve* been getting on with his other interests. And just five years after Luther nailed those 95 Theses to the church door, two young guys, Henry Voes and John Esch, barely twenty years old, got arrested in Brussels for turning Lutheran, because they’d *heard* Scripture, *found* Grace, and *got* Faith in Christ Alone. And the people who arrested them said, “Hey, just let it *go* and we’ll let *you* go.” When Henry Voes and John Esch *wouldn’t* let it go and get on with their other interests, those two young guys got tied to a post and burned alive. The Spirit of God was on them.

The color of Reformation is red, first, for the fire of the Holy Spirit who came down 500 years ago and shouted to us all, “Scripture Alone! Grace Alone! Faith Alone! Christ Alone!” As if to say, “That’s the path to God in this world, children, *and* the way to come *alive* on this earth, *and* the highway to Heaven!” He had to shout it because we’d forgotten it all for five centuries and got lost, lost in the world, lost inside our own heads, lost inside our own sin, without hope on the highway to Hell. It’s a wonder that any of us was *ever* saved back then, except for God’s mercy that kept thousands of sinners still praying like the tax-collector in the temple, “Lord, have mercy on us! Christ, have mercy on us! Lord, have mercy on us!” and getting more than they knew they were asking for, thank God, just like that tax-collector.

Then the Holy Ghost came down, and thousands and thousands started singing out, “Scripture! Grace! Faith! Christ!” And thousands like those two young guys starting dying before they’d let it go. I’m relieved to say that nobody during the Reformation ever got killed for religion in Lutheran territory. But Lutherans? Lutherans got killed all over Europe. The red on Reformation is *also* for their blood. And not just their blood

long ago. The Nazis killed our pastors for preaching Scripture Alone, and then the Communists crucified our pastors and nailed them to their own church doors. In the Reformation and after, why didn't they save themselves? Because they knew that nobody *can* save himself or herself, not for long. Why didn't they save themselves? Because they knew *they had a Savior*. How could they be so sure?

“Scripture Alone!” that’s how. And the important word there is “Scripture!” Scripture without anything piled on it or taped to it, Scripture – not swathed with religious imagination, not swamped with *irreligious* chatter, but Scripture Alone so that we can actually *hear Scripture*. The Reformation shouted, “For the love of God, will everything else please shut up, so I can hear God talk!” And you’ve got to shout the same thing, regularly, and so do I. Because the world’s still full of religious imagination and our own minds can pump it out by the hour. And the world’s still full of *irreligious* chatter, and our own sinful, *irreligious* nature is always chattering, too. That’s why we’ve got to go to devotions every day, got to go to church every Sunday and Bible studies, too, shouting, “Let me read *Scripture*; let me hear *Scripture*; let me learn *Scripture*! Will everything else please shut up so I can hear God talk?”

But way too often, louder than our words, our actions have shouted, “It’s nothing but *Scripture*; it’s just *Scripture*; it’s only *Scripture*” so I can just let it go – for a *while* – let it go, let it go - Jesus says, SOME OF THE SEED falls ON HARD GROUND and Satan sweeps it away.” But let it go, let it go, so I can get on with my other interests. Jesus says, SOME OF THE SEED falls ON THORNY GROUND – and the stuff of this life chokes it to death.” What are we doing with the Word of *God*? John Esch and Henry Voes gave up their lives for it. How did it ever seem like a big deal to give up some sleep for it, miss a game for it, miss a *meal* for it?

We all know that the Bible’s true and we’re right. But what we beg God for and what we’ve got to beg God for is not, “Lord, keep us *right* about Your Word,” but, “Lord, keep us steadfast *in* Your Word!” Lord, unswathe me from whatever I or anybody else imagines. Lord, blow away the swamp of chatter from outside me and inside me, too. Lord, let me hear You talk.”

Because when I finally hear God, what He says is too strange, too wonderful, and too good to be true. He says, BY GRACE YOU ARE SAVED. Even after we’ve let Him go? No. It’s *because* I let Him go in so many ways that there’s no other way to save me but BY GRACE Alone.

And when it’s GRACE Alone, *then* you know what GRACE is. GRACE is not God’s help if we just try harder. That would be GRACE plus me trying and that’s not

GRACE at *all*. And GRACE is not God's pity because He knows you mean well. That would be GRACE plus your good intentions and *that's* not GRACE at all. GRACE plus anything isn't GRACE, because GRACE is always naked. GRACE is always and only God's naked love rushing down after people who never deserved it and who need it more than we know.

