

June 19, 2022 – Galatians 3:23-4:7 & Luke 8:26-39

Confirmands learn many things during the course of confirmation class. At least, they're supposed to learn many things. They certainly hear many things. Whether they actually learn anything is somewhat debatable. Between cramming their memory work 30 seconds before they say it and passing tests by the skin of their teeth, confirmation class isn't exactly an exercise in academic rigor. But it really hasn't ever been, I suppose.

And it's for that reason that there are certain concepts and doctrines that I impress upon them more fervently than others. Things I want them to truly learn. The means of grace. The sacraments. The inspiration of scripture. The incarnation. The Trinity.

And maybe most of all Law and Gospel. Now, why is that so important? Well, because if you understand the difference between Law and Gospel, then you can discover all of the other doctrines for yourself. If you can define Law and Gospel, then you can read scripture on your own and find every other doctrine of the Lutheran Church staring right back at you, plain as day. When you know Law and Gospel, then you know how to read the Bible. And there's not much that's more important than that.

What I've always found interesting, though, is how easy it is for most confirmands to understand the Law. And how difficult it is for them to understand the Gospel. The Law is easy to understand. Probably because they live in the Law on a daily basis.

These kids are 14 years old. Their lives are defined by rules. You have to go to school. You have to do your homework. You have to obey your parents and teachers. You have to be home before curfew. You're not allowed to drink or smoke or do drugs or have sex or cuss or any number of other unacceptable things. Rules upon rules upon rules. They know what it is to have the burden of the Law on their shoulders.

There's a reason why generations of kids have felt the Law restrain their thoughts, words, and deeds through the rules of their parents and guardians, and responded, "I feel like I'm living in a prison." Because that's what the Law is. It is a prison.

That's exactly how St Paul describes it in our Epistle lesson today. He writes, "*Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.*" The Law is a prison. As they hopefully learned in class this year, it confines us like a curb. It shames us like a mirror. It directs us like a ruler.

And it's there for our good. Because we are creatures of the Law. Luther described us as horses with blinders on. We go where our rider tells us to go. And we are by nature ridden by sin, death, and the devil. Sin has a hold upon us from the day we are born. From the day we are conceived, even.

That man in our Gospel reading was an extreme example, but a helpful one. Demons had completely taken hold of him, body and soul. And so he was trapped by them. Imprisoned by them. Enslaved by them. His family had tried to restrain him with guards and chains and shackles. But nothing could control him. The demons drove him to live among tombs and wander the desert. He was a captive to sin, death, and the devil.

It's a stunning picture. In some ways, completely foreign to us. But it's not that extreme in other respects. Because apart from God, we're not that much different. We may not speak with the voice of a thousand demons or wander cemeteries tormented by the devil. But our thoughts, words, and deeds are no less bound to the devil's will.

We are enslaved to the elementary principles of the world, as Paul puts it. Driven either to sinful desires or confined by God's Law. Restrained by his commands. Not because it will save us. But because it might just show us how much we need a savior. How hopelessly sinful we are. And how desperately we need God to rescue us.

Yes, teenagers understand the Law. They fight against it with every ounce of their being, just like the rest of us. And yet, they desperately desire to know that they have parents and teachers and family who care about them. Who will tell them "no" when they're about to hurt themselves. Who will tell them to stop when their sinful hearts tell them to go. We all need those types of people, really. But probably kids most of all.

And yet, as I said, the Law cannot save us. Because the Law is just a prison. We have a good sized prison in our community. And we have some prison guards in our congregation. Ask anyone of them if simply being locked up in prison makes someone a good person. Does sitting in a jail cell suddenly transform someone into a productive citizen who loves their neighbor?

No. Of course not. It restrains them from doing any more harm. It teaches them the consequences of their actions. Consequences that might restrain their behavior a bit in the future. But putting someone in prison doesn't magically make them good.

The prison of God's Law is no different. It can restrain us from hurting ourselves or our neighbor. It can impose consequences on our actions. And we might consider those consequences in the future. But that doesn't make us good. Not in God's eyes. And if we're honest with ourselves, not even in our own eyes.

No matter how well we obey the Law, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Because that sin, restrained by the Law, is still very much there. And we are still slaves to it.

No, the solution is not more Law. The solution is Gospel. And this part is so difficult to understand. For confirmands and adults alike.

Because the Gospel is God coming to us in prison. Enslaved to the devil. Bound by the Law. Filthy with sin. Carrying the stench of death, like a man living among tombs.

God coming to us in this wretched state and saying, "I'm adopting you as my son. I'm adopting you as my daughter. I'm making you part of my family. You will be my children and I will be your Father. I am making you an heir to my inheritance. And I am releasing you from prison forever."

Why would he do that? We deserved to be in prison. We deserved to have the Law take us captive. We are still sinners. Why would God want us to be his children?

I can't answer that question. All I can tell you is, he does. I know he does. Because when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law – just like us – to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. God sent Jesus and he died on a cross to make us no longer prisoners. To set us free by his blood. To adopt us by his grace.

He adopted me. And he has put his name upon me. He has put his Triune name – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – upon me in the waters of Holy Baptism. He has put his Son on me like a robe of righteousness that covers my prison jumpsuit. He has put His Spirit in my heart. So that I no longer stare at him in fear or contempt, like a prisoner looks at a guard. But I look at him in love, like a child crying, "Abba! Father!"

Does all this mean I am no longer a sinner? Absolutely not. The devil still tries to push me around, drive me back to sin and death like that poor man among the tombs. The Law still weighs heavy upon me, showing me just what a poor miserable sinner I am. Making me ashamed and even afraid of my own thoughts, words, and deeds. I'm no different than any other sinful man.

And yet, at the same time, I'm completely different. Because I am a baptized child of God. I am not a prisoner to my sin. I am not a prisoner to God's Law. I am a son of God and an heir to His kingdom. And that changes everything. Because my fate is not death or the grave. I will not be sent into the abyss like that terrified Legion of hell.

No, my fate is resurrection from the dead and eternal life in paradise. My future is to stand by Jesus' side and declare how much he has done for me.

Today, we invite three young people to stand before this congregation and declare how much Jesus has done for them. That's what confirmation is, really. A declaration that you are a baptized child of God and a fellow heir with us of his kingdom. You may understand the Law the best, but confirmation is a declaration of the Gospel. And it is for you. Amen.