

June 25, 2017

A Cross with Nails, Not a Bed of Roses

PRAYER

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN

SERMON

There are many people who believe that when you put your faith in Christ, everything in life will be wonderful. Life will be a bed of roses. They believe that when you commit your life to Christ God will bless you with success and wealth and prosperity. Everything will be just the way it's supposed to be. Life will just be grand, life will be a bed of roses. Historically, that has been called the theology of glory. Today, it's called the prosperity gospel. And the prosperity gospel is really quite simple. If you bless God, then God will bless you. Simple enough. And that's a gospel that's proclaimed by many of the megachurches that have become so well-known across our land.

Probably the best example of this prosperity gospel is a book that was published a few years ago by Bruce Wilkerson called *The Prayer of Jabez*. The book is based on a prayer by a man who appears only once in all of scripture. And there's not much said about him in his prayer which is really very short and simple. It simply says that God would increase his boundary and God would be with him and protect him from harm and danger. Wilkerson takes that short prayer and embellishes upon it. And then in the book promises that he will teach us a prayer that if we pray every day God will have to answer. And he goes on to make the claim that God has many unclaimed blessings for us. Blessings out there that are just waiting to be claimed by us. So, it's really a very simple approach.

That if you bless God, God will bless you. And so far, so good. But the problem is what is understood to be blessing. Blessing is equated with material blessings. It's equated with success and wealth and prosperity. Hence the term prosperity gospel. But you know what about people of faith who are not successful? Who are not blessed with great wealth? What about Jesus' words in the sermon on the plains in Luke's gospel where he says blessed are the poor.

Probably more familiar with the words of Matthew in the sermon on the mount where Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit. But in Luke's gospel Jesus says blessed are the poor. What about Mary's beautiful Magnificat in Luke's gospel where she sings this great hymn of praise to God when she is told that she is going to be the mother of our Lord. She says blessed be the Lord God of Israel who's acted on behalf his people. He has lifted up the lonely. He's scattered the crowd in the imagination of their hearts. And sent the rich away empty. Doesn't sound like prosperity gospel to me.

And you think about people of faith. Who had more faith than Peter and Paul? And yet the blessings they experienced could not in any way be equated with material blessings. In today's gospel, we hear Jesus instructing the disciples before he sends them out on their mission. And in that gospel, he really puts the kibosh on this idea of a prosperity gospel. He tells them outright that you know if they reject the master what do you think they are going to do to his followers. It's not going to be easy. Life and ministry is not going to be a bed of roses. It's going to be a cross with nails. Following Jesus is not easy. And just because we follow Jesus, just because we believe in Jesus, doesn't mean everything in life is going to be wonderful. Reality is we live in a Good Friday world. A world with a lot of hurt and pain. And we are going to experience that in life whether we believe in Jesus or not.

Martin Luther, during the reformation, as he debated with the radical reformers who were proclaiming this theology of glory that you know for the faithful people of God that life was just this wonderful glorious experience, said that the gospel is shaped by the cross. And from that he lifted up what is called the theology of the cross.

That we live in a Good Friday world, we live in a world of hurt, of pain, of sin. We live in a world where we experience defeats where we are sometimes crushed by the weight of life. And yet in that Good Friday world, we experience the cross of Christ. We experience death and resurrection. And that's the hope of the gospel. The blessing of God. Not that we will obtain prosperity and wealth but that we will have the eternal assurance of God's presence with us throughout the journey of life.

You know as I look at the reality of this Good Friday world in which we live because I'm a Lutheran, this may not surprise you. But I think Lutheran's understanding of the theology of the cross is the only understanding of the Christian faith that makes sense. We live in a world where the innocent suffer. Sometimes they suffer from random acts of violence that just makes no sense. Sometimes they are victims of businesses and industry with unethical practices who in are driven by the bottom line. Sell faulty products or engage in unscrupulous practices that defraud people of what they have. We live in a world where people in third world countries hunger and many starve to death for lack of food. A world where innocent children sometimes suffer death or debilitating injuries from freak accidents and occasional medical malpractice. And this litany can go on and on and on. It's a Good Friday world.

And yet in the face of this we have the assurance of God's presence and love. Now you know why do these things happen if God is a loving and gracious God, why do these terrible things happen? I wish I had the answer to that question, I don't. But what I do know is that suffering and death and injustice are not God's will. Not God's will for the world, not God's will for our lives. We see that in Jesus' ministry where he cures the sick. Gives hearing to the deaf, sight to the blind, even raises the dead. And those wonderful and gracious acts of love, Jesus is giving us a foretaste of that kingdom that is to come. That kingdom where we have wholeness and wellbeing in the presence of God.

What the theology of the cross does it assures us that when we experience pain and suffering. When we experience our Good Friday's, when we experience our cross of nails, we are driven to the cross of Christ. That assurance of his love that lifts us up and bears us up and sees us through our Good Fridays, our times of suffering and hardship. And because of that cross, and because of Christ presence as we experience our defeats in life, we are tempered in the fire of the struggle to become stronger people of faith living in the presence of our gracious God.

As Jesus talks about us taking up the cross he's making one thing perfectly clear for his followers. For those who follow Jesus our lives are not about us. They are about him. And as we live in faith and as we experience our Good Friday's, when we bear our cross of nails. We are driven to the cross of Jesus and into his arms that scoop us up and embrace us and hold us and bring us into that kingdom that is yet to come.

PRAYER

May that peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN