

March 22, 2017 – Psalm 16 & Romans 1:1-6

I was recently reading a book by the author Carl Medearis called “Speaking of Jesus”. Medearis is a well-known missionary to the Middle East and is considered an expert on evangelism to Muslims. But his book is really much broader than that and looks at how we think about our faith in general. I don't agree with everything he says. But I think he makes some good points.

He argues that Christians spend too much talking and thinking about doctrine. Don't get me wrong, doctrine is good. It's important. It's necessary. But doctrine can also be problematic. Especially when you're talking to a non-Christian, like the Muslims that Maedaris talked to in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon.

Because they don't want to hear about justification or sanctification or atonement or the incarnation or any of those other bits of theological jargon. They are far more interested in talking about Jesus. The person of Jesus. What he did. What he said. What happened to him. That eventually became the starting point for all of his evangelism. And, in fact, for all of his own personal faith. Don't speak of doctrine. Speak of Jesus.

He has a point. For Lutherans especially, I think. Because we're very good at dissecting our faith into doctrines. At carving it up into these nice little self-contained bits of Biblical text and early church teaching. And you really do start to lose the forest for the trees in the process.

I mean, if a doctor went and dissected me, and took all of my bones and all of my organs and laid them out on a table, would you say, “Yes, that's Pastor Joshua Ketelsen.” No. You'd probably say, “Eww. Gross.” But more importantly, you'd say, “Pastor Joshua Ketelsen is more than just a collection of organs. He is more than the sum of his parts. He is a person. A unified whole.”

The same is true of Christianity. You can learn a lot about your faith by dissecting it and looking at each individual part. Each individual doctrine. But those individual doctrines are not Christianity. Christianity is the person Jesus Christ. The unified whole of everything he did, said, and suffered.

Paul makes this point in our second reading. These are the very first verses of Paul's letter to the Romans. Where he is introducing himself to them for the very first time. They've never met Paul. They've never seen Paul. They only know about Paul by reputation.

And so he wants to identify himself. Make clear to them who he is and why he has the authority to say what he does. And so he says that he is Paul, a servant of... what? Christianity? The faith of Abraham? The doctrines of the church?

No. He's a servant of Christ Jesus. And he is called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ our Lord. And he talking to you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

And yes, there are a lot of doctrines that go into that. There's the doctrine of predestination, in which he was set apart for the gospel of God. There's the doctrine of the incarnation, in which God's Son was descended from David according to the flesh. There's the doctrine of sanctification, in which we bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of Jesus' name. These are all things that Paul will teach as part of being an apostle.

But he is not an apostle of these doctrines. He's an apostle of Jesus. He's a servant of Jesus. He belongs to Jesus. That's what really matters. Jesus is what really matters.

Because it was Jesus who did everything for us. Martin Luther used to say that the whole church stands or falls on the doctrine of justification. And boiled down to its very core, the doctrine of justification is this: Jesus did it all.

When we use a word like “justification” it can sound really complex or intimidating, but it's really not. Jesus did it all. There's nothing left for you to do. He justified you in God's eyes. He made you righteous. He made you sinless. He made you holy. He bought you with his own blood. He is the atoning sacrifice.

It doesn't always makes sense. But it doesn't have to. You don't need to understand it. Because Jesus did it.

And he did it for you. He didn't just do it for the fun of it. There was nothing fun in being crucified. He didn't do it just for those who are obedient. Because no one is obedient. And he didn't do it for everyone else. He did it for sinners like you and me.

That's justification in a nutshell. And that's why Paul emphasizes over and over again that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ. Not because our faith has anything to do with it. But because Jesus has everything to do with it.

As Luther once said, faith is nothing more than the hand that clings to the cross. Jesus lived and died for us. Jesus did the work. Our faith can only cling to what he did.

And what he did is pretty amazing. Because he lived the life we couldn't. He was born in human flesh, just like us. He suffered temptation, just like us. He died a mortal death, just like we will.

But unlike us, he was born without sin. Unlike us, he resisted temptation and overcame the devil. Unlike us, he defeated death and lived again.

And then instead of simply ascending into heaven, having proved how much better he was than us pathetic humans, he gave that life to us. He gave us a rebirth without sin, through the waters of baptism. He gave us the power to resist temptation and defeat the devil through the strengthening of his body and blood. He has promised us resurrection from the dead so that we may live again.

He lived our life, did it better than we ever could, and then says, “Here. Take it. Take my life. I've made it yours. It's a gift.”

It's a gift that was promised to us long before Jesus was ever born. Paul says in our lesson that he was set apart for the Gospel of God, which God promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David. And what we read in Psalm 16 is one of those Gospel prophecies, written by none other than David himself.

Who writes, *“Therefore, my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol [that is, to death and hell], or let your holy one see corruption.”* Now tell me, is David talking about himself or about Jesus. It seems like he's talking about himself, but then he says that God won't let his “holy one” see corruption. “Holy one” is a title of the Messiah. Of the Christ. Of Jesus. So which is it?

It's both. Because even a thousand years before Christ's birth, God had in mind that Jesus, his holy one, would defeat death and never see the corruption of the grave. But because of his victory – because of his life, death, and resurrection – David would have faith that his whole person, body and soul, would dwell secure.

We have faith that our whole person, body and soul, will dwell secure. Because of what Jesus has done, we will never be abandoned by God. Because Jesus justified us in God's eyes, we will never see death and hell. Because Jesus did it all. We have nothing left to do.

So speak of Jesus. Think on Jesus. Believe in Jesus. Be a servant of Jesus. For it is not the doctrines you know that save you. You are saved because you belong to him. Amen.