

Grace and peace to you all from God, our loving advocate and holy guide – Amen.

As a young priest Martin Luther found himself struggling with the idea of falling short of God's love. Luther would spend hours in confession within his monastery's walls. He would meticulously recount every single way he had sinned or fallen short of God's commandments before his confessor.

It was a practice that would lead him to live in a constant state of fear – terrified over the thought of forgetting to confess one of his sins, worried that if he didn't find absolution his soul would be forever lost in the life to come.

This internal battle continued until a priest essentially told Luther to start living his life for God, rather than in fear. This would benefit them both; the priest probably didn't want to spend another 2-hour session hearing Luther confess!

This revelation to live for God grew within Luther throughout his teaching and preaching days – eventually helping to influence his thoughts throughout the coming Reformation. In a letter he would pen to his partner in ministry, Phillip Melanthon, in 1521 Luther proved he had something very different to say about sin and the law in the light of God's ever-present forgiveness and grace. He wrote:

“God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and sin boldly, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.”

For Luther, living faithfully became less about keeping an account of every way he had failed to live up to God's call – instead turning to trust that God's love and grace would catch him when he fell.

This is one of the reasons why the words of promise spoken over Luther at his baptism became so central for his life of faith. Before he could ever confess or make amends for his sins, God had named and claimed him as a beloved and forgiven child of God. In those waters all those years ago, Luther had found the grace he had been longing to receive – it just took him a while to realize what this gift truly meant for his walk of faith.

Over the course of his life, Luther grew to understand that there would never be an escape from sin, but also that God wasn't calling him to try to live a perfect life. All Luther or any one of us has been called to do, is live out our lives in

response to God’s love, grace, and forgiveness – gifts that have been freely given to us all.

And I think this is what Jesus is truly getting at in John’s Gospel lesson today. Not that we should try to keep all of God’s commandments in some legalistic way – but as a reminder to us that when we live out our faith – when we love one another, when we show mercy and grace, when we work towards finding reconciliation and forgiveness in the midst of pain – we will be living out God’s commandments in every single way.

After all, that was the final commandment Jesus gave to us all in the 13th chapter of John’s gospel when he said:

“Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Love.

It’s all about love.

So where does the Holy Spirit come into the midst of this call for us to love one another?

Any one of us who has been in a relationship knows that, while love can be a holy and uplifting experience to share, it is also a choice we need to continually make each and every day; Whether it’s loving your family, your friends, your partner, your child, or your spouse – love isn’t always our first response in the midst of our daily stresses or life’s up and downs.

Maybe this is why love was the last commandment Jesus left for his disciples before his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. He knew that their journey of faith would be a hard one over the days and weeks to come and so he left them not only with the commandment to love one another – but with the assurance that they weren’t being called to live this out on their own. Jesus assures the disciples that his presence will still be known to them in and by the Holy Spirit – their advocate who will journey with them wherever their life may take them.

Yet, John’s gospel doesn’t portray the life and work of the Spirit in our midst as some over-the-top life-changing experience that knocks us off our feet; John

chooses to present the Spirit to us as our *Paraclete* – a Greek word meaning “one who comes alongside us” – bringing help, consolation, comfort, and encouragement no matter our need. And it is this very Spirit who also calls forth God’s love for all of creation.

It also offers us a new picture of our call to share the love of God as Christ’s disciples:

Will we be a *paraclete* for others – walking alongside those who need a compassionate listening ear?

Will we come alongside those facing injustice at the hands of our broken systems?

Will we seek reconciliation with those who have faced deep pain?

Will we encourage one another, celebrating all that we have received?

Will we be the Spirit of love God has sent into a world in need?

And, of course:

Will we journey faithfully and prayerfully with each other now in this time of discernment for Holy Spirit Lutheran Church?

This morning John’s gospel has offered us a way to witness to God’s ever-present grace and love for the world: through the life and breath of the Spirit who comes alongside us in each and every way; a Spirit who calls us to know more deeply the love of God; and a Spirit who calls us to share that very same love with all whom we meet.

So may this Spirit of God – the one of encouragement, consolation, hope, and love – be with us now and remain with us as we leave this house of worship to go out into a world in need - Amen.