

“Graduating Without Distinction”  
+ Lent 1, Year C +  
Deuteronomy 26:11; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13  
February 21, 2010

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! AMEN.

The text for this morning’s message is the Epistle for this day particularly these words, “ ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved...For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.”

It sounded so easy when we were doing our worship planning – use the Gospel for each Sunday for the Wednesdays of Lent as well. The lessons are rich – certainly there would be a number of directions to go...and then you sit down to write. What in the world does the wandering Aramean brought up out of Egypt to come into the Promised Land have to do with Paul’s great discourse to the Romans stating that there is no distinction between believers – that Jesus is Lord, Lord of all – generous to all who call on him and beyond that what do those two lessons have to add to the oh-too-familiar Gospel where Jesus meets Satan in the wilderness and faces down wily lies and attractive temptations with God’s Word?

Starting with the Old Testament lesson we realize that being “Children of the Wandering Aramaen/Abraham” was the major identifying factor of the Children of Israel – they were set apart from all people to be God’s Chosen Nation/God’s Covenant People of promise, rescued from slavery in Egypt and given God’s Law to follow as they listened to the prophets and awaited the promised Messiah. The Law, the prophets, the promised Messiah, distinguished them from all other peoples and nations – set them apart for special consideration and blessing – blessings so great they were to celebrate them with the aliens/non Jewish people residing among them so they could see how they gave glory to the One True God for the bounty granted His chosen people.

People like being set apart, exceptionally blessed and loved, don’t they? I remember how good it felt when I was selected for a leading role in a play (truth be told I was most often in a supporting role), was given a solo, and it really was cool to be chosen to speak for my 8th grade graduation. Wonderful distinctions! I remember, as well, seeing the Varsity letters for sports and National Honor Society tassels my siblings and friends wore – the Cum Laude and Magna Cum Laude distinctions they earned at graduation and the special awards they won. I remember the envy and the shame for not doing better. My wife and I both grew up in homes where it was mentioned that our fathers’ had been Valedictorians and our mothers’ Salutatorians. No pressure there! This is not to say that achievements are unimportant – that doing your best and reaping the results of hard work are not commendable and laudable – they are!

However, they have nothing to do with salvation. Paul makes it clear that when it comes to salvation if you “confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised Him up, you will be saved.” That’s it – and there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile in that

regard. When it comes to salvation we all Graduate Without Distinction – but it is the only graduation that really counts!

The implausible unfairness of that for all the Hermione Granger/first especially, middle or last born/overachievers, Type A personalities and doers of all things right like the elder son in the parable of the Prodigal Son must be addressed! (I can feel you writhing at the inequity and you know who you are!) Jesus does say there are places of honor in God's Kingdom – He says the Father will make those decisions AND then He tells us places of honor are based on being a servant to all/laying down your life/becoming the least...setting all honors aside. That is hard for achievers – makes me think of Lancelot DuLac (I played his squire in the play Camelot and took my bow with an English Sheepdog). It was Lancelot who said, "humility is my greatest virtue." Which, once having been spoken, made it untrue?

But there is one word – the WORD – that breaks down all distinctions – breaks down all barriers – the WORD that was spoken and the world was created – the WORD made flesh – Jesus. At His name every knee will bow, every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Kurios/Lord is the great ascription that Paul gives to Jesus. Jesus – the name we can call upon in any trouble. Jesus, who lives in our heart by faith! Simply confessing that Jesus is Lord/Jesus is God – speaking it out for all to hear and believing that in your heart shatters all the judgment that has ever been on you for all of your sins, all of your doubts, all of your attempts to earn your way, to make your own path of perfection back to God. Knowing by the gift of faith that Jesus is Lord – the Lord of all, who rules, who reigns – who conquered sin and death changes all of eternity. Jesus – the Word!

Interesting, isn't it that Jesus used the Word – the Word of God in Scripture to conquer temptation. I saw a painting recently of the Temptation of Christ – Jesus shaded in a cave from the heat of the day and Satan posed like a helpful friend just outside pointing with a "why not?" kind of look to some stones that looked an awful lot like loaves of bread – could have been food with just a Word. Were temptations of the body His greatest weakness or was it the temptation to reclaim the power He had released to accomplish our salvation? How did He keep from caving in?

One of the legendary figures in our family history is my great-grandfather Kilian Boerger's ½ brother George Fox. He was a hero of the Mexican American War who moved to California and helped start the Union Pacific Railroad. When the country-crossing rail line was being constructed, an elaborate trestle bridge was built across a large canyon in the west. In order to test the bridge, the builder (who was not George Fox...) loaded a train with enough extra cars and equipment to double its normal payload. The train was then driven out to the middle of the bridge, and left there for one full day.

A curious worker asked the builder, "Are you trying to see if we can break the bridge?" "No," he replied, "I'm trying to prove that the bridge won't break."

Jesus wasn't led by the Spirit of God out into the wilderness to see if he would break God's Law, abandon God's will and way; Jesus was led out to the wilderness to prove that He wouldn't – and He didn't which, well, distinguishes Jesus from all others in the human race. Mary, His

mother, humble and obedient to God – true model of virtue and grace – even she was subject to temptation. Abraham, Miriam, Moses, Deborah, Elijah, Simeon, and Anna who spent all of her days in the temple of the Lord – none of them – like none of us – was without sin. So “God made Him who knew no sin to become sin for us.” And because of the innocent suffering and death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ – the firstborn from the grave – we too will rise – graduate without distinction to matriculate into the glories of heaven.

Makes all the distinctions we come up with here on earth seem rather, well, unimportant, in a way. Pastor Stephanos of the Mykane Yesus church here at Jehovah was excited to tell me this past Friday that his trip to Ethiopia was a great success. The church there – the fastest growing church in the world – has been torn apart for 16 years by rivalries and jealousies. In a 2 year process of repentance and forgiveness they are walking together in unity once again – that is 5.3 million people! He used to be the leader of that church body – met with Pope John Paul II and other world leaders of the church – now he is so excited that they have 30-40 people worshiping in our chapel – worshiping Jesus – our Savior, our Lord – by whose name, and through whose power we are saved.

May we humbly serve – may we powerfully proclaim what God has granted us the faith to believe – that Jesus is Lord – that God’s Word is always near – that others may be drawn to the cross and live eternally!

AMEN

Now may our loving, leading God, guide us to follow His Son that we may walk safely through the wilderness of this world sharing and calling upon the name of Jesus until by grace we reach the life that He alone can give.