

## “What Does This Mean?”

“... for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

During these past six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have had the privilege of gathering with families to celebrate special occasions that they were able to schedule amid vastly different circumstances. Weddings that were originally planned for our sanctuary were moved to family farms and backyards, with both the wedding party and guests in custom-designed masks. Parents whose children were born in local hospitals that were under strict virus protocols brought their children to the waters of Holy Baptism, again in a gathering of masked family and friends. Even though the circumstances were unique, the blessings of the Sacrament remained the same: through water and the Word these children were *“reborn children of God and made members of the Church which is the body of Christ.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). These newly-baptized children who through this holy sacrament have been *“sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever”* are blessed with the assurance that even in these uncertain times we live in the sure and certain hope that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, whose promise to God’s people is that *“I will be with you always, to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:20). Because the Lutheran Church baptizes infants in accordance with our teaching that *“one should also baptize children, who through such baptism are entrusted to God and become pleasing to him”* (*Augsburg Confession*), an important part of our baptism service is when we charge the adults who bring their child to Holy Baptism to teach them what it means to live as a baptized child of God:

- “As you bring your children to receive the gift of baptism, you are entrusted with responsibilities: to live with them among God’s faithful people, bring them to the word of God and the holy supper, teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the holy scriptures, and nurture them in faith and prayer, so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.” – ELW Holy Baptism.

While the whole church joins in taking on the responsibility to *“support [your children] and pray for them in their new life in Christ,”* the parents and sponsors are entrusted with this calling to teach their children what it means to believe in the Christian faith and what it means to live as a child of God. This parental responsibility was Martin Luther’s inspiration for writing the *Small Catechism*, which Luther wrote *“in a simple way in which the head of a house is to present them to the household.”* In a sermon delivered in November 1528, Luther teaches that the family home is to be the center for Christian education, where parents teach their children how they are to walk as children of the light:

- “Every father of a family is a bishop in his house and the wife a bishopess. Therefore, remember that you in your homes are to help us carry on the ministry as we do in the church.

If we do this, we shall have a gracious God, who will defend us from all evil and in all evil.”  
— *Luther’s Works*, 51:137.

• Luther wrote the *Small Catechism* for the home, so that parents could explain to their children in simple terms the most important things in the Christian faith; “*for Luther the household is a house church.*” (Timothy Wengert).

Luther made some changes to the catechisms that were commonly used in the Roman Catholic Church of his day. He reversed the order of the “three chief parts,” so that the Ten Commandments are studied first, followed by the Apostles Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. Luther also added sections on the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, as well as Confession and Forgiveness which grows out of Baptism. But while he made some changes in his Catechism, the center remains the same: our confession of faith in the words of the Creed (which comes from the Latin word *credo*, “I believe”). Our confession of faith is the foundation upon which the Church is built; it is the statement of faith that guides and informs all that we do as the people of God, the way in which we live our lives as baptized sisters and brothers in Christ.

- “The center of Martin Luther’s confession of faith in the Small Catechism is the Apostles Creed – that is, faith in God’s promises. And the center of the Creed is God our creator, who, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, rescues us from all evil. By the Holy Spirit God creates and strengthens our faith in Christ and his forgiveness. God’s commandments, grounded in the First Commandment, show how much we need faith to ‘fear, love, and trust God.’ The Lord’s Prayer is anchored by our heavenly Father’s promise to listen and to act. The sacraments proclaim forgiveness and rescue in Jesus Christ.” — Wengert.

The confession of faith upon which the Church is built has its origins in the teachings of Scripture, which contain some of the early creed of those who first believed in Jesus Christ as Lord. One of these early creeds is included in today’s second lesson from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which Paul quotes in his appeal concerning the way the Philippians should behave as Christians, picking up on his exhortation that they “*live your lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*” (1:27). The “Christ hymn” serves as a creed on Christ’s death, resurrection, and glorification, beginning with the statement that Christ Jesus “*was in the form of God*” (2:6), the incarnation of God’s presence among us (“*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have beheld his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*” — John 1:14). But while Jesus Christ is “*true God, begotten of the Father in eternity*” (*Small Catechism*), Christ chose not to use this divine authority to his own advantage. Instead, he “*emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness*” (2:7). In becoming “*obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross*” (2:8), Jesus identified himself totally with the human condition. His death by crucifixion was a punishment reserved in the Roman world for rebels and disobedient slaves, thus marking the reality of Christ’s self-identification with those who were slaves. “*In his self-emptying and his humiliation, he reveals what God is like, and it is through his taking the form of a slave that we see ‘the form of God.’*” (Morna D. Hooker).

As this confession proclaims that Christ was “*crucified, died, and was buried,*” it also proclaims that death was not victorious on that first Good Friday. The triumphant “therefore” in 2:9 introduces the action of God, who now responds to Christ’s self-emptying and humiliation:

- “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” – 2:9-11.

As Christ triumphed over “*sin, death, and the power of the devil*” through his death on the Cross, we who have been born anew in the waters of Holy Baptism confess that because Jesus Christ is Lord we too rise to live a new life; “*he has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules in eternity. This is most certainly true.*” (*Small Catechism*). The Christian faith that is rooted in the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ assures us that “*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*” (*Romans 6:5*).

As Luther teaches us what it means to believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, he asks a question that challenges us to consider what this faith means for our daily lives as Christians. Again and again, Luther asks “*what does this mean?*” It is not sufficient to merely learn by rote the confessions of the Christian faith; we must also ask ourselves what this faith means in the way we live as Christians, how it informs our decisions and actions as people of God. Christian faith is not merely an intellectual exercise; it is a way of life that is rooted in what we believe and teach and is lived out in how we choose to live and act in response to what has been revealed to us by God through Christ.

