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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

The best seats in the house.

We are all familiar with that phrase.

The best seats in the house.

At a baseball, the best seats in the house are those right behind home plate.

At a football game, the best seats in the house are those on the 50 yard line.

At a Broadway show or at the ballet, the best seats in the house are NOT in the front row, where you will only see feet and won't have a view of the entire stage.

The center aisle, halfway up, or the first row in the mezzanine is the preferable seats at those events.

When riding in a car, the best seat is the passenger front seat, which is why people like to call "shot-gun" when determining who is going to sit where.

And then there is the church.

And where are the best seats in the house here?

Well, apparently, for most people it is toward the back of the nave.

Most people like to plop themselves down toward the back, which for the likes of me, I can't seem to figure out.

I can only imagine that there is some unspoken fear of being too close to the action upfront.

I don't know.

I mean, it is not like you have to pay extra to sit up front like at a sporting event or rock concert.

PAUSE

So, today, our Gospel lesson is all about the best seats in the house.

Indeed, in our Gospel lesson the brothers James and John come to Jesus and they request to sit one on the right and one on the left of Jesus when Jesus comes into his glory.

The brothers James and John want to be at the head table.

They want to be front and center.

They want to be in the places of honor alongside Jesus.

PAUSE

Now, I don't know about you, but I will be ecstatic just to be with the Lord in Paradise.

I don't know about you, but I will be content just to receive my halo and wings and will be content with whatever seat I get.

I don't know about you, but sitting right next to Jesus is not my chief concern.

But for the brothers James and John having the places of honor next to Jesus was apparently working on their minds.

And so, they asked Jesus to sit one on his right and one on his left.

But Jesus, our Lord Jesus has to remind these two brothers and remind all of his disciples that with regards to the best seats in the house, "whoever wishes to be great among you must be a servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

Whoever wishes to be great among you must be a servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

Greatness is not measured by preeminence.

Greatness is not measured by supremacy.

It is not measured by superiority, or prestige, or dominance.

It is not measured by high regard, high esteem, or high standing.

Greatness is not measured by having the best seats in the house.

No, greatness is measured by the cross.

For Jesus tells us, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

And so, if God measured greatness by the crucifixion of his Son, far be it for us to measure greatness by anything different.

PAUSE

Now good old Martin Luther, our beloved Luther, wrote an important piece on this very topic.

Martin Luther helps us understand this concept of greatness with his writing entitled, “The Heidelberg Disputation.”

What does that title mean?

Well, the “Heidelberg” part refers to a particular location in Germany.

You see, because of Luther’s controversial teachings in the 16th century that smacked in the face of the medieval Roman church, Luther was asked to present and to defend his theological thinking to his fellow Augustinians.

Luther was a monk in the order of the Augustinians.

And the Augustinians asked Luther to share with them his newfangled theology.

The Augustinians wanted Luther to explain himself.

And so Luther wrote a disputation, which simply consisted of a list of items for debate.

Luther wrote a list of talking points, which were then subsequently discussed at a meeting in the town of Heidelberg.

Thus, we get the title of this work by Luther, called The Heidelberg Disputation.

This Heidelberg Disputation dates to the year 1518.

And it is within this writing where Luther develops what he calls the Theology of the Cross and the Theology of Glory.

The Theology of the Cross and the Theology of Glory.

And it is these two distinctive theologies that have relevance with respect to our gospel reading today.

For we see that the brothers James and John were all about the Theology of Glory.

As Luther says, a theologian of glory prefers glory to the cross, prefers strength to weakness, prefers wisdom to folly, and in general, prefers good to evil.

Indeed, is this not the mindset of James and John, who request that they may sit at the best seats in the house, who request from Jesus to be in the places of status when Jesus comes into his glory?

James and John are bent on glory, bent on status, bent on prestige. They are bent the places of prominence.

But conversely Luther teaches us that God can be found only in suffering and the cross.

God, you see, is hidden in weakness. God is hidden in folly. God is hidden in the cross.

In short, Luther is saying, "Truth, God's truth is a paradox."

