

November 17, 2024
Twenty-sixth Sunday After Pentecost

“On Being Sanctified”

Hebrews 10:11-25

“Sanctification” is one of those churchy words that can be kind of intimidating. But on the one hand it’s really kind of simple. To be sanctified is to be made holy. Yeah, “holy” is kind of a churchy word also that means to be without sin; without blemish; untainted and pure. To be sanctified is to be recreated this way.

Christ died to take away the blemish of our sin and through our “Holy” baptism into His death and resurrection we stand sanctified by Him, not of anything of ourselves but the passive object receiving the fruits of His sacrifice. The Gospel is that by and through Jesus, we are sanctified.

But then you come across one of the verses in the Bible like what we have here today in Hebrews chapter 10: *“For by a single offering (Jesus) has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”*

“Being sanctified?” Shouldn’t it be “are sanctified” or “stand sanctified”? “Being sanctified” sounds like the process is incomplete—like there’s some work left to do! Well, that’s the thing about sanctification, it has a lot in common with the “now and not yet” understanding of our salvation. Yes, we do indeed stand in Christ as sanctified and holy saints of God this very moment. Yet yes, we are still at work every day striving to live in that reality.

The footnote in the Lutheran Study Bible quotes Martin Luther: “Everything is forgiven through grace, but not everything is yet healed through the gift. The gift is poured in, the leaven is added, and it works to remove the sin which has already been forgiven to the person, and to drive out the evil guest, whom it has permission to drive out. Meanwhile, as this is happening, it is called sin and in its nature truly is sin, but now it is sin without wrath.”

In other words, by grace through faith you have been forgiven and been made holy in Christ, your sin does not condemn you. Yet because you have been made holy in Christ, your reaction is the action of doing what you are now enabled to do—fight against and drive away that impotent sin that still clings to you here in this life. And I will fully admit that this is tough to fathom because, I mean, we’re working to drive out this sin in our being that we know we will never completely be able to drive out...yet we’re going to try anyway because Christ has taken away its consequences, and we love Him for that and we know this sin has no part with us or Him now. We’re being sanctified...because we are sanctified! Weird.

So why am I highlighting this sanctification weirdness today? Well, because we are near the end of the liturgical church year and that means all of our readings are highlighting the end times and the final coming of our Lord and Savior on the Last Day. The Gospel lessons feature Jesus saying “Stay awake” and “Be on your guard.” Today’s Gospel reading, while particularly aimed at the disciples who will soon become the apostles, really pushes this theme of preparedness and steadfastness in the faith.

The danger of too simple an understanding of sanctification is that one figures “I’m sanctified, so that’s all there is to it.” You all know what I’m talking about. I know you have acquaintances, friends, family who are baptized, know the Gospel and call themselves Christians...but they’ve pretty much come to a standstill when it comes to striving after a holy walk in faith. The attitude pretty much is, “Jesus did all that is necessary for salvation and I know it, so I’m good to go.” And taken simply in the moment this is a true statement.

But life in this truth is much more. Listen to the author of Hebrews: *“Since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts*

sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”

Does any of that sound passive, like just letting things be? No. This is an exhortation to an active faith that continually, joyfully pursues the presence of Christ, vigorously chasing the holiness He continually grants us in His blessing of forgiveness, life and salvation. It’s not all about shunning sin in repentance, although that’s surely a critical part of the equation. It’s also living in the gifts, knowing you are Christ’s; knowing you are living forever, and letting that holy reality define you daily—this is the sanctified life in Christ.

If one considers his or her sanctification something that Jesus did way back when and doesn’t define your present, what is going to define your present? It’s going to be the world, right? I’m not saying it will be the evil, deplorable sin of the world, though that does happen to some. It may simply be the normal stuff of the world: family, career, leisure activities, socializing, even volunteering for good cause. It may look pretty good and moral to the world. But is it a life sanctified by Christ, seeking to walk in His ways because He is the Savior of the world? If not, it’s still a life defined by the world, and that is a life unprepared for the coming of the one who brings an end to the fallen world.

Let’s not do that, and let’s lead a sanctified life in Christ that others who may be at risk of falling into the worldly and mundane will be encouraged to take joy in Jesus Christ the Savior and the holiness He bestows.

Hebrews continues, *“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”*

How do we encourage one another in being prepared for the arrival of our King? By joyfully living out this holiness, this sanctification, that our Lord has done to us! Not alone, but with other believers! And not just with words and song, but with actions—the holy actions of love in service to others and, or course, the holy action of repentance; contrition leading to a shunning of sin and continually striving to do better in this life—because you stand sanctified...yet are being sanctified each and every day.

Of course, that last verse from Hebrews includes what you are doing right this moment, gathering together as God’s holy people, standing sanctified and being sanctified by His grace through the Gospel proclaimed and His Holy Sacraments received. There is a reason that verse is used more than any other to remind people that Jesus wants them to go to church.

But it’s also every other day Christians gather together. It’s at home with family, praying, reading the Word in the Bible or devotions, perhaps encouraging the child or grandchild that Jesus is Lord and that you’re praying for them. And yes, it is also admonishing the erring, not by beating them over the head with the law, but by reminding them of the good news that they stand sanctified, made holy in Christ, encouraging them to repent and live in that blessed gift.

The main point I want you to take home today is to know, Christ Jesus has declared you Holy in your baptism, in His Word and in His Supper. Live in the joy of that! Wake up in that every day and let this truth motivate what you say and do in all the earthly vocations you carry out.

And especially, especially remember this when you catch yourself in the midst of evil, heinous sin! Think about that. When the Holy Spirit through conscience convicts you that you have failed and shown yourself indeed to be a poor, miserable sinner, a proper response is, “But wait, I’m sanctified...and in this very moment of contrition and repentance I’m being sanctified in Christ! By Christ’s grace, I am holy!

Grab on to this simple, Gospel truth all the time, and walk in it to the Glory of Jesus.

Amen.