

Advent Evening Service Year B. The scripture text is taken from II Corinthians 5:17-21

Tonight as we continue our Advent Evening Services, we are going to look at the doctrine of sanctification. No if you will recall from last week, I talked about, "Justification", sanctification, dove-tails into justification.

In January of 2013, as I was preparing to retire from the Army, I had to go through a process called, "ACAP" which means the "Army Career and Alumni Program". One the classes, that I had to sit through was: "How to dress for success". The class focused on what one should wear out in the civilian world, what one should wear to be successful in the work place or in the market place, how one should be outfitted for success in the world.

So regardless of what we may think, of what one wears to be successful in the business world, or in the market place, there is much about this that we can liken to, our life in Christ.

So what do you mean? As Christians, even though we are sinners, we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ, a constantly worn garment that gives us saintly status and life, as God's children.

With Christ's righteousness, (not our righteousness), but with Christ's righteousness, we are outfitted, clothed, and made totally fit, for sainthood and citizenship in His Kingdom.

And then miraculously, the robe of righteousness also creates and develops us, on the inside into a mature image of the righteous Son of Man.

Through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God dresses the sinner, in the righteousness of Christ which is worn and lived in, through faith.

Justification brought us, what Luther called an "alien righteousness". To put on the righteousness of Christ, is to put on Christ.

This holy clothing has a powerful renewing effects on us. We are regenerated into a righteous reflection of what we wear by faith, in our baptism.

As our faith grows and matures, Christ's righteousness, develops us, into a new creation, into a mature likeness of His human nature.

As Jesus, according to His human nature, grew in wisdom and stature, so also does the new creation, you and I, which has come forth in Baptism.

The more we grow in Christ, the more our daily living can take on a reflection of His righteousness, and the fruit of faithfulness, which will increase.

This is what is called, "sanctification". Sanctification is not something we seek, or have to earn, it just happens, by the working of God's Holy Spirit.

Sanctification is a lifelong, growing and maturing process, of the Christian's new life in Christ, that Baptism has created.

A number of years ago, a professor of Theology at Luther Seminary, named Gerhard Forde, wrote this about "sanctification", he writes: "It is defined as getting used to the unconditional justification wrought by the grace of God for Jesus' sake. It is what happens when we are grasped by the

fact that God alone justifies. It is being made, “holy” and as such is not our work. It is the work of the Spirit who is called, “Holy”.

So let’s start with the word, “sanctification”. So by it’s very basic definition, the word, “sanctification”, means, to be made holy, to be set apart for God’s own purposes. So how does this happen?

We, (that would be you and I) as sinners are apprehended by Christ, and recreated back into the image of God in our baptism.

By baptism with the water and the Word, where we are splashed, with His grace, is the beginning of God’s work of sanctification.

Now we may think of Baptism as a “portal” through which God has His way with us, remaking us anew, and dragging us into His Kingdom.

However, baptism, is where, God enters into our space and time, sinks down into the mud and muck of this sinful, and fallen world, and makes what He desires us to be, in Baptism.

Baptism is where God first nailed and killed us, in the cross of Christ, and then raised us up in faith as a new creation.

Now, we may think of baptism as the gateway to God, where He descends to us; where He deals with us according to His good pleasure; and where the Savior, makes Himself and His saving gift manifest.

Therefore we must take God at His Word as found in the Book of Romans, chapter 6, verses 3-4. (Now if would please turn in your Bible to the Book of Romans, chapter 6, and we will look at 3)

Paul writes: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

Did you notice the paradox in our baptism. God kills us, to make us alive. From death, to life, we have come.

We as Christians are those, who have fallen into the hands of the Heavenly Physician and we are just dying to live.

Indeed, without a death to sin, there is no life in Christ. God Almighty Himself, comes to us through the simple earthly element of water, and the ordinary words of the human language.

God masks Himself, in these mundane things, according to His saving grace, so that we might die to sin, and live in Christ.

Through the temporal, the common, and the mundane, chosen places of life, the extraordinary, supernatural God, makes Himself known, and under the paradox of opposites.

God takes deadly aim on us, so that we may live, He rescues us from sin, death, and the devil and creates in us, a new and everlasting life.

Baptism marks, how God carries the Christian from the beginning of his or her life in Christ, to the fullness of salvation.

