



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Minnesota South District

...developing leaders intentionally engaged in the mission of God

July 26, 2019

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thess. 5:16-18)

Dear Brothers in Christ,

I write this as our Synod convention is winding down. It's been a full and eventful week, with all kinds of elections, essays, and resolutions, along with some scattered rigorous debate, but all permeated with rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving. The above verses were the theme for the convention, but as the inspired Word of God, they are also edifying and salutary words for every Christian to live by.

As pastors, we certainly know, preach, and teach this, but living it personally is another thing, isn't it? With all the ups and downs in our lives, balancing ministry, family, and community duties, maintaining a robust spiritual life of prayer and thanksgiving doesn't come easy. The devil, the world, and our own sinful nature press against us, deceive us, mislead us, and attack us on all sides.

As I have written [previously](#), one particularly sinister affliction, especially for pastors, is the ancient vice of *acedia*—spiritual apathy. It's the listless inability or missing desire to rouse yourself to care about the holy things of God, including any desire to pray or meditate on the Word of God. When that happens, it's hard to give thanks or rejoice about much of anything. The devil delights in such successful temptations.

This condition often mimics the symptoms of melancholy and forms of depression. However, the overall difference between depression and *acedia* is that with depression, hope for divine help is desirable but appears impossible, but with *acedia*, hope for divine help appears possible but not desirable.

Pastors are notoriously susceptible to this affliction. I should know, because I've suffered from it much over my years. Here's what I've learned from bitter experience: we pastors need to guard our own souls very carefully. Isolation is deadly; the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers becomes critical. Likewise, when we cannot rouse ourselves to care about our own spiritual life, it is spiritually dangerous to try and draw strength from ourselves to give to the people we serve. Rather, we must always give them Christ. And to give Christ, we must also receive Christ ourselves, over and over again.

That's why the practices of personal piety are so central to faithful ministry—even when we don't feel like it. But the good news is that when we are too overwhelmed or too apathetic to pray words from our own heart, our Lord provides us with His own words to say and pray. The Lord's Prayer leads us forward. Likewise, the Psalms become our prayer book, for our Lord prayed them Himself. If you want to know how and what our Lord Christ prayed, open up the Psalms and pray along with Jesus, remembering that He prayed them first. When you can't rouse yourself to pray, simply speak the Psalms out loud. Pray as our Lord prayed: visualize in your mind's eye whom He prayed for and how He prayed. Revel in the vast range of emotions portrayed in those words, reflecting your own soul's condition before God.

This kind of prayer, of course, is coupled with and flows out of the Divine Service itself. As Lutherans, we're distinct in our confession of faith and approach to spirituality because everything

centers on the love of Christ and His atoning work for us. The Divine Service expressed by our liturgy keeps that love and atoning work of Christ front and center.

Lutherans have always been a liturgical church following the historic structure (*ordo*) of the liturgy. Although we have great freedom in musical settings for the Divine Service that vary from congregation to congregation, region to region, country to country, and indeed era to era, nonetheless we have always retained the liturgy. It serves not just to give voice to what we believe, teach, and confess, but to shape our life of discipleship. So when you are afflicted by the burdens and sins of this life (like *acedia*) these liturgical prayers can help carry you through. When Christ is at the center of our corporate confession and worship, He remains the center of our personal spiritual life. So use the liturgy to carry you through those rough spots when you don't feel like praying, (e.g., like the words of the *Kyrie*). