

Dear friends and members of St. John Lutheran,

One of the things that makes Christianity difficult for the new convert is the **paradoxical nature of the faith**. Let me try to explain. A **paradox** is two truths, that examined apart are undeniably true. But when you put the two together, they appear to invalidate one another – it appears that there must be a mistake with one or the other truth.

Let's begin with a simple paradox: **The virgin birth**. 1), True or false? - Jesus was born of Mary. Of course this is true. 2), True or false? - Mary was a virgin. Yes, that's true. But how can a woman conceive and deliver a baby, and yet be a virgin? That's a paradox. It requires faith (Jesus would say "childlike faith" is required to enter the kingdom of God – Matt. 18:1-4). We believe, but there's no scientific explanation.

The Christian faith is jam-packed with paradoxes. Let's look at another one: **Simultaneously sinner and saint**. 1), True or false? - you are a sinner. Yes, you are. St. Paul writes, "**None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one**" (Rom. 3:10-12). 2), True or false? - through faith in Jesus' perfect life, death, and resurrection, you are perfect in God's eyes. True – you are perfect in Christ. St. John wrote in his first epistle, "**If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit**" (1 John 4:12b-13) We are God's saints on earth, all who believe (saints' are God's perfect children on earth and in heaven). So, when we are in the act of sinning, are we still saints? Yes! We are still His forgiven children. But that doesn't make sense! Precisely! That takes childlike faith to accept.

Let's take one more from the plethora of paradoxes: **Baptism**. 1), True or false? – the Old Adam in you, your past life of sin, died in the waters of Holy Baptism. True. St. Paul states in Romans chapter 6: "**Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death...**" (Rom 6:3, 4a). 2), True or false? – Baptism was a life-giving event for you. True enough. You received new life in your baptism. St. Peter writes in his first epistle: "**Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...**" (1 Pet. 3:21). Wait a minute, how can baptism kill and save at the same time? It's a paradox. Want a paradox embedded in a paradox? While the Old Adam was put to death in our baptism, we still sin! Dr. Luther states, "Turns out the Old Adam was a pretty good swimmer!" Our sinful nature no longer controls us, upon receiving God's Spirit through Baptism, and yet we are incapable of eliminating all sin in our lives. All of this requires childlike faith to accept.

**All other religions of the world are based on human reason: keep the law, earn forgiveness, and go to heaven.** Every other religion is based on what **you** must do to be saved. **Christianity is based fully on what God has done for you.** You can do nothing. You are only a recipient of His grace and mercy. But you have a commitment that you must keep (another

paradox!): You must remain in His word, and receive His Sacraments. And as you walk the narrow road, God promises to keep you in this childlike faith until you die (or He returns in glory first).

Where Christians (especially those new to the faith) fall down, is that they try to **rectify the paradoxes**, by finding some secret key to unlock and demystify them. There is no key! God, in His infinite wisdom has made human reason incompatible with saving faith in Christ. This means, of course, we must rely totally on Him! (God's plan, all along). Go to other churches beside those in the LC-MS and you will notice they all gravitate to one side of the paradox, or to the other. Methodism (J. Wesley's teachings) is based on working to perfection in this life, by progressively becoming better and better. Impossible! Liberal churches focus on the free gift of forgiveness, and reject the need to strive to maintain the law of God. Heresy! Keeping the law is God's will for us, and when we fail, He provides help through repentance. We understand that the Christian life is one of daily repentance – turning, with God's help, from the sin that harms us and other people, toward godliness and new life.

What Dr. Martin Luther understood clearly is that the right distinction between Law and Gospel gives the believer balance in his walk through life, and keeps him on the narrow road that leads to heaven. The **Law** always condemns us, because it shows that we have failed to keep it. The **Gospel** always points to God's forgiveness, earned for us by Christ's suffering death. Maintaining the proper understanding of Scripture, so that we don't confuse Law for Gospel (or Gospel for Law) is how the Christian maintains his balance. And this balance is beautiful to behold! When you struggle to understand the Bible (you're probably struggling with a paradox), God promises to help. We have weekly Bible studies where you can ask for help. Don't give up – keep struggling. This is God's will for you (see Matt. 7:7-11). And know this: God will give you wisdom (and childlike faith!) to live, now as His child in His kingdom of grace, and one day in His kingdom to come!

Pastor Travis