Christians can actually say: "I was baptized, and I am baptized." Baptism, is simultaneously, a dying and a rising work that is accomplished at the beginning, as a gate-way to God.

It is a work that God continually accomplishes in the Christian's life; and it is what He promises to accomplish in the end.

The Christian lives and grows by a dying to sin, and is raised, living and growing in Christ, that returns him or her to their baptism again and again.

We make progress in our Christian life, by starting over again by God's baptismal work. We are always beginning anew, dying to sin and self, being made alive by His saving word.

When one is baptized, God's action does not stop at the baptismal font, or even at the door of the church. God's baptismal covenant is renewed in us continually, through His ministry of Law and Gospel, this is a life-long process.

As Luther well stated how God accomplishes His redemptive work in his Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 28, Luther writes: "The love of God does not find, but creates that which is pleasing to it."

Secondly, it is not just not God's way of doing things. God never comes hat-in-hand, hoping we will give Him what He wants. God does not enlist us with attractive pitches or motivational incentives, God simply creates what His own heart desires, with whatever pleasing attributes He might want.

Now for us who are dead in our trespasses, this is Good News. It means, as God has His way with us, He will be doing everything that is necessary for us to become just what He wants.

For instance, through Jesus' public ministry, our Lord Jesus Christ provided clues about how He works to bring people into His Kingdom.

For example, at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, Jesus turned water into wine, pleasing to everyone who was there, by telling the stewards to fill some large stone jars with water to the brim, saving the best wine for last.

Jesus fed thousands in the wilderness by distributing a few loaves of bread and two small fish. And in the upper room with His disciples, He broke bread, (saying this is my body, take and eat) and after supper He poured wine into the cup, (saying this cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you, drink this in remembrance of me).

On the road to Damascus, a man, by the name of Saul, who persecuted Christians, had an encounter with the risen Christ, who changed his life forever, as Saul became Paul, and of course Paul, carried out his missionary work to the Gentiles, spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ, and planting churches throughout the known world.

Think about this, Jesus required no help from anyone. We are examples of the same working of our gracious God, who makes us pleasing to Himself, in the saving work and gifts of the crucified and risen Christ through our baptism.

So for us today in the year of our Lord, 2017, almost 2018, if we were to make a promotional sound-bite for what Christ is looking for in each of us, we could perhaps say, that He is looking for a few, really bad, spiritually dead people, (both men and women), who would be something like Lazarus, a spiritual corpse, willing to stay dead.

We contribute our deadness, and He does the rest, just as God, worked in creation with the life-less clay to create the first man, Adam, and what was pleasing to Him, through His Word.

So also, in God's perfect plan of redemption, we encounter the crucified and risen Christ, who takes our spiritually life-less clay, and creates for Himself, sons and daughters for His family, and citizens, each of us, for His heavenly Kingdom.

This is the God who is with us, as we come to the foot of the cross of Christ crucified, who on the cross has defeated all (not some) but all the powers of darkness, and raises us up, with Himself, making us pleasing to the Father.

God has made us what we are through Christ, His children, and citizens of His heavenly Kingdom. Turn in your Bible to the Book of Ephesians, chapter 2, starting at verse 5 and follow along with me as I read this passage.

The writer of Ephesians states: "Even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved-and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

Ok, I got it, by Christ's righteousness we are justified by grace through faith, and through this thing called justification, again going back to Christ's righteousness, by the working of God's Holy Spirit, we are sanctified, we are made holy, we are set apart for God's service in the world. So what does this mean us?

Well, first of all, this does not mean that because we are Christians, who are saved by God's grace, that life is going to be "smooth-sailing", or that our life of faith is going to be a "walk in the park".

Trust me on this one, we are not going to be spared any troubles that come along our way. I don't know about you, but there have been times in my life, when I certainly have not felt very justified, or very sanctified.

Just because we are justified by God's grace through faith, and through justification, we are sanctified, doesn't mean that we are above the pitfalls of the flesh, we still live in this world, and it is a struggle.

Please turn in your Bible to the Book of Romans chapter 6, and then we are going to go chapter 7 as well.

Please go chapter 6, starting at verse 1. Paul writes: "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (verses 1-4)

Now if we do not read beyond Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome, in chapter 6, life can seem victorious. However, chapter 7 provides a sobering, realistic look at our lives.