GRACE is God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Whose riches? God's. At whose expense? Christ's. Whoever knew a God like this? He doesn't just give away everything He's got; He gets killed so He can give it to *you*. GRACE is an Eternal Father sending His Son, not to get tied to a stake, like those two young Lutheran guys, for Someone who really deserves it, but a Father sending His Son to get nailed to a stake to pay for people who never did deserve love like that. And GRACE is an Almighty Son holding out His hands for the spikes because He loves you – why? Because He loves you. Why? Because He loves you. The one who keeps the air moving in and out of your throat, the one who keeps the galaxy wheeling at 600,000 miles an hour, the only one who really knows you and who knows you through and through – He loves you and gave up His *Son* over it; He loves me and gave up His *life* over it. And since you, like me, never could believe in Jesus Christ or would, GRACE is an Almighty Spirit calling us by the Gospel into love everlasting. No wonder Henry Voes died before he'd let this go.

If you don't care about holding this tight, you don't *get* it. If you don't care about holding this tight, you haven't got it *yet*. But once you get this at all, then you know why young John Esch said, "Burn me alive if you have to, but I'll give up my life before I'll give up His GRACE." And no wonder so many other Lutherans were martyred, shouting or whispering through cracked lips, "Yet BY GRACE am I SAVED forever." And the Holy Ghost is shouting the same naked Scripture to us now: BY GRACE YOU ARE SAVED, child – you, little one. And if they take *all* your other interests – even "take they your *life*: your goods, your reputation, your child, even your *wife*, let these all be gone" to Heaven ahead of you, "they yet have nothing won" not when BY GRACE YOU ARE SAVED forever THROUGH FAITH Alone.

And when it's Faith *Alone*, *then* we know what FAITH is. FAITH is not believing in God plus doing your best, or believing in God plus loving Him. If we *had* loved Him the way He deserves, then maybe we could try trusting God *plus* our record but that wouldn't be FAITH at all. Neither is it FAITH in God's love plus my future performance some day. And it's sure not FAITH in my faith.

Be comforted, every one of you who say, "I could trust Him if I could just trust myself." You *can't* trust you. But trusting you never *was* part of trusting Him. If you've got faith that a ship'll carry you, you don't get on board *and* keep one foot on dry land.

Your legs aren't that long. FAITH means all the load on Him because I've got nowhere else to stand, and all the load on Him because He loves me. FAITH, when it's real, is naked. It's a totally empty hand reaching out. It's FAITH Alone – in what?

Then a Voice calls, “In *Me!*” And we see Christ *Alone*. And when it's Christ Alone, *then* we know who Christ is. He's the Love beyond All Love, *in the flesh*, back from His grave and breathing GRACE to you and me right now, because of THE SURPASSING GREATNESS OF JESUS CHRIST our LORD who died Alone for all our sinning and rose from the dead righteous enough for all of us all by Himself. Here He is now. And naked Scripture is shouting out naked GRACE and calling out your naked FAITH like Lazarus from the tomb to reach out, grasp Christ and make Him your own: Trusting Jesus, that is all. It's, “Jesus, have mercy on me,” and then it's, “Jesus, You *have* had mercy on me. Your own Scripture says so.”

That's why Martin Luther said, “Sentence me to death if you have to; I've got no other interests that compare.” And that's why we say, “So I'll miss a game; so I'll miss some sleep; so I'll lose some friends; so I'll lose my job; so I'll lose my life. But here I stand. Here I stand, SAVED from being lost in the world on my own, SAVED from being lost inside my head, SAVED from running the maze like a white mouse till I die of sin-exhaustion, SAVED from chasing sin like a carrot, SAVED from guilt, SAVED from the Hell I had coming, SAVED: With GOD in the world and *alive* on this earth and on the highway to *Heaven* with the One who loves me forever.”

Once you get it at all, you hold it tight. Once you have it at all, then, as every Lutheran here has sworn at our Confirmations, “Will you carefully and earnestly learn the Scriptures? Will you hear God talk?” We said and we say, “Yes, with the help of God!” “And will you lose everything rather than let Jesus go?” “By the grace of God, *yes!*” “Will you even die?” “Yes.” Why? Not to be saved – we've all got to die sometime or other – but because you can *afford* to die now. “For the sake of Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone – for Christ Alone will you even shed your blood?” “By the grace of God, *yes.*” Some of us are wearing red today already for the blood of a martyr and the fire of the Holy Spirit resting on us.

Back in the Reformation and in every personal day of reformation until we leave for where our interests lie, it's the Holy Ghost descending like fire through His Word and it's you swearing yourself away to the vast love of God Almighty, regardless of whatever fire they light to burn you. Even when our own conscience is on fire, THROUGH FAITH from the Spirit of God we shout in the flames, or whisper, “*Yet BY GRACE am I SAVED.*” Amen.