

Life Sunday Sermon 2015

Isaiah 40:1-2 “Matters of the Heart”

Rev. John F. Bradosky, Bishop of the North American Lutheran Church

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“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended that her iniquity is pardoned that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (Isaiah 40:1-2).

The prophet Isaiah is speaking to God’s people. These words are not his but come from the heart of God. The words Isaiah and the other prophets had to speak were not always words of comfort, but words of judgment to turn people away from sin. The primary origin of that sin was also a matter of the heart, a matter of faith. The unique and defining attribute of Judeo-Christian faith is monotheism, the belief in one God. Yet God’s people lived in a pagan culture that worshipped many gods. It was tempting to forsake the belief in one God and pursue the gods of the surrounding culture. Tragically, they often yielded to the temptation necessitating the call of the prophets to recognize the foolishness of their behavior, repent, and return to faith in the only true and life-giving Lord God.

People were easily seduced and attracted to pagan fertility gods and goddesses. The fertility of the soil was essential to an agrarian people. Their crops and herds were their source of sustenance and wealth. Their wealth was a measure of their value in the culture and a sign of their importance or success. The fertility gods like Baal, Ashtarte, Dagon, and Milcon were worshipped as individuals brought offerings and participated in sexual acts with priests or priestesses at the temple where the image or statue of the idol was kept. Productivity and success were connected to perverse displays of human sexuality, contrary to God’s Word and God’s will. The abuse of human sexuality was never more apparent than in the worship of Molech. This idol was worshiped by either

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offering your children to grow up as temple prostitutes or as human sacrifice, consumed by fire. The Lord God’s absolute prohibition against such behavior is recorded multiple times in Leviticus, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Malachi. It was considered far worse than a transgression of His teaching. This act is considered so atrocious that to engage in such activity is to profane the name of God, to profane His character, His person. It was considered so egregious because it was contrary to the Creator’s essence.

A little later in the book, (Chapter 44) Isaiah comments on the nature of these idols. People shape these gods from wood or metal. They use some of the wood for heating their home or cooking their food and with the same wood they fashion a god. They attribute power and greatness to this image deceiving others into trusting it, worshipping it, serving it. These idols are shaped into the form of human beings “in all their glory.” The images are sexually explicit, crafted to encourage people to pursue sexual pleasure and gratification, legitimizing it as a form of worship. These gods cannot see. They cannot understand. They are as blind and ignorant as those who create them. If they are nothing more than the invention of humans their worship is nothing more than the worship of humans and an excuse to indulge in shameless immorality. The true idol is human sexuality and the promotion of licentious behavior. Instead of giving life it destroyed life and relationships. The worship of these idols destroys our relationship with the living Lord God and with those closest to us. It made children, the by-product of sexual acts, mere offerings to be consumed or objects to be used for even more perverse sexual indulgence.

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We live in a world that has been equally deceived. It is a culture that is sexually charged and explicit. People are reduced to mere sexual beings. The media crafts the idols we worship and desire, encouraging us to act on our desires, to fulfill our lusts and pleasure ourselves no matter how perverse or contrary it is to the will of God or His Word. The addiction to pornography and participation in prostitution is at an all time high. Instead of being understood as a source of shame it is lauded as legitimate big business. Our children are engaging in sexual experiences at an increasingly younger age. Abortion is equally connected to our sexually charged culture that devalues human life and relationships for the sake of momentary pleasure and selfish fulfillment. The horror of abortion is no less egregious than the behavior of those who worshipped Molech by sacrificing their children to the idol of human sexuality. We are a people in desperate need of Isaiah’s words.

The greatest temptation for God’s people is to engage in self-deception, believing that it is possible to blend the idolatry of the culture with their faith in the Lord God. It is equally tempting for Christians today to believe they can embrace the surrounding culture with its idolatry and at the same time remain faithful to Christ. The Apostle Paul points out to the church in Rome how impossible this merging of belief is. The worship of God cannot be merged with the worship of idols. Attempting to do so creates greater separation and alienation from God. Paul writes, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds

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and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen (Romans 1: 21-25).

Paul is pointing out that all sexual sin is a symptom of a greater problem. It is not the main problem. The diagnosis of Scripture is that our main problem is that we refuse to consider or find satisfaction in God’s beauty and goodness as the center of our existence, but hoard the gifts of creation and treasure them over the Creator to whom they point. These gifts were given to us by the Creator to bless and remind us of why He alone is worthy to be loved with all of our heart and mind and soul and strength. The seductive focus on the gifts of creation rather than the Creator produces within us a spiritual disorientation that spills over into every aspect of our existence including our sexuality. We soon find ourselves participants in life-destroying behaviors, having alienated ourselves from the only true source of life and love.

As we reflect on the need for celebrating Life Sunday we acknowledge that we are all participants in a culture that promotes values that lead to the acceptance of abortion as a right. In many ways we have all failed to speak up in opposition, all accepted it as inescapable, all compromised in part by believing it is possible to accept both the values of the secular culture and Christian faith. Instead of pointing the finger of judgment at others, we realize we too are convicted by the wise counsel of God through the prophet Isaiah and need to hear these words. This is truly a matter of the heart, our hearts!

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This is a matter of the heart that is more than a book by Danielle Steel, more than a song by Tracy Chapman. It is more than our feelings, our pleasure, or our preoccupation with our own desires. This is really the greatest matter of the heart, the sovereignty of God in our lives. This is the issue raised in the first commandment. What place does God have in our lives? Luther makes clear in his explanation to the first commandment that an idol is anything that we give priority over God’s rightful place.

