

22 August 2010
Pentecost 13
The Confirmation of Sarah Douthwaite

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Answer Is: Jesus”

Text: Luke 13:22-30 (Hebrews 12:4-29)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

God's Own Child I Gladly Say It: I am baptized into Christ (LSB #594). We sang that at the beginning of the Divine Service today. Sarah first spoke those words by grace through faith some 4,557 days ago. For although she was only 10 days old and her vocal chords could not yet form the words, the faith given to her that day by her Saviour sang out in joy, as in the waters of baptism Jesus took little sinful Sarah, forgave her all her sins, and said to her: *you are mine!* And she was. God's own child in Jesus.

Since that day, Sarah has heard that promise repeated to her many times, as her Saviour has affirmed His love for her, saying: *I forgive you all your sins.* You are mine. Yes, it is true, you have not always lived as my child. You have sinned. But my love is greater than your sin, my promise greater than your rebellion. I remember that day when I took you as My child. I meant it. You are mine.

And today, Sarah will take her place with people ***from the east and west, and from the north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God***, as her Lord Jesus comes to her today and places His very own Body and Blood into Sarah's mouth - a pledge to her of His everlasting forgiveness, life, and salvation. And no greater gifts will she - or any of us - ever receive. Baptism, Absolution, Supper. Forgiveness, Life, Salvation. Gifts that will never be taken away, for what Jesus gives He does not take away. What He promises is sure and true.

That's what this day is all about, this day when Sarah is confirmed into the faith. It is not at all about what she has done or accomplished, but about what Jesus has done and accomplished for her. For what she has done is very little; what Jesus has done - and continues to do - is very great.

And this is what Sarah has begun to learn. Yes, *begun*. For though today, her confirmation instruction is ending, her learning has just begun. It is a learning that will continue all her life. As she lives the faith into which she is baptized and which today she publicly confesses. As she lives and breathes this faith in all kinds of joys

and sorrows, in ease and in struggle, in good times and in bad. She will learn each day anew the *breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God for her in Christ Jesus* (Eph 3:18) - a love that provides, but also disciplines; a love that exalts, but will also humble her, if necessary. A love that she may not always understand or comprehend, but a love that will never end.

And so that she may learn of this love and grow in it, she has learned the catechism. It was a discipline that, as the writer to the Hebrews put it for us today, ***seemed painful rather than pleasant***, yet this Word of God ***yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it***.

And so she, like you, has learned the **Ten Commandments** - not to make her a saint, but to make her a sinner. That she learn to look for her righteousness not in what she does, but in her Saviour Jesus alone. Her Saviour Jesus of the **Creed**, *who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven* and died on the cross - not just for the sin of the world, but for her sin. That His death be her death, and His life, her life. The life for which she prays in the **Lord's Prayer**, asking for what her Father has promised to give, that she live the life He gave her in His strength, in His gifts, in His holiness. For this she is unable to do on her own.

This life of repentance, faith, and holy living - of death, resurrection, and ascension - is her life, her story, because she is **baptized** into Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, for **absolution** and **communion** with Him, *to live with Him in His kingdom, in righteousness and purity, both now and forever*.

God's Own Child I Gladly Say It: I am baptized into Christ.

That's the answer. The one and only answer. The sum and substance of the six parts of the Catechism. Our synodical catechism officially has 306 questions and answers, but there's really only one. It's all about Jesus.

You've heard the joke that in Sunday School, if you don't know the answer, say "Jesus" and you'll probably be right. Well, there's some truth to that. You could also say *Baptism*, for that's really saying "Jesus" too. He is *the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through Him* (John 14:6). Faith, therefore, that clings to Jesus and not to itself or to works is right faith. Sarah, like you, has learned that answer. And she will spend the rest of her life exploring it, wondering at it, and rejoicing in it.

So having said that, what do you think the answer to the question asked of Jesus in the Holy Gospel today is? When ***someone said to [Jesus], "Lord, will those who are saved be few?"*** The answer, of course, is Jesus. Now, I know that doesn't seem to answer the question, when the question was "many or few?" But hang on; bear

with me; it really does. Because when the question is about salvation, the answer has to run through Jesus.

