

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

Isn't wonderful to know that God always receives a person when he repents, even if it is in the hour of his death. This is firmly grounded in God's Word, first and foremost, because **the promises of grace** contained in it are **universal** and **unconditional**. The Lord says: "*Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ... I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*" (Matthew 11:28–29), and "*All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out*" (John 6:37). Christ thus invites all those who are weary and heavy-laden to Himself, without appointing any time. We know that Christ desires that everyone be saved – so the door to heaven is always open to the penitent soul. Therefore, whoever turns to Him, even in the hour of his death, is received.

With this knowledge, we can see that **a person's entire lifetime** is meant to be **a time of grace**. From the Epistle to the Hebrews, we read: "*Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts. ... But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today'*" (3:7–8,13). We also read, in the Book of Lamentations: "*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness*" (3:22–23). Finally, Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes, "*But he who is joined with all the living has hope*" (9:4). We see here that **as long as it is still today for a person** (in other words, he or she is alive and breathing, and Christ hasn't returned again), the gates of heaven remain open to him or her. A person can still cry out to a dying man, "*Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near*" (Isaiah 55:6). He is saying, "It is still the time of grace. Heaven still stands open to you. You still have hope for salvation. Publicly acknowledge your sinful life, and your need for Christ as Savior, and heaven will be delivered to you."

Holy Scripture offers us enduring assurances of this. For instance, examine the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20). We read there that many will be hired in the eleventh hour and enjoy the goodness of the master. This means that **a person can still find grace even in the last hours of his life**. There really have been sinners who first sought grace at the very end of their lives and received it. Take, for example, the criminal who hung on the cross next to Jesus. Here, for the first time, his eyes were opened to his perilous condition. He confessed that he was worthy only of eternal death in hell and he turned for forgiveness to Christ. Did God scorn this eleventh hour plea for help? The Savior replied, "*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise*" (Luke 23:43). God declares: "*I have no pleasure in the death of anyone ...; so turn, and live*" (Ezekiel 18:32).

It's part of our human nature to place conditions on love and obedience. We expect kindness, respect, recognition, and reward for our service to others, and we imagine God is the same way. The **unconditional nature of God's love** is so hard for us to fathom! How many come to the end of their lives and imagine that it's too late to turn to God? That the die is cast – that God's judgment against their life of sin and rebelliousness is unchangeable?

But **a growing number of people** who used to attend church are counting on being able to turn to God in their old age – ignoring God in their youth, living a life of sin, and then, at the eleventh hour,

seeking God's help. The author of the Book of Hebrews says, "*Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it... how shall we escape [hell] if we neglect such a great salvation?*" (Heb. 2:1, 3). Dr. C. F. W. Walther, the first president of our synod, has this to say about those who seek salvation at the last possible moment:

Whoever uses [God's word] in this manner is like a criminal who throws himself from a boat into the ocean because he has heard that many have escaped to shore from a shipwreck upon a piece of wood. Will such a one succeed? Certainly not. Of him, it is said: *Then woe to those who scorned the Lord And sought but carnal pleasures, Who here despised His precious Word And loved their earthly treasures! With shame and trembling they will stand And at the Judge's stern command To Satan be delivered.* (TLH 611:4).⁽¹⁾

We all know **someone** who has **left the church of their youth**, to pursue life in the world. Oh, they probably claim to be a good Christian, but the reality is they've drifted away from God. They may be counting on God's eternal goodness – that somehow their good life will help them get into heaven. They may be counting on returning to church in their old age. But death can come at any time. And "*how shall we escape [hell] if we neglect such a great salvation?*" Please share this article with them. Invite them to church with you on Saturday night or Sunday morning. God will be thrilled to see them come, and we, as a congregation are waiting with open arms. Finally, pray that they will understand this truth: **"today" is the day of salvation!**

Pastor Travis