**GOD’S TIME, GOD’S TOOLS**

I’ve mentioned it before, but John is the Lutheran gospel. Along with the letters of Paul, the writings of John are where our movement within the Church has found its greatest inspiration and support. It’s not that we take John and Paul and leave the rest. It’s that we find John and Paul bearing the clearest and most consistent witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ; with the rest of the Bible supplementing and amplifying what we hear and read in the letters of Paul and the writings of John. Not surprisingly, this affinity for John and Paul goes all the way back to our movement’s founder—Martin Luther himself.

One of the reasons Luther was so drawn to John was that he was a very anxious man. German to the core Luther had a good bit of what’s come to be known as German perfectionism. Growing up in a very German-American family, in a very German-American part of the country, I know all about this disposition. My father could not live with one hair amiss, one weed in his lawn, or one bug stain on his bumper. Luther was the same way. If the slightest thing was off, including with himself, Luther would notice it and grow anxious.

Luther was also a Roman Catholic prior to his excommunication by the pope in 1521. If there’s anything to what’s sometimes described as Roman Catholic guilt, Luther had it in spades. Church often made him feel terrible; with it drawing attention to his every blemish and raising troublesome questions about whether he had or could do enough to please a god he perceived to be angry and wrathful. Church would often plunge Luther into deep despair, doubt, and dread; with the German word for this inner turmoil being “anfechtung.” But as anxious as he was, as subject to bouts of “anfechtung” as he was, Luther did eventually find solace and comfort in the writings of John and then again in the writings of Paul.

Now there’s nothing from Paul’s writings in our appointed readings from Scripture today. But we do have two readings from the writings of John. These readings give voice to much which can combat our insecurities when they come knocking. Start with how our reading from 1st John emphasizes that God’s love is given, not earned. When insecurity about our relationship with God overcomes us, we begin to worry that we have to win or attract or awake God’s love as if God and us were potential partners in a romantic relationship. To put in metaphorical terms, we come to think that we have to wear our Sunday best all the time if God is ever going to ask us to dance or out for a bite to eat. But the writings of St. John tell us this isn’t how it works at all.

God’s love isn’t earned or won, anymore than it’s attracted or awakened. God’s love is given. God’s love is a gift. Verse ten of our reading from 1st John makes this clear. It says, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” There it is. The Good News we celebrate and proclaim. We don’t have to win God’s love. God’s love is given. God’s love is experienced, not earned. God’s love is a gift which includes the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus Christ. Whew! Isn’t that a relief! Glory, glory, hallelujah! I guess we can just be happy and stop worrying so much; enjoying the salvation God’s love has freely won for us through Jesus Christ.

But wait a minute! Doesn’t the Bible say that I have to have faith and that faith without works is dead? Well, yes. Yes, it does. But this need not produce worry or dread. Talk of faith’s necessity and of how faith must produce works doesn’t have to spell doubt, despair, and dread for us; plunging us into our own personal version of Martin Luther’s many battles with “anfechtung.” Start with the works part! In our reading from John, Jesus does say the faithful shall bear fruit. But he also says that apart from him we can do nothing. Jesus is the vine. We’re the branches. He’s responsible for all the fruit and the growth. And then there’s the Father who prunes our lives and our faith so they might produce even more fruit. “I am the vine and my Father the vine-grower,” Jesus says right off the top today. And just as the fruits of faith are not self-produced, so also is faith itself not self-produced.

In the verses just prior to today’s reading from John, Jesus says it’s the Holy Spirt who shall teach us everything. It’s the Spirit who teaches us why to believe. It’s the Spirit who teaches us how to believe. It’s the Spirit who teaches the works that faith produces naturally. The whole notion that faith and its fruits are some sort of self-produced add-on to what God has freely done in Jesus Christ is completely out of step with what we hear and read today. God’s love is a gift. God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ is a gift. Christian faith and its fruits are a gift, with all three members of the Holy Trinity deeply involved and invested in the giving of this gift according to Scripture. I guess we can relax and rejoice. Maybe it’s time for the very first verse of a Grammy-winning song from Bobby McFerrin called “Don’t Worry! Be Happy!”

And so, can we do it? Can we just relax and be happy? It’s certainly a possibility, a glorious freedom, that God’s Good News makes available to us, but I’m not certain we always take advantage of it. If we’re not worried about ourselves, we’re worried and anxious about our family and friends; about our job; about our church; about our community; about our country. These are anxious times. The disappearance of blue-collar America, growing economic inequality all across the globe, a worldwide pandemic, escalating gun violence, a hotter plant with more extreme weather swings, the ongoing blight of prejudice in all its forms, the numerical decline of the Church all across the Northern Hemisphere—these are all developments which speak to the anxiety, to the anfechtung, our times can produce. But brothers and sisters the future doesn’t depend upon us.

“Apart from him, apart from Christ, we can do nothing,” we’re told today. This applies to our past. This applies to our present. This applies to our future. We’re the fruit. Christ the vine. And let’s not forget that our reading from John also informs us that God the Father is completely invested in his Son’s success and in his success through us. If we can’t believe that the Holy Trinity who has gotten us and the rest of the creation this far also has the future handled, we might as well turn out the lights, lock up the doors, and never come back again. But thanks be to God, we can believe that the Holy Trinity who has brought us this far does have the future handled! This belief, this faith, this trust is the Holy Spirit’s gift to us. Let’s take advantage of this gift. Roll the Bobbie McFerrin again!

Don’t worry! Be happy! Addressing more than one corner of our lives, this is the Bible’s message to us. It’s not about us. It’s about God. It’s God’s time, God’s gifts. If we have to do anything, it’s to be thankful enough and attentive enough to connect the dots that appear by way of God’s grace. It’s certainly how it once worked for Philip in our reading from Acts. The Lord, as in Jesus, told him where to be. The Spirit told him who to address. And with the aid of the Bible, the Ethiopian official told him which questions and issues needed addressing. Being thankfully attentive to God’s movements in his life and his world, all Philip did was connect the dots that were already there to be connected. As we’re happy, as we tell worry to take a hike, let’s follow the same script ourselves; connecting the dots God leaves for us to connect. And let’s not go thinking that being thankfully attentive to God’s movements in us and around us is some kind of self-created disposition. In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul tells us that joy is one of the fruits God grows and you certainly can’t be joyful unless the Spirit also allows you to identify reasons for joy and thanksgiving in you and around you. Again, it’s not about us. It’s about God. It’s God’s time, God’s gifts. Apart from him we can do nothing. But with him we can do everything. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, I can do all things through He who strengthens me. Amen!