Now when you hear this, you may be asking, is Paul contradicting himself? So let's look at chapter 7, starting at verse 14. Paul writes: "For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want to do.

Folks, there is no contradiction here. These passages from Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome are true.

Yes, the Christian has died to sin, and has entered into full union with Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, sanctified, and set apart for service to God. But also, the Christian is still tied to his or her, "Old-Self" the "Old Adam", if you will, and, what the Apostle Paul refers to as the "Flesh".

I want you to remember something, if you don't remember anything else I have said tonight, I want you to remember this: The Christian Life, is lived totally in the Cross of Christ. And I am going to quote Daniel Akin here: We do not live for victory, but we live from victory. In Christ we have overcome the world, even though we are still in the world.

We continually live by God's unmerited Grace or we don't live at all! Justification, and sanctification is not some past event that the Christian moves on from, but rather, is a constant reality, in which all aspects of life with God are focused and well-grounded.

We walk by faith, or else we lose our way and stumble. Now let's go back to the Book of Romans chapter 7, I want you to look at verse 24 (Now follow along with me as I read). Paul writes: "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh, I am a slave to the law of sin.

Now look at chapter 8, verse 1: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

This fellow Christians this is the reality of the world we live, we are flesh and blood, we are weak and fragile, we are imperfect and mortal, we are sinful and fallen, no one is exempt. This is both what is wrong with us, and at the same time, a normal part of the Christian life and journey.

We are simultaneously, a New Creation in Christ, and also, the "Old-Adam". These two are continually battling one another in our thinking, in our desires, in our actions, and in all aspects of our everyday behavior.

The Christian life of sanctification is a battlefield. The justified and the sanctified life involves fighting a war that rages inside all of us.

The New Creation in Christ, lives in Christ by the Spirit as a slave to righteousness, and the Old Adam (that sinful-self) is tied to this fallen world, in bondage to sin, death and the devil. And both are in a constant power struggle, with one determined to defeat the other.

Now let's go to the Book of Galatians, chapter 5, let's look at verse 16. (Now follow along with me as read). Paul writes: "Live by the Spirit. I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want." (verses 16 through 17)

So is it any wonder, that Christians, not just Lutheran Christians, but Christians of all denominations, experience turmoil, suffering, and conflict as a part of our walk of faith?

How wonderful it would be, to have things calm and peaceful on the inside, and to have a real victory over our sinful thoughts, our sinful actions, our sinful desires, and our sinful behavior?

Understand, the nature of the battlefield of the human heart, is a clash between the "New-Self" in Christ, the justified self, the sanctified self, against the "Flesh" against the "Old Adam".

Do we not long to be free of the sorrows, the suffering, and the confusion often found in our day to day lives?

Take heart, God's Holy Word promises these blessings to us, that we will be free of these things that plague us, as they are now hidden in the risen and ascended Christ. We shall not taste them in all of their fullness until the final fruits of our resurrected life in glory.

I am going to close out the message for tonight with this: As those who are justified by grace through faith, and through this justification, by the work and the merits of Christ, we are sanctified, are clothed and wrapped in Christ's love and forgiveness.

I believe that as we grow and mature in our life of faith, our walk of faith, we begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and no it is not an "on-coming train".

Rather, we begin to trust in God, more than ourselves. (And sometimes that can be a difficult thing to do). Martin Luther himself, talked more about our affection towards God, rather than worrying about lists of pious things to do.

With this gift of God's unmerited grace, we might actually begin to love God as God, and to hate the sin in our life.

Think about this, we might actually begin to dislike sin, and hope for its removal. The truth be told, on any given day, we may feel guilty about our sins (our sinful behavior) and fear the consequences, but we are far removed from hating them.

Because we are sanctified, sanctification holds out the possibility of actually coming to the point where we hate sin, and love God.

It is not that sin will ever be taken away from us, because of the world we live in, but rather, that we are to be taken away from sin, the heart, the soul, and mind, as Luther put it.

In that manner, the Law of God is to be fulfilled in us, by the uncompromising and unconditional grace of God. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord God, By your grace, and your grace alone, are we saved and sanctified for service in the world. Be with us in daily walk of faith as we struggle with sin and its desires. By the power of your Holy Spirit remind us, that when all is said and done in this life, faith in Christ is all that matters. All these things we humbly pray in Jesus Christ's most precious and Holy name. AMEN.