

Lent – A Time of Renewal of Godly Fear and Christian Unity  
Luke 23:39-43; 22:7-20  
April 5, 2017

**Luke 23:39-43** *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

**Luke 22:7-20** *Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover.” “Where do you want us to prepare for it?” they asked. He replied, “As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there.” They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover. When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.” After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”*

If I say the word fear, what comes to mind? Most people, when they think of fear, think of dread, fright, concern, anxiety, panic. Now, if I say Godly fear, what comes to mind – respect, awe, reverence? Maybe you draw a blank at that term. Many people have a problem putting God and fear together. Then there are those who can put the words together but interpret Godly fear to mean that God is big, scary, and out to get people.

Let’s try another word. What do you think of when I say unity – oneness, completion, solidarity? How about when I say Christian unity – Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, the church universal, the body of Christ? Unity isn’t quite as vague as fear, is it? Unity is pretty much self-explanatory. Unity means together and Christian unity refers to the togetherness of the followers of Christ.

Okay, we’ve done our word studies. Now, what do these two terms have to do with each other? As we look at the last two topics in this Lenten series, we’re taking them together because they can only come together. You can’t possibly have true Christian unity without Godly fear because Christian unity is a by-product of Godly fear. Without a pure Godly fear in place, hypocrisy masquerades as Christian unity.

Since we don’t want to get the cart before the horse, we will look first at Godly fear. And to consider Godly fear we must first separate it from ordinary fear. Ordinary fear, the

kind that brings on dread, fright, concern, anxiety, and panic, is a by-product of sin. If Adam and Eve had never sinned, those words would have been beyond their comprehension.

It was only after they sinned that dread, fright, concern, anxiety, and panic set in. God never intended for his children to be afraid of him. The fear that I just defined is the wedge that Satan uses to separate us from God. It's the lie that claims God is big and scary and out to get people.

So, we need to analyze Godly fear. We need to understand it so we can bring it into our lives and let it replace ordinary, sin-inspired fear. To get a handle on Godly fear, we need to know what it is, why we should have it, what it is used for, and what are the benefits. To learn these things, we will look to what God says in Holy Scripture. Because of limited time, we will only look at a few Scripture verses for each of these.

The book of Proverbs 8:13 tells us that *To fear the Lord is to hate evil*. We are supposed to hate evil because God hates evil. A proper awe and respect of God means we should want to be like God. God is holy and he detests everything that isn't.

In Psalm 111:10 we learn that: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. The pathway to true wisdom, which is the ability to discern between right and wrong, begins and ends in Godly fear. Only when God occupies the position of highest priority in our lives, are we perceptive enough to see through the lies of Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh.

The next thing to consider is why we should look to God with a Godly-fear. In the book of Revelation, we read: *Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy*. The very fact that only God is perfect and sinless makes him worthy of our respect and awe. God is everything that we, in our natural sinful nature, are not.

Besides his holiness, God is worthy of our fear because of his goodness and his forgiveness. In 1Samuel, the prophet tells the Israelites and us: *Be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you*.

To see what great thing God has done for us, that deserves our fear of him, we turn again to the psalmist who says: *But with you there is forgiveness, therefore, you are to be feared*. In his goodness, God gives us the one thing we could never gain for ourselves – forgiveness of sin.

Now, let's consider a couple of things which Godly fear enables us to do. First, we turn to Psalm 5 where King David says to God: *I will come into your house; in reverence I will bow down*. Only with Godly fear in our hearts can we worship God properly and acceptably. Godly fear keeps the proper perspective of God first and us last.

Godly fear also helps us avoid sin. Moses told the Israelites: *Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning*. As

Christians, avoiding sin is an important part of our lives. And, because of our natural, sinful nature, we can only avoid sin when our hearts are full of Godly fear.

The great benefit we derive from Godly fear is described by the apostle Peter as he spoke to the household of Cornelius the centurion. Peter said: *God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him.* Godly fear brings God's acceptance. God's acceptance brings entrance into God's family and eternal life with him.

To find the second benefit of Godly fear, and also our transition into the other theme for tonight, we turn to the Old Testament and to the prophet Malachi. There we read: *Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard.* Godly fear leads to unity among those who fear God.

Christian unity is impossible without Godly fear. Christian unity is the purest form of unity. Christian unity is modeled after the unity that Jesus said he had with the Father. John's gospel records Jesus praying to his Father: *Holy Father, protect them by your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one.*

It was Jesus' desire that all believers be of one mind. Tonight's second reading recalls how Jesus first instituted Holy Communion. This holy supper brings several benefits to the faithful – forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, strengthening faith, and unity of the body of believers.

When we come together to jointly partake of Christ's body and blood, we create a bond that unites us as one family with a common thread of unity running through us. In the Lord's Supper we all receive Christ's body so we all might be one body. We all receive Christ's blood so we all might be of one holy blood.

Christian unity is what makes the church strong. In Christian unity we support and encourage each other. We give each other the power to resist temptation. It's through Christian unity we feel true love and acceptance. Christian unity is one of the things the church cannot live without.

One of the major enemies to Christian unity is personal preferences. Everyone has personal preferences and, in and of themselves, their not wrong. God didn't make everyone alike. We all have our likes and dislikes. Quite often, these differences make our lives more interesting. Sometimes these differences even become the catalyst for positive change.

However, when personal preferences are brought into God's house, when Christians begin to insist that things be ordered according to their personal likes and dislikes, Christian unity begins to break down. Fighting and division invade the church. Splinter groups and cliques form. People begin to take sides on issues which have nothing to do with the mission of the church – which is taking the Gospel to the lost. When personal

preferences become more important than Godly fear, Christian unity goes out the window.

It would be reasonable for some to think, “If Godly fear is forgotten and Christian unity is lost, everyone loses.” But that’s not true. Not everyone loses. The devil wins. When lack of Godly fear leads to a breakdown of Christian unity, the devil wins big time.

Have you ever read C. S. Lewis’ book *The Screwtape Letters*? In this book, Screwtape is a lieutenant of Satan. Wormwood is Screwtape’s nephew and he is on his first assignment on earth. The book is a series of letters between Screwtape and Wormwood. In one letter, Wormwood writes that he is concerned because the person he has been assigned to is attending church regularly.

Wormwood asks Screwtape how to get the person to stop going to church. Screwtape advises his nephew, “You probably can’t stop him attending church. So your job is to get him to sit in church and dwell on all the things he doesn’t like the people around him.”

Godly fear leads to Christian unity and Christian unity is the glue that keeps the local church together. Jesus told his disciples: *A new commandment I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.* Jesus didn’t suggest Christian unity – he commanded Christian unity. And for us to have true Christian unity we must be filled with a Godly fear that places God and his commands first in our lives.

As we approach the end of this Lenten season, I encourage you to consider your personal level of Godly fear. I also encourage you to see if there are any things in your life that are hindering Christian unity around you. If your Godly fear and your Christian unity are lacking, turn to the Lord. Dig into the Holy Scripture to see what place God desires in your life. Pray for an extra measure of the Holy Spirit so that you might love your neighbors as you love yourself. May God bless your self-examination.