

4th Sunday in Lent: March 26, 2017
“Thank You God For Mother Church”

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text this morning is from Galatians 4.

Given our area and the history of the Lutheran Church, I know that we are not used to calling the church our mother. It seems to be an uncomfortable phrase that we would feel better, if it were to stay in the history of the middle ages. Sure, we call God our Father, but we hesitate, and are very reluctant, to call the church our mother; but that is exactly what the church is. Many ignore this truth to their own demise, and we do not have God as our Father, if we do not have the church as our mother. As you comb through the Scriptures, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that He has bound His gracious presence to His Christian church here on earth. It is through His church that His grace and mercy are given through His very means. So the reality is, if you will have nothing to do with her, you have nothing to do with Jesus Christ, her head.

Now, given our cultural context today, I have to say God is not our mother. He is our Father. Modern feminism, and modern liberalism, would have us believe that gender and gender roles are either not important, or they are ambiguous. So, many argue that it is also ok to address God as mother, or that the terms are interchangeable. But this is nothing less than old-fashioned paganism. Nowhere in all the Scriptures is God ever referred to as our mother. He is our Father.

Now let me be clear, this is not to say that God the Father is a male as a male human being is male. God is a spirit and He doesn't have body parts, so He cannot be thought of as male in opposition to female. But the Bible is clear, and God has revealed Himself as Father. Gender is important. It is not fluid. It is a gift and part of God's design. In fact, God clearly reveals Himself through the Bible as Father in order to teach us about gender, gender roles, His gracious plans and great design.

There is a difference between a human father and mother. It is a difference that is grounded in our creation. God created us in His image. We were made perfect, holy, innocent, and by His design, male and female. A male is capable of being a father, and a female is capable of being a mother. A male is not designed to be a mother, and a female is not designed to be a father. The two are not

interchangeable, nor is one more important than the other. Interestingly, the Bible doesn't talk about parents. It talks about fathers and mothers. These are God-given offices, and there is a difference.

A father gives his name to the mother. The mother receives the father's name. The father fathers a child. He begets a child. The mother cannot beget a child. She receives the seed from the father and she bears a child. She then nurtures the child she bears. She receives; she doesn't give. Without the seed of the father, she couldn't be the mother. But no father worth the name will abandon the mother of his children, and certainly no father will permit his own children to disregard their mother, to despise her, to ignore her, to pretend that she doesn't exist or that they don't need her.

If God is to be our Father, then the church must be our mother. In one of the great mysteries of the Trinity, God the Son died for us, and bought us with His own blood on the cross. In so doing, He also purchased the means by which we would be born from above. Remember Jesus' words to Nicodemus, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."¹ In Mark, after Jesus' resurrection, He commands His disciples, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."² One must receive this "washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."³

Now I ask you, to whom did Jesus give this washing? To whom did Jesus entrust the sacrament of Holy Baptism through which the Holy Spirit births us into the Kingdom of God and makes us heirs of eternal life? He entrusted it to His holy church.

In our Gospel Lesson for today we see how Jesus, just before the celebration of the Passover, miraculously feeds five thousand men, plus women, plus children. As we

¹ John 3:5–6

² Mark 16:15–16

³ Titus 3:5–7

read through the rest of this chapter we see our Lord using this miracle to teach that He is the manna come down from heaven. His flesh and blood are the true food that faith feeds upon. He says, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.”⁴ To whom has Jesus entrusted the preaching of His gospel? He has entrusted it to the church. To whom has He entrusted the Sacrament of His body and blood? He has entrusted it to His church.

So just what is it that makes the church our mother? It is through the very nature of her reception that makes her our mother. She has received the means by which God becomes our Father. That is, she has the pure gospel and the life-giving sacraments of Christ.

The church is our mother, because she has the gospel given to her. In fact, this is how you can recognize her as being the church. The church can be found where the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and where the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution.⁵ It is precisely in His Word and in His Sacraments, that the promise is found.

Consider the allegory, St. Paul writes. Hagar had the son and Sarah was barren. The law said that the firstborn son would become the heir and Ishmael, Hagar’s son, was the firstborn. What did Sarah have? She had neither a son nor the law. She had nothing but God’s promise that she would have a son and that from his line the Savior of sinners would one day be born. She had the promise and that’s all she had.

And so Hagar persecuted Sarah. She stuck her nose up in the air and acted superior to Sarah, “Sarah, you are a dried up old fool! You can’t even bear a son, but I can and I did and so I will have the honor, and you won’t have anything. I will have Abraham’s name and identity because I have a flesh and blood boy while you have nothing at all. You have a promise, a dead, cold, empty doctrine that is clearly untrue.”

⁴ John 6:51

⁵ Augsburg Confession VII, 1

See what then happened as God has recorded it. Hagar was thrown out! She was nothing but a slave! She had no right to Abraham's name. She had no right to the name "church" even though she claimed it. No, the church is the mother of those who trust in the promise. The church is the mother of every Christian because to her has been given the promise.

It is easy to confuse the church with an outward organization concerned with great wealth, beauty, power, and size. In fact, those who are most likely to call the church their mother are also most likely to confuse the church with an external hierarchical structure that makes all sorts of bold claims about being the church that Jesus established.