This is a matter of the heart to admit that God is in control. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. He has no limitations and is without equal regarding influence or power. Consider what the scriptures declare about His rightful place in our hearts:

God is above all things and before all things. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He is immortal, and He is present everywhere so that everyone can know Him (Revelation 21:6).

God created all things and holds all things together, both in heaven and on earth, both visible and invisible (Colossians 1:16).

God knows all things past, present, and future. There is no limit to His knowledge, for God knows everything completely before it even happens (Romans 11:33).

God can do all things and accomplish all things. Nothing is too difficult for Him, and He orchestrates and determines everything that is going to happen in your life, in my life, and throughout the world. Whatever He wants to do in the universe, He does, for nothing is impossible with Him (Jeremiah 32:17).

If God has that position of sovereignty in our hearts, then He alone rules our lives.

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His Word guides and directs our lives, our behaviors, thoughts, emotions, and desires.

His Word shapes our values and decisions. When His Word conflicts with the values of the world we oppose the world and follow Him.

Above all else, His Word proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the profound nature of His love for us. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ we receive the promise of salvation and redemption. His love for us in Jesus Christ has the power to free us from the bondage to all other idols, all competing cultural values, all self-destructive behaviors. This is the greatest word of comfort for our hearts.

“Comfort, comfort my people says your God.” The Holy Spirit is the Comforter Jesus promised to send. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that transforms our lives and guides us in the paths of righteousness. To those who admit their sins and struggle to turn in the direction of faith in Jesus Christ, we are called to “speak tenderly.” To those who grieve the fact they have compromised their faith to worship idols, embraced culture above Christ, and participated in perverse sexual activity, including those behaviors that contribute to the acceptance of abortion and now long for transformation and for the redemptive embrace of Jesus, God speaks a tender word into our hearts.

God commands Isaiah to cry out to His people saying their warfare has ended. Inside of each of us is a spiritual struggle for first place in our hearts, for who or what will be God in our lives. When we arrive at the place of repentance, knowing we cannot save ourselves, we have reached the point of surrender. We are captive to Christ and no longer insist on our own wisdom or our own way. There is no longer a need to resist or rebel. We have lost the battle and He has won the war for our eternal salvation.

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God wants us to be absolutely assured that our iniquity is pardoned, our sins forgiven. This was accomplished on the cross. Jesus took upon Himself the iniquity of us all. If we had to pay the price for our own sin the demands of justice would require us to forfeit our life. Instead, Jesus offers His life for ours. He pays the price for our forgiveness. There is no greater word of comfort we could receive.

This final phrase of the text has manifold meaning for us, “she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” Even though we receive forgiveness, the consequences of our sin often exact a huge toll on us. As I thought about abortion, I was reminded that we have received double for our sins. We must live with the fact that we have participated in the death of a child, in the deaths of countless children throughout our land for generations. In addition to this sin, we also grieve the loss of those countless relationships and the gifts they were designed to bring into our lives, the contributions they could have made to this world and to the Kingdom of God.

This meaning alone would leave us lost in our sin. The greater truth of the Grace of Jesus Christ is that it is always sufficient, more than enough. From the cross of Jesus Christ, God gives us not just twice as much Grace as we need but infinite Grace always more than we deserve or can imagine. In this passage we receive true comfort for our heart.

In his work, *Bondage of the Will*, Luther reminds us that the only way we can truly trust in these promises that bring such comfort and assurance is that we also believe in God’s absolute sovereignty in all things.

“When he makes promises you ought to be out of doubt that He knows, and can

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and will perform, what He promises; otherwise, you will be accounting Him neither true nor faithful, which is unbelief, and the height of irreverence, and a denial of the most high God! And how can you be thus sure and certain, unless you know that certainly, infallibly, immutably, and necessarily, He knows, wills and will perform what He promises? Not only should we be sure that God wills, and will execute His will, necessarily and immutably; we should glory in the fact as Paul does in Romans 3:4. ‘Let God be true but every man a liar’ yes, and again, ‘[N]ot the word of God has failed,’ (Romans 9.6), and in another place, ‘The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are His’ (2 Timothy 2.19). In Titus 1:2 He says: ‘Which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began’ ... ‘He that cometh, must believe that God is, and that he is a rewarder of them that hope in him’ (v.6) ... for the Christian’s chief and only comfort in every adversity lies in knowing that God does not lie, but brings all things to pass immutably, and that His will cannot be resisted, altered or impeded.’ (The Bondage of the Will; pp. 83-84.)

It is God’s absolute sovereignty that brings true comfort in His promises. It is His sovereignty that gives us confidence to follow Christ, to risk obedience to His Word and will in spite of the influence of our culture to the contrary. It is His sovereignty that gives us courage to live in opposition to the emptiness of the world and the fullness of life in Christ. The sanctity of life is never a matter of human choice or sexual freedom but the sovereignty of God over all matters in our life including our sexuality and our morality.

His Word reminds us that it is possible for us to have an appearance of obedience without true obedience. That’s because God does not only take our behavior into



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consideration, but also our thoughts and motives. That’s why the Bible tells us that although people look at the outward appearance to make judgments about others, God looks at the heart to draw His conclusions. For God, heart matters are the heart of the matter.