- “To acknowledge this Jesus as universal Lord is to accept as Lord the humble, obedient figure on the Cross. And since divine ‘being’ is revealed in divine ‘action,’ we begin to understand why theology and ethics are inseparable. The basic ethical exhortation is to ‘be like God’ (*Leviticus 19:2*), which means, in effect, to *behave* like God.” – Hooker.

Paul’s inclusion of the Christ hymn serves such a function; it roots the church’s life in this confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord while challenging the Philippians to live in a manner that is worthy of the gospel of Christ that calls us to “*love one another as I have loved you.*” (*John 13:34*). Paul’s appeal to the Philippians is that their lives reflect their faith, that in their common life they might live according to Christ’s example. Paul’s appeal is based on the “encouragement” the Philippians possess “in Christ,” for in Christ believers find both comfort and strength. It is because Christians are “in Christ” that they are united to him and to one another and are able to share in his mind and strength. It is this union that is the source of the “encouragement” (*paraklesis*) that provides, in turn, “*any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy*” (2:1).

Based on what they have in Christ, Paul appeals to the Philippians to behave in such a way as will “*make my joy complete*” (2:2). The Philippians have already brought Paul joy (“*I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you,*

*because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.”* – 1:3-5); if their behavior reflects their common life in Christ, they will fulfill Paul’s joy. He encourages them to “*be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind*” Paul is not demanding that every member of the community think exactly alike, but that they must share a common attitude which is rooted in the example of Christ’s humility. Christians are to refrain from “*selfish ambition or conceit*” in favor of humility which regards “*others as better than yourselves*” (2:3). In the Old Testament, humility is emphasized as the proper attitude toward God:

- “For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.” – Psalm 138:6.
- “Towards the scorers he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favour.” – Proverbs 3:34.
- “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” – Micah 6:8.

Living as children of God, baptized in the name of the one who humbled himself for the sake of others, means that Christians must “*look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others*” (2:4).

- “Although Christians are thus free from all works, they ought in this liberty to empty themselves and to serve, help, and in every way deal with their neighbors as they see that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with them. This they should do freely, having regard for nothing but divine approval. All our work should be directed toward the good of our neighbor, because for each of us our faith suffices and all our works and all our life are left to him to use in a free service of love to our neighbor.” – Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*.

The confession of faith upon which the Church is built challenges us to embody Christ’s love in all that we do, to “*let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*” (2:5) who chose to serve others rather than to be served and who gave himself so that he might be Saviour of all. It is Paul’s call to the Philippians to “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*” (2:12), which is not meant to provoke uncertainty or anxiety regarding one’s salvation but to embody the appropriate attitude in the presence of God, and attitude that might be described as “awe” (the same attitude in Luther’s refrain that “*we are to fear and love God*,” “fear” being defined as awe or respect rather than terror or fright). The call to “work out your own salvation” does not conflict with the Pauline insistence that salvation is the work of God alone. The Christ hymn describes the gracious action of God in Christ, but that gracious action demands a response, which Paul describes as “the obedience of faith” in Romans 1:5 (or as Luther teaches in the *Catechism*: “*For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him.*”). Although Paul is urging the Philippians to work out their own salvation, it is in fact God who is at work in them, “*enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (2:13). What the Philippians will do in response to all that God has done for them in Christ is, in fact, the work of God within them, the God “*who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.*” (Ephesians 3:20-21).

- “It is only because he became like us that we can become like him. It is only because we are identified with him that we can become like him. By being transformed into his image, we are enabled to model our lives on his … when a man follows Jesus Christ and bears the image of the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord, when he has become the image of God, we may at last say that he has been called to be the ‘imitator of God.’ The follower of Jesus is the imitator of God.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The next celebration we are planning amid the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic is Confirmation, which was cancelled when we were unable meet for in-person worship in May. We will gather with family and friends of our confirmands on the afternoon of Reformation Sunday to celebrate as they affirm the promises their parents and sponsors made on their behalf when they were brought to the waters of Holy Baptism as infants. They will join with all the church in confessing their faith in the Creed which is rooted in our belief in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, renouncing all other allegiances to anything that would draw us away from worshiping and serving God. Surrounded by the people who have loved and nurtured them in the faith, they will be asked if they intend to continue in the covenant God made with each of them in Holy Baptism:

- “… to live among God’s faithful people, to hear the word of God and to share in the Lord’s supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth” (ELW Affirmation of Baptism).

As each of them affirms that “*I do, and I ask God to help and guide me,*” we will pray that God will continue to bless them with the gifts of the Holy Spirit so that they may live out these baptismal promises in embodying the love of God in Jesus Christ in their daily lives. As we celebrate this milestone in their lives, we commit ourselves to Christ’s call to “*lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

- “Not only is Christ the example, he embodies God’s will and work for humanity, and so deservedly is the object of our devotion. This passage is not merely instructional – it is doxological. We believers not only learn from this Christ Jesus, but we join all creation in professing he “is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”” – Troy Troftgruben.

Our lives as God’s people are **Rooted in the Gospel for Witness and Service.** Our faith is grounded in what we believe and teach about God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; our life together is centered on the question that challenges us to live and serve as children of God: “**What does this mean** as I seek to serve all people following the example of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour who came “*not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*” (Mark 10:45).

Amen.