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Chicago
Fifth Anniversary of the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification”
Service of Solemn Evening Prayer
St. Luke’s Lutheran Church, Park Ridge, IL
Friday, 1 October 2004
6:00 p.m.

Justification by faith Col 1:13-20

When I prepared this sermon and reflected upon what I should speak of on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the “Joint Declaration on Justification” and I read the text of the Letter to the Colossians we heard some minutes ago, I thought: The Bible is indeed better than we are! Groups of learned and wise theologians gathered together for months to prepare the “Joint Declaration;” they were preceded by a theological discussion of more than two decades, yet nevertheless required several drafts to compose this rather long text, on which another company of theologians finds it hard work interpreting. Whereas the Letter to the Colossians says the main content in only one phrase:

“For he (i.e. God our Father) has rescued us from the domination of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” We often ask and are asked: What does the message of justification mean? What does it have to tell us today? This one phrase in the Letter to the Colossians gives us the answer.

Darkness and light is a contraposition we find in many places in the Bible. The separation of light from the darkness is God’s first work in creation; and the transition from darkness to light means redemption, liberation and salvation, means justification as well.

One might argue that this is mythological language, language of former times, language we find also in the scrolls of Qumran and in Gnostic texts. But this is irrelevant. It is our experience as well. Every human being needs light in order to walk in safety and to live well. When the sun is shining our heart becomes open and cheerful; whereas to be in the darkness makes us fear; in the darkness we don’t know where to step, how to avoid being hurt, who will come to threaten us. In the darkness we are lost.

In our modern era we feel enlightened; we have – as we are used to saying – overcome the dark period of the Middle Ages. Indeed, we know much more than our grandfathers and grandmothers. We have investigated the macro cosmos and the micro cosmos, we know better about how our body functions and what is happening in the hidden depth of our soul. We are proud of it. But to be honest, do we know better than our forefathers what is the meaning of life and love, the meaning of suffering, pain and death? Are we

really enlightened when it comes to such existential questions? The answer is embarrassingly simple.

The Biblical vision of humankind, of people walking in the darkness, with minds obscured, loving the darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil, is not so far from our modern experience as it may appear. Friedrich Nietzsche, who is the prophet of our post-modern age, describes exactly our experience when he announces the death of God: “We are falling to the right and to the left, to all sides. It becomes more and more dark. Cold breathes in our face.” When God is dead we lose sight of what is the very foundation and very goal of our life, where we are coming from, where we are going and what we are living, working and suffering for.

“God is light and darkness is not in him,” says the Bible. God’s revelation means therefore that God becomes our light and our salvation, that in his light we see the light. The people in the darkness see a great light, says the prophet. Faith means living in the light, having found the right direction and the meaning of life, seeing anew the goal of our life, living with confidence and hope.

Why? The Letter to the Colossians gives the answer speaking about Jesus Christ as God’s beloved Son. With this affirmation we enter into the very mystery of God and of our salvation. This affirmation tells us: God is not a lonely supreme being. God is love, who in creation communicates his being and his life to his creatures and who in all eternity gives himself fully in his Son and in the fullness of time through him to us. God’s love shines, as Saint Paul says, in the face of Christ. He is the light shining in the darkness. In him God revealed the very meaning of his godhead, of the world and of history. In Jesus Christ he revealed that we are his beloved sons and daughters. We are not lost, we are loved, and nothing can separate us from God’s love.

“Who shall separate us from the love of God?,” asks Saint Paul. And he answers: “I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor spiritual power, neither the present nor the future, nor cosmic powers, were they from heaven or from the deep world below, nor any creature whatsoever will separate us from, the love of God, which we have in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

I think with these words Paul expresses in a different way what he in other contexts means by the term justification by grace. The message of love, which shines in the darkness and overcomes it, imparts the whole doctrine of justification. We can never merit love, for love is a pure gift. Love is not only an external reality, love fulfills, purifies and transforms our existence from inside. Love cannot be without answer and consequence, love bears fruits, which Saint Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit: “Charity, joy and peace, patience, understanding of others, kindness and fidelity, gentleness and self-control.”

We would misunderstand this message if we interpreted it only as a private consolation and edification. It is much more. It contains and strong social message. Love is not the substitute of justice, love presupposes justice, motivates justice and fulfills it; it does not

undercut, it surpasses it. It interprets our human existence as being for others. Witness of love brings light in the lives of others. Thus love is a sharp critique of our social egoism and individualism. Love is the most revolutionary of things which changes the world from within.

Although we did not solve with the “Joint Declaration” all controversial problems and difference, we can give abundant witness to the world with what we did solve and confess in common; we can enlighten the darkness of individuals and social situations, we can bring the warmth of love where people freeze in a society which often is cold, we can overcome old controversies among ourselves and solve our further problems in a dialogue of love and truth.

Indeed, we have reasons to rejoice about what we were and are able to confess together. We have to thank God who let shine his light upon us. We reached out to one another with our hands and we will never unclasp them. May God be with us. Amen.