When you want to know *who* is saved, or who *can* be saved, or *how* to be saved, there are two places to look. The first is at yourself, or at those who need saving. But by looking there, you will find the answer to be not *many* or *few*, but **none**. Your sin is too great. You cannot overcome it and you cannot stop doing it. No matter how hard you try. Sinful is how you were born and how you naturally roll. It is your first instinct on how to react to something. It is your native language and the air you breathe. And so if your salvation and eternal life is up to you . . . well, start making alternate plans for how you're going to spend eternity.

But, as Sarah has learned, *that's the wrong place to look*. For if you want to know who is saved, or who can be saved, or how to be saved, don't look at the person who needs saving - *look at the Saviour*. Think of people stranded in the middle of the ocean, or stuck in a flood, or trapped in a burning building. Looking at them, what is their hope of being saved? But when the rescuers come, there's hope. Hope because of *their* strength and skill, because they are able to save.

And so looking at Jesus, those who are saved are not *few* or *many*, but **all**. For on the cross, the sins of *all* people, from the beginning of time to the end of time, were laid on Jesus. He took the fire for them all. He paid the price for them all. He died for them all. Not one excepted. Not one too big, not one too small. All have been atoned for *by His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death*. And so all that needed to be done has been done. For you, for me, for all people. In Jesus, we have been saved from the flood of our sins. In Jesus, we have been saved from the fires of hell. In Jesus, the door to eternal life is open. In Jesus, you recline at table in the kingdom of God. In Jesus, you live.

But it is also true, as Jesus said, that there are ***many who will seek to enter and will not be able***. Which does not mean that many won't be able to enter through Jesus - no, *all* may enter through Jesus. And all means all! But it means that many will seek and try to enter *apart from* Jesus and His cross, by other ways, other religions, other doors; by their good works, by their sincerity, by their own efforts - *and will not be able*. For to seek to enter any other way results not in life, but in death. Any other way is a dead end and a locked door.

And you know it. How many times have you resolved to do better? To stop doing a particular sin? To pray more? To study the Bible more? To be a better Christian? It didn't last very long, did it? And even if it did, could doing *now* what you were supposed to be doing all along, make up for a life of sin? You know that it cannot. So the question, "***Lord, will those who are saved be few?***" really should be reworded. That person asking Jesus that day really didn't want to know how many

would be saved - he wanted to know: Will I be saved? Can I be saved? Sinful, rotten, wretched, miserable, no good, screw-up, no matter how hard I try, failure, me.

The answer is Jesus. He is the door. The door that is as *narrow* as the cross, and as *wide* as the cross. Narrow for it is the only way; wide for it is the way for every single person ever; no one excluded. And if for everyone, then for you. Luther once remarked that if Jesus had said the cross is for everyone in the world *except for one person*, you would always wonder if you were that one person; and so you could never be sure. But if the cross is for all people - and all means all - then you can be sure. It is for you. His forgiveness is for you. His life is for you. His salvation is for you.

The answer is Jesus. To *strive to enter through the narrow door* means to cling, by faith, to Jesus. To keep your eyes fixed on Him. To repent and cling to Him and not to yourself; to what He has done, not what you can do. To cling to Him in Baptism. To cling to His words of Absolution. To cling to His Body and Blood. For these things are most true and sure. These things are the hand of your Saviour rescuing you; rescuing you from sin, from death, and from the power of the devil.

The answer is Jesus. That is what the Catechism teaches us. Sarah's going to come forward now and answer a lot of questions; but under each answer, there's really only one answer: **Jesus**. Sarah's learned a lot; but she's also learned that it all comes back to one thing: **Jesus**. As she has learned that, she will spend the rest of her life learning it anew each day - learning Jesus and all that He is and all that He does. She will never get to the bottom of Him, never fully understand or comprehend. None of us do, or will. Jesus is too great a Saviour.

And so the song of our life is not a symphony of good works or accomplishments - but simply this: *God's Own Child I Gladly Say It: I am baptized into Christ*. And that, my friends, says it all.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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