Truth is in paradox.

And this truism ranks up there as one of my most favorite quotes in life.

Truth is in paradox, paradox meaning a statement that is self-contradictory.

PAUSE

Consider all the paradoxes within our Lutheran tradition.

Luther states, "The Christian is both saint and sinner." The Christian is a saint because of baptism, and yet still daily struggles with sin.

That is one paradox.

Another paradox is this. "The Word of God is both law and gospel." The Word of God conveys God's justice, God's judgment, while at the same time declaring God's grace and mercy.

Still another paradox of Lutheranism is this. Salvation is both already and also not yet. We are saved because Christ has been raised, and yet we still await the final consummation when Christ will come again.

These are just some of the paradoxes from Luther.

And then there are the paradoxical sayings of Jesus.

Jesus says, "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last."

And again he says, "Those who save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will save it."

So on and so forth.

Yes, our Christian faith is all about paradox, from the time that the King of Israel, the Messiah of God, is born in a lowly manger in some backwater town, to the time that the King of Israel, the Messiah of God is disgracefully executed on a cross. It is all self-contradictory.

Yes, truth is in paradox.

And so, when we read that God's wisdom looks like folly to the world, God's wisdom being that his Son dies on the cross...

When we read that that is God's wisdom (point to the cross)...

And when we hear that God's power is conveyed through the death of Jesus our Lord...

When we hear that that is God's power (point to the cross)...

Well, we can either do one of two things.

We can reject God's wisdom and we can reject God's display of power as completely and utterly absurd...

We can throw up our hands and say this Christianity-thing makes entirely no sense whatsoever.

OR, we can step back and try to understand what God's wisdom and God's power truly means.

What does it mean that God's might is hidden in suffering and the cross?

What does that mean?

And if we do, if we are brave enough to try to wrap our minds around God's wisdom and God's strength hidden in a cross, what do we find but life.

We find life.

And I am not just talking about the promise of eternal life.

I am not just talking about the continuation of life at the end of our earthly existence.

No, that would make this whole paradoxical truth a moot point for the here and now.

No, what I am talking about and what I believe the gospel is saying is that life is not just about quantity of life, but it is also about quality of life.

Jesus says in John 10:10, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

And this "abundance of life" can be understood in two ways...

Eternal life, in the sense of having a quantity that is abundant, life that goes on and on for all eternity.

AND, abundant life that is of a higher quality, life that is enriched, life that is augmented, enhanced, and deepened.

In other words, abundant life that is of the here and now.

That is the life God offers in the embodiment of Christ on the cross.

In the paradox that is the cross, God offers abundant life.

PAUSE

Now, I guess when we really think about it, would we want the same everyday mundane life we live now for all eternity?

Wouldn't we after a time, become disillusioned with life as the same old same old?

Personally, I couldn't envision living life for ever and ever in the same vein as I live it now.

It would be monotonous and boring, wouldn't it?

The glory of this life would lose its appeal, wouldn't it?

But, sisters and brothers in Christ, life lived in the gospel, life lived in Christ, life lived in service to others, that is something else altogether.

That kind of life in service to others makes us ready for living in the kingdom.

To be sure, I don't imagine that the kingdom of heaven will be more of the same kind of secular living here on earth.

I don't imagine life in the kingdom as the same humdrum existence on earth.

No, living in the gospel now is preparing us for living in the kingdom to come, which I imagine is a kingdom of absolute altruism, a reality of living selflessly for one another.

And so the brothers James and John have it all wrong. We have it all wrong if we glory in things like status, prestige, and preeminence.

That is not where we will find God in this world or the next.

That is not where we will find an abundance of life.

PAUSE

God is hidden in suffering, in weakness, and in folly.

God is hidden in the cross.

And so the best seats in the house are the seats right next to our neighbor who suffers any kind of need.

As followers of Christ, those are the seats we are to seek out, so that we may offer God's grace to others.

Those are the best seats, those seats next to our neighbors in need, because in this way, we find God in ourselves.

Thanks be to God. Amen.