

PENTECOST 15 / FINAL SERMON AT FLC

August 28, 2016

Isaiah 43:1-3a, 4a, Romans 6:3-5

Ephesians 2:4-10, John 3:16-17

"Pastor Saul's Greatest Hits"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

I probably should explain my sermon title: *Pastor Saul's Greatest Hits.*" I realize it probably sounds a little egotistical but my idea when I came up with that title was actually something quite different.

All preachers tend to have certain facets of the Gospel that they emphasize again and again in their preaching – sort of their favorite sermon themes. And I know that's true for me.

It's like I tell my confirmation students a few times during the year, *"If you don't remember anything else this year, I hope you'll remember this one thing,"* and then I proceed to tell them something I feel is crucial to the faith.

The bible passages I chose for today lift up my favorite themes.

Isaiah 43 is often my go-to text when I'm visiting with someone in the hospital or with someone facing a crisis in life. *"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name and you are mine."*

What comfort it gives us to know that we belong to God. He is the one who created us. He has redeemed us through the death of Christ, and, in baptism, God has called us by name and claimed us as his own.

Each and every one of you here in this room today can hear these beautiful words as addressed to you! God created you, and on the day of your baptism, as the pastor said your first and middle names, that was God calling you by name! Imagine that!

After sharing that part with a parishioner, I say, *"Now, since God has called you by name and declared that you are his beloved son or daughter, wouldn't it be nice if the passage went on to say, 'therefore, you'll have nothing but smooth sailing for the rest of your life'?"*

But, of course, it doesn't say that, does it? Instead it says, *"When you pass through the waters..."* Notice, it says, "when" not "if".

That's because in this life, we know that we can expect to face difficulties.

Even though we are God's beloved children, still, we live in a broken world, and there will be suffering, there will be trials.

Or, as God says through the prophet Isaiah, we will have to pass through deep waters, and we will sometimes be asked to walk through the flames of suffering and despair.

But God promises us that we will never have to face those trials and tribulations alone. God will always be with us. And God makes the incredible promise that not even floodwaters or flame can ultimately destroy us as long as we are being held in God's arms of love.

And then come some of the most beautiful words in the entire Old Testament: *“You are precious in my sight, and I love you.”*

Did you hear that? **If you don’t remember anything else I say today, remember this:** You are precious in God’s sight and God loves you!

God is speaking these words fresh to YOU this day, right here in the sanctuary of First Lutheran Church of Fergus Falls.

God is saying, *“You... you sitting there in the third pew; You, up there in the balcony;... You, sitting in the back;*

All of you, no matter how you feel about your own faith at this moment, no matter if you think you’ve been a lousy Christian lately, no matter if you don’t think you deserve my love,” says God, ***“You are precious in my sight and I love you.”***

Please, remember these words of God to you today. That’s **the one thing** I want you to remember. Of course, there may be a few other “one things” that I’ll ask you to remember from today’s sermon.

Anyone who’s heard my preaching over these 17 years would expect that I would talk about baptism in my last sermon, and that’s why I included the passage from Romans.

Far too often, people seem to think that salvation – is just about what happens to us after we die.

But that’s a pathetic, shrunken understanding of the wonders of living in the Kingdom of God.

The apostle Paul tells us that in baptism we have been united with Christ into his death and resurrection. And because of that, we can walk in newness of life.

He’s not just talking about **new life in heaven**, some time way off in the future. He’s talking about a **new life for us here and now** – a wonderful **Easter life**.

Our world often feels like we’re in a unending Good Friday. There is suffering, violence, death and all sorts of fearful things threatening us.

It’s no wonder some Christians only focus on heaven – on eternal life – after they die.

But the good news is, because we have been united with Christ through baptism, **we can live an Easter life – a life of hope and renewal – right here; in this Good Friday world.**

We know that through His death and resurrection, our savior has won for us a glorious victory over the forces of sin, evil, and death.

And that means we don’t have to be afraid of whatever may come our way in this world.

Remember the promises in Isaiah 43? Yes, I knew you would remember. God has promised that we are never alone, no matter what floodwaters or fire we’re made to face in life.

Now, if you don't remember anything else I say today, please **remember this one thing: in baptism we have been united with Christ so that we can live as Easter people in this Good Friday world.**

I told you there would be several "one things" that I want you to take with you today.

Now let's look at the text from Ephesians. This has always been a **core passage for Lutherans** as we proclaim the truth that we are **saved by grace through faith**, and that this is **purely a gift from our gracious loving God**.

As Paul says here:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

Oh, how hard it is for us to grasp this amazing truth. We always, always want to add something to God's grace.

We just can't imagine getting something for nothing. The world doesn't work that way, right? We always think there must be something I have to do in order to deserve it.

Those of you who were here last Sunday probably remember when I threw the ladder onto the floor and said, *"the ladder has to go. Salvation is not about climbing up to heaven by a ladder of works, or effort, or sincerity.*

It is only about God in Christ climbing down for us and for our salvation."

God's love for you is unconditional.

It doesn't depend on how hard you try to please him or obey his commandments.

God's love doesn't depend on how sincere your faith is, or whether you've made a *"personal decision for Christ,"* as our evangelical brothers and sisters would put it.

No! It's as Jesus says in one of the Bible verses I require my confirmation students to memorize, John 15:16 *"You did not choose me. But I chose you."*

And now, here's **one more "one thing"** that I hope you'll remember from this sermon.

It's a quote from Phillip Yancey from his marvelous book, *"What's so amazing about Grace."*

He gives this definition of grace, and I've never found a better one:

"Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more.... And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.... [because] God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.

Think about it: *"There is nothing you can do – nothing at all – that can make God love you any more than God already loves you, my friend. He's already crazy about you!"*

And the second part is equally important, especially if you've ever done something (and who hasn't) that makes you wonder if God could possibly still love you:

"There is nothing you can do – NOTHING – that can make God love you any less."

What freedom this grace can give us! You can **stop trying to make God love you more** by doing good works. **It's useless.** God already loves you infinitely.

So now you can **start trying to love your neighbor for the right reasons: not to impress God, but as a way to say "thank you"** to the one who loves you just as you are.

So, friends, if you remember nothing else from this sermon, please remember this one thing: *"There's nothing you can do to make God love you more, and there's nothing you can do that would make God love you less."*

Well, I guess I've given you three "one single things" that I want you to remember from my preaching: Number 1) God says TO YOU" *"You are precious in my sight and I love you and will always be with you."*

Number 2) In baptism, we have been **united with Christ's death and resurrection** so that we can **live a new life here and now as Easter people in a Good Friday world.** And,

Number 3) You are saved as a free gift of God's grace, and grace means that there is absolutely nothing you can do to make God love you more, **so stop trying.**

And there's nothing you can do that would make God love you less, so **stop worrying and SIMPLY ACCEPT THE AMAZING, UNCONDITIONAL, INFINITE LOVE OF GOD.**

And now friends I will ask you to PLEASE KEEP ME AND MY FAMILY IN YOUR PRAYERS, AS I WILL KEEP YOU IN MINE. Amen.