

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Easter 4 – April 18th and 21st, 2013

Acts 13:15-16, 26-33

¹⁵ After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak.” ¹⁶ Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: “Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! . . .

²⁶ “Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. ²⁷ The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. ²⁸ Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. ²⁹ When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead, ³¹ and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

³² “We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors ³³ he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:
“You are my son; today I have become your father.”

Dear Children of our Heavenly Father,

Since I'm a pastor, sometimes people want to talk to me about church. And sometimes people give me the impression that there is something wrong with a lot of the sermons that you hear in churches today. Since this is a topic of interest for me, I usually try to figure out what this person thinks is missing from the preaching.

Though most of them probably wouldn't say it this way, but usually the complaint can be summarized like this: “I wish the sermon would be more about me.” “Tell me what to do,” they say. “Get me excited.” “Make me feel good.” “Be more practical.”

What can we learn from the Apostle Paul about this? He is largely regarded as one of the greatest missionaries who ever lived, so certainly we can learn from his sermons, like we have in this section of God's Word. On the one hand, Paul shows us that it's true. God instructs us how to live lives of thankfulness and comforts us in our sorrows.

On the other hand, we learn that it's not all about us. If you look at Paul's sermon to the people of Antioch, you can see that he doesn't give them a set of rules or tell them to do something. He tells them about a person and a promise. The person is Jesus Christ. The promise is that everyone who believes in Jesus has forgiveness of sins. So, no, it's not all about us.

Theme: It's All About Jesus!

- 1. Our message is all about Jesus**
- 2. Our lives are all about Jesus**

The apostle Paul is one of the greatest and most successful missionaries ever used by God. Today he receives an invitation from the synagogue leader in Antioch: **“Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak.”** And the sermon he gave was so compelling that when he was done, they said, “We'd like to hear more.” What was his secret? Was he a powerful speaker? Did he have a special way with words? Actually, Paul says that he was not a very great public speaker. And in his sermon in Antioch, we don't find him telling a bunch of clever stories or using attention-grabbing visual aids. The thing that makes people say, “We want to hear you speak again,” is that Paul simply told the story – the

history – of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. He told them all about Jesus.

Here’s his sermon: **“The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. ²⁸ Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. ²⁹ When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead.”** Nothing fancy there! It’s not much different than what we say in the Apostles’ Creed: “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.... on the third day he rose again from the dead.”

When we listen to preaching, it's very easy for us to try to judge the message by outward things. We may be impressed by a person's speaking gifts or strong personality. It might feel good if the message is all about me. But the message I need to hear is not all about me. The message I need to hear is the one that's all about Jesus.

Well . . . we do have to hear some things about ourselves, but I'm afraid that those things don't make us feel good at all. We need to hear that we are sinners who don't have a chance of saving ourselves. That's why Paul told the people in Antioch, “You could not be justified by obeying the Law.”

Actually, one of our biggest problems is that we think it's all about us. We would like to think that the good things we do make us good in God's eyes. But God's Law makes it clear that we are not good enough to be justified by our own works, because our works and actions are never good enough to get a “thumbs up” from God. This means that you cannot be saved by the things that you do. You can only be saved by what Jesus did. That's the message that was proclaimed from the pulpit in Antioch that day, and that's the message we need to keep on hearing, too.

Yet although the message Paul had to share with the people was not all about them, the message about Jesus had a huge impact on each of them — and on each of us. This is because Jesus promises forgiveness to all who believe in him. He says, “I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.”

This is why Christianity is not all about a set of rules, or the things that we do. We cannot be justified – that is, declared not guilty, forgiven and approved by God – by the things that we do. You won’t be justified – forgiven – by loving your neighbor. You won’t be justified by going to church, or even by telling other people about Jesus. Because nothing we do is good enough. We don’t meet God’s standard of perfection.

But Jesus did. And he gives us who believe in him credit for it. And Jesus died – to pay for all the imperfections in our lives, even the times when we didn't think we needed him. And Jesus rose again on the third day – to show beyond any shadow of a doubt that he has defeated death and paid for the sins of the whole world. That’s how we know that God is not lying when he says, “Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This promise of forgiveness through faith in Jesus is what it’s all about.

2. Our lives are all about Jesus

That's why our lives are all about Jesus. That’s why everything that we do – as individuals and as a congregation – is about Jesus. Some people think the Christian church is all about loving your neighbor, or the golden rule. And it’s true that Jesus himself taught, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And that's what we strive to do, but this does not show what great people we are or earn favors from God. That we could never do. Rather, we do it because we want our lives to be living sermons that show by acts of service and unselfishness that it's not about us; it's about Jesus.

Other people think Christianity is all about making changes in society – fighting against the evils of abortion and sexual immorality, lobbying the government to make laws to protect marriage and family. And certainly Christians are concerned about those issues because they are connected to our faith in Jesus. But Christianity is not really about these issues. It’s about Jesus.

Still others think Christianity is all about a set of rules. They think the Christian Church just wants to tell you what to do and not to do. And it's true, Christians want to follow God's commands in their lives to thank him for forgiveness. But Christianity is not just a bunch of rules for living. It's about Jesus.

Still others think that Christianity is all about the institution of the Church, as though our purpose here were to keep the building standing, to keep people in it, and keep the institution financially healthy, so that this institution may keep on going and thriving – or to preserve the Wisconsin Synod as an institution and Church body. It's true that we work hard to maintain this building and keep our church and Synod going. But it's not because we have to preserve the institution. It's because this is how Jesus is proclaimed and preached.

So let's ask ourselves, "Why are we here in church? Why does this building exist? Why is there an organization of people known as St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church? What is the Christian church all about?" If the answer doesn't include the name Jesus, we've got the wrong reason and purpose. If we are working to keep this church going simply because it's our church, we've got the wrong answer.

On the contrary, everything we do, as an individual or as a church, is not about us, but about Jesus. The message we proclaim and the things we do have the same purpose: to shine the spotlight on Jesus, to proclaim his Word and let everyone know what he has done to save us from sin and give us eternal life. That's what we're all about. That's what our sermons are all about. The Christian Church – and individual Christians – are all about Jesus – that Jesus died, and Jesus rose, and Jesus promises forgiveness. May everything we do serve the purpose of knowing Jesus and making him known.