

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 30, 2022

Hazelnut

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Gospel text for today has caused one particular question to bounce around in my head all week long. It seems like a particularly important question that we should ask after engaging with this text. What does it mean to dwell in God's Word?

Why is this a critically important question? Mainly because in verse 31 Jesus indicates that dwelling in God's Word is the only means of being "true" disciples.¹ He even reemphasizes the concept in verse 35, saying that slaves to sin are incapable of having a permanent place in God's household, or "dwelling" with God, while the son does have a place.² Jesus is presenting his would-be followers with two ways forward: dwelling in God's word and being free or remaining a slave to sin. I know which path appeals to me more, but how do I follow it? What does it mean to dwell in God's Word?

So, I put that question to you now, take a minute to reflect on how you would answer it: What does it mean to dwell in God's Word? (*pause for reflection*) What did you come up with? Does it mean engaging with Scripture? Does it mean attending communal worship? Does it mean partaking of the sacraments? Does it mean being a part of a community of faith? All of the above?

Perhaps we should consider the inverse. What would it mean to not dwell in God's Word? What would it mean to remain a slave to sin? How would you answer those questions? The various language used in our corporate confessions might give us some insight:

¹ John 8:31b (NRSV)

² "**continue** in my word," "does not **have**," and "**has** a permanent place" all rely on the same Greek verb, μένω. menó: to stay, abide, remain (Strong, J. (2010). The new Strong's expanded exhaustive concordance of the Bible (Red letter ed.). Thomas Nelson.)

“We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.”

“We confess that we have turned from you and given ourselves into the power of sin. We are truly sorry and humbly repent. In your compassion forgive us our sins, known and unknown, things we have done and things we have failed to do.”

Powerful words of self-recognition; confessing that ultimately, we are stuck as slaves to sin. An important understanding of Luther’s theology and a key element of the Reformation. While Luther was arguing specifically against the practice of selling indulgences as a means of attaining salvation, he ends up articulating the very same emphasis Christ gives in our text today. The same emphasis that Paul shares in our Romans text (another key piece of Scripture for Lutheran theology): All of us are broken sinners and outside of Christ, outside of God’s Word, there is only slavery and death.

And, as Luther clearly illustrated, the church can participate in this slavery as much as any other institution. The systems we create, including our religious ones, often become barriers to the life we were created to live. A life lived by dwelling in God’s Word. Now back to the paths in front of us.

Not dwelling in God’s Word means slavery to sin. Slavery to sin means we do not love God with our whole heart, nor do we love our neighbors as ourselves. This slavery affects us every moment of every day. We sin in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We sin by what we do, but also by what we choose not to do. We sin by our overt actions, but we also sin by perpetuating systems that harm others and harm God’s good creation. And ultimately, this slavery means our death...a natural consequence of our slavery to sin.

This is the path we are always on when left to our own devices. It is the path of the ego, the “I,” the self. It is a path that always seeks what is easy and comfortable. It is the path that concludes I can simply buy my way into heaven. It is the path that allows me to look down on and judge others, especially if they’re different from me. It is the path that leads to oppression, injustice, violence, and hatred. It is slavery of a particularly insidious sort.

Dwelling in the word then, must be very different from that path. And given the teachings of Christ, it must involve grace and mercy, acceptance and

inclusion, compassion and love. And this dwelling is not something we can every truly accomplish on our own. Dwelling in God's word comes about solely through the grace of God. The grace that Paul calls a "gift." The grace of loving host who welcomes all into the household, if only they would wake up to its reality in their lives.

That's the thing about grace as a gift...we already have it. It's there, it's ours. But we typically don't even see it. By God's grace we are already free from slavery to sin and death, but for whatever reason...habit perhaps, or simply lack of imagination...we return to our slavery again and again. On the cross Christ broke all of our chains, Christ made us members of God's household, Christ freed us! And yet we continue to hang on to those chains...to deny our place in God's Word (and often deny one another's place there too).

So, what does dwelling in God's word mean? I think a big part of it is recognizing that we are already there. God's Word is all around us. God is constantly speaking to us, showing us how to live as we were created to live. Inviting us, again and again, to wake up from our egos and see the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Opening our eyes to how God is at work in the world around us and inviting us to share in that work of grace and love.

In her "First Revelation" Julian of Norwich is presented with the image of a hazelnut in her hand. She writes this about her vision: "And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God. In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it."³

In a deeply powerful way Sister Julian is teaching us that everything around us bears God's Word to us. Everything around us was made by, is sustained by, and will eventually return to, God's Word. If "I" is at the center of sin, then dwelling in God's Word means letting go of the "I" and seeing God's Word all around us. Dwelling in God's Word means recognizing that we are loved and

³ Julian, & Windeatt, B. A. (2016). *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love: The short text and the long text*. Oxford University Press.

sustained by God, and ALL THAT WAS, IS, AND EVER WILL BE is loved and sustained by God. Dwelling in God's word means knowing God's grace as a gift for you and knowing God's grace as a gift for all. Amen.