

Dear Members and Friends of St. John,

This may come as a surprise to you, but the typical Christian church in the U.S. doesn't preach and teach one of the very fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith: **Good Christian will face trials in this life and will suffer for the sake of the cross.**

Far more common in churches today is what Luther referred to as the **Theology of Glory**. Let me explain, by starting with a question. How many times have you heard a TV evangelist say, "If you have faith, real faith, your life will be great! Problems that you face are because you don't believe in God enough – you don't trust in Him enough. If you live correctly and pray correctly, God will bless you with an abundance – material wealth, a great marriage, good children"? The **Theology of Glory** states that you are blessed in proportion to your goodness, and punished in proportion to your badness. Sounds logical, right? It's entirely false.

This false theology (found in **many** churches in America) is becoming more and more popular. It finds its place among Americans that embrace the concepts of 'spirituality' - that religion is a personal life style that each individual can choose for himself. This popular understanding looks at all religions of the world as a smorgasbord of choices: there are multiple paths to heaven, so go out and select what works for you! But all the religions of the world, except Christianity, are based on what **we do to earn salvation**. They always focus on "self" – "me" is put ahead of God and neighbor. And **that is precisely what people want**. They want to be in control of their own lives. They want to see themselves as capable of *willing themselves* into heaven. Self-help books, meditation, physical disciplines like yoga, pop psychology, and the principle of positive thinking – these are all Theology of Glory disciplines where we can be in the driver's seat – instead of God.

The Lutheran Church is a very unsatisfying experience for people that have grown accustomed to being in control of their 'self-help' spiritual life. I mean, come on! Lutherans begin their worship by confessing their sinfulness in front of other people. And then the pastor pronounces forgiveness, that comes from God's grace alone – not by anything they've done (including saying the words of confession!). Next there's that Lutheran understanding that we're going to be sinners until we die. "That's strange. You mean you Lutherans don't believe that you can work at ridding yourself of all sin? And there's no hope of earning God's favor by doing good things, or praying the right kind of prayer?" That's right. Actually, we believe what the Bible clearly teaches, that **good Christians will face trials, and will suffer**. Our faith will be tested. We will struggle with our sin until the day we die. And that through our sufferings and trials, we will be drawn closer to a loving God that disciplines us because He loves us. **We will face ridicule for our denial of self** – the work that God is accomplishing in us. The self-centeredness that is at the very core of our sinful nature is being replaced with a desire to serve God by serving others. That's the **Theology of the Cross**. That's a theology that is true to God's word. That's why we teach it and preach it!

To the outsider, this church that teaches and believes that **God's means by which He brings people to salvation is entirely objective** (in other words God's work exclusively), and **not what they do** (each person's personal choice to be saved, or personal work that earns them salvation) –

seems rather naïve and ridiculous. Yet we read from Romans chapter 3, "*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—<sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...*" So much for earning our place in heaven. And what about that suffering that people say we can avoid by earning God's favor? We read from Hebrews chapter 12: "*It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?<sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.... For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*" (ESV). Looks like even the best Christian is going to face trials and sufferings – because God uses trials to grow us up in Him. We learn to trust Him, and see our Lord as the one in the driver's seat – He's in control.

In conclusion, I want you to know that **it's a great time to be Lutheran!** We see ourselves rightly when we see ourselves as completely dependent on a gracious God that gives us new life in Christ, and bestows on us His righteousness, **not** because **we deserve it, but because He loves us.** We have the very power of God inside of us, helping us to deny our sinful self, and to put others ahead of our selfish wants and desires. By remaining in God's Word, and receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we are strengthened and readied for whatever works that our Lord has for us. Rejoice, God has made you part of a church that teaches and proclaims the truth – even if many in the world refuse to accept it.

Pastor Travis