But Jesus established His church on earth by giving to her the pure gospel and His holy sacraments, that's it. The church has received from her Lord the authority of the gospel, and that is the power to set people free. The gospel gives Jesus to sinners where they need him. The gospel tells sinners that Jesus has suffered for them and that for His sake God forgives them all their sins. The gospel covers sin and gives life in the face of death. The gospel gives forgiveness of sin, resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

We need the church because she alone has the promise of the gospel. I would spend some time reading and studying the differences of the terms invisible church and visible church, catechism questions 170-179 in the catechism, or questions 175-186 in the old catechism from 1941. It is true that you don't need (Zion) St. Luke's Lutheran Church. It is very true that you don't need Dr. Joel Koepp as your (vacancy pastor) pastor. While that is most certainly true, you do need the church because you need to hear the gospel. You need the washing and you need the Holy Supper. You need to receive Jesus, not just once, but continually. He said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."⁶

This is why you need the church. Jesus cannot be found apart from His church. That is why Hebrews exhorts, "let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but

⁶ John 15:5

encouraging one another,”⁷ because, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”⁸ Here sinners are washed in the waters of regeneration⁹, receive the freedom given through absolution¹⁰, and feast for forgiveness with angels, archangels and the whole company of heaven on the bread of life.¹¹

The importance of gender and gender roles is deeply emphasized by God in the importance of not only father and mother, but related is marriage, the very building block of God’s design in family. These deep biblical understandings have far-reaching practical implications, not only in the culture and our homes, but also in how the visible church body carries out its tasks. While there are many ways this plays out, let’s explore just one example this morning. The fact that God is our Father and the church is our mother means that it is wrong to put a woman into the pulpit as a preacher. The called and ordained servant is to represent Christ, and Christ chose only men to be His apostles, the first one’s in the office of the ministry¹², only men were in the 72 in Luke 10 as those sent to represent Him, and only men took part in the institution of the Last Supper, even though the Passover was celebrated as families. Jesus also made it clear through St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 and in 1 Timothy 2 that God does not call women into the office of the public ministry.

This is not a matter of can, or of ability, it is simply a question of “should,” and God doesn’t call women to do what he forbids them to do, and vice versa, He doesn’t call men to do what He forbids them to do. I do not want to get into a gender war, or a battle of the sexes here. I simply want to point out that Jesus, who as God, could not be sexist in any way, was the one to make these decisions and organized this design. For a very good and thorough treatment on this subject, I would encourage you to read a Book entitled “Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective,” or pick up the short pamphlet in the North entryway entitled, “What about...Women Pastors.”

⁷ Hebrews 10:24–25

⁸ Matthew 18:20

⁹ Titus 3:5-8

¹⁰ John 20:22-23

¹¹ John 6:35

¹² Cf. John 20:22-23, Acts 2

I know this is not the wide, culturally accepted view, and I can hear the comments forming in your head, “But Pastor, aren’t you being exclusive and misogynistic?” Brothers and sister in Christ, consider, “The Bible’s nuptial language for the relationship between Christ and the Church, the Lord and Israel...is not mere metaphor, but rather the expression of some fundamental reality about Christ and his Church, so that...the office of the Ministry has a Christological foundation.”¹³ The world that surrounded the New Testament Church was filled with women in leadership roles in religion.

St. Paul in Romans 12 treats the Church as the Body of Christ and there he deals with both unity and diversity. The diversity among members does not deny equality before God; nor does equality before God dispense with diversity. It is precisely the diversity that produces the Body of Christ, as One head with many members. This does not mean accepting our limits for ourselves, but rather recognizing these limits come from God. That means that by God’s great design, we are all given different strengths, weakness, talents and abilities, to carry each other’s burdens, work together for the body of Christ, to His glory and the benefit of our neighbor; all within the design and limits that God has given. Women are not excluded, rather they are entrusted with all sorts of important functions in the life of the church. Men and women complement each other, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”¹⁴

You need your father and your mother. They are God’s representatives on earth for you. This is not just bodily true, it is also spiritually true. You need your Father and you need your Mother, the church. You need what Christ has given to her. You sin. You damage yourself by your sin. You hate. You envy and covet and lust. You break God’s commandments every single day. You soil yourself and make yourself dirty inside and out. You cannot clean up your own life. You need your mother.

I have heard, and I’m sure you have also, some people claim that they can have a good relationship with Jesus without going to church. They use the phrase made popular by Oprah, “I’m spiritual, not religious.” They use the expression “organized” religion as if their own disorganized version is better. But they simply

¹³ Harrison, Matthew and John Pless, *Women Pastors: The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective*, page 392.

¹⁴ Galatians 6:2

betray their own ignorance of Jesus. Catechism question 179, “What do the Scriptures teach about our life in the church? They teach that we should seek always to be and remain members of the invisible church and we should be faithful to that visible church which professes and teaches all of the Bible’s doctrines purely and administers the sacraments according to Christ’s institution.”¹⁵

Read through the end of the Gospels very closely and what do you see? Jesus died, rose from the dead, and instituted His holy church and ministry as the first order of business. Jesus on the cross gave His life as ransom, to pay for our penalty, to save us from misery and death, and to win peace with God, but He did not give any of this to us on the cross. That was salvation won, not salvation given. In other words, He won the treasure for us then and there, but He gives us the treasure here and now, in His Church, in His bride, through our mother, through His established means. She has the blood of Jesus that silenced God’s wrath against sinners, and she has the promises of God that sets sinners free. She is the heavenly Jerusalem because she is in holy communion with our Father in heaven through her mystical union with His only begotten Son. She is free and she has freedom to give. So we stay with holy mother church and we remain the free children of God through His blood.

*“Let us recall that in our midst Dwells Christ, His only Son; As members of His body joined We are in Him made one. For love excludes no race or clan That names the Savior’s name; His family embraces all Whose Father is the same.”*¹⁶ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

¹⁵ Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation: Question 179, pg. 162

¹⁶ LSB 845 Where Charity and Love Prevail: stanzas 5-6