

Exaudi, the Seventh Sunday of Easter  
May 4, 2008

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

FOR HIS NAME'S SAKE

John 15:26-16:4; I Peter 4:7-11; Ezekiel 36:25-27

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Psalmist, King David, says: "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" There have certainly been a few atheistic fools in every age, but by and large every culture this world has known has believed in the divine. And it is only through an act of willful unbelief that one extinguishes the innate knowledge that God exists. I do not mean to say that there aren't times in which a person might momentarily doubt God's existence (I think everyone has these moments); but even in such times there is a deeper knowing that affirms the existence of God, and such knowledge goes to work within us either by pushing the doubts aside as being foolish (which they are), or by fearing God's wrath should we fall into unbelief. Only a fool, and a willful one at that, comes to believe that God is not.

The question throughout the ages has not been whether or not God exists, but how God is. The world has come up with all kinds of theories about God in answer to that basic question. And one must leave room for all sorts of opinions about divinity when one starts from the bottom up, man attempting to discover and define the divine according to his own understanding and experience. Some, like the Zoroastrians, have opined that there must be two gods, one good and one evil who balance each other out. Others, like the deists of the Enlightenment, have said that there is only one god, but that this god is unknowable and frankly unconcerned with us. Many cultures, both ancient and modern, believe in a whole pantheon of gods, a god for every place, situation, and circumstance. The fact of the matter is that one can never know for sure, unless God reveals Himself; for man is finite, not just in terms of lifespan, but in terms of brain power, and can inquire only so far into things.

Philosophers, however, have certainly tried. And in many ways some have gotten closer to the truth than many of the world's religions have. Some have opined correctly about many of the various attributes of divinity, such as the idea that God is infinite, or cause, or source of virtue, or transcendent. But while philosophy may succeed once in a while in describing some attribute of God, it cannot succeed in knowing how God actually is with any certainty. Again, for that to happen, God must reveal Himself.

Certainly God can be described according to His attributes. We rightly teach that God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, transcendent, just, eternal, holy, and etc. Not philosophy, but the Scriptures teach us that these things are certainly true. But again we do not know God because we confess His attributes. One can understand, for instance, that God is omnipotent without knowing how God's character directs His omnipotence into action for our good. One can know that God is just without ever believing that God's justice is carried out in the crucifixion of His own Son in order to save us from sin and the divine wrath concerning it. Well, I think you must be getting the picture, that there is much more to God than simply a list of attributes that describe what it means to be divine.

God describes Himself by these attributes too, as I have said, but He defines Himself and shows His character by action. He defines Himself by love and by mercy. St. John says: "In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." God is known through His actions toward us in Christ, through His mercy. And it is this love and mercy that sets the true God apart from all the false gods of this world's religions, philosophies, and heresies.

And it is by love and mercy that He makes Himself known to us and wishes to be known by us. This is His fame, His reputation, His good name. Listen again to what God says in Ezekiel 36: "I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake..." And what does He promise to do? To save them, to make them holy, to gather them as a nation, to cleanse them of their sin and idolatry, to give them a new heart and spirit, to cause them to be faithful, to make them His people, and to be their God. And by this, the Lord says, He will be made known to the world! His love and mercy will reveal Him as true God.

And the Lord has kept this promise completely. His love caused Him to desire to have mercy on His people. His love caused Him to send His Son to save them. And having accomplished salvation, His love caused His Son to send the Holy Spirit into the world to proclaim that salvation to all people.

And now this promised work of God's love and mercy is come to us. Yes, look at how that Ezekiel passage applies to you. Has He not drawn you from out of this world and incorporated you into His kingdom? Though you through your sins have profaned His holy name, does He not still have mercy on you, and thereby vindicate His name before all people? Has He not sprinkled clean water on you in Holy Baptism and thereby washed away your filthiness and idolatry? Has He not also in this Sacrament sent His Spirit to you to create in you a new and believing heart and a new spirit? You are called a Christian. He has placed you into the kingdom of His Church. He has made you His person, and He is your God. All of the promises given to Israel through Ezekiel are now yours through Christ Jesus.

And why has He done this for you? He has done so for His name's sake, not because you have deserved it. To the contrary, you have deserved by your sins and rebellions nothing but wrath and punishment in this world and in the next. Do not be a fool in this either, thinking that you have somehow merited God's goodness or earned even the slightest portion of your salvation. "I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. And I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord," says the Lord God, "when I am hallowed in you before their eyes." It is precisely because you have not done anything to deserve His love, that His love and mercy are shown to be so great! Your inherent lack of godliness shows forth His divinity in this.

But now you are a Christian. And your life is to reflect and confess the character of God. St. Peter says: "above all things have fervent love for one another, 'for love will cover a multitude of sins.' Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God..." In these things you are reflecting the divine goodness that you have received. And this is what godliness is all about. Being godlike, you see, is not about being ruling or being powerful. It is not about honor and dignity in the sight of men. It is not about being worshipped by others. Being godlike means being like God is in love and

in mercy. This is why St. James wrote in an epistle we heard a few weeks ago: "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." Why? Not because this merits anything before God, but because it is a reflection of the love that has been received from God. It is a result of being saved by Him, not the cause.

But how does a Christian become more godlike, or to put it more conventionally, more godly? How, when our sinful nature still clings to us and fights against faithfulness can we live in such a way that God's name is hallowed in us? Well, I have good news for you in this. It is not up to you to become more godlike. It is up to God to make you so. And He does it through the same means by which He also saves you and forgives you your sins. He does it by sending His Holy Spirit into your heart and soul to strengthen in you the faith He has given and to create faith where unbelief still lingers. Therefore Jesus promised in the Gospel to His apostles: "when the Helper comes whom I shall send from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning..." They could not bear witness themselves until first the Holy Spirit had borne witness to them, had brought Christ's love and mercy into them, changing and empowering them.

And the same thing is true for us. Note how Peter speaks about our witness. He says that we are to administer to others the gifts we have received ourselves from God. And when we proclaim Christ or confess our faith, we are to do so as God has supplied ability and in accord with His Word. Likewise in Ezekiel, the Lord clearly says that the godliness and faithfulness of the people is a gift from Him. "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them." These things only happen when the Spirit of the Lord is first put within us.

And so we continue to receive the Lord's gifts, in which we know the Spirit is active. We continue to hear His Word and to hold onto it. We continue to trust in the baptism that we have been given. We continue to receive the forgiveness of our sins by the word of absolution His servants speak. And we continue to eat and drink the life-giving and spirit filled food of Christ's body and blood. These are the sources for Christian life and for Christian living. In them God is made known, for in them His love and mercy are bestowed on us. And we who are by nature sinners are hallowed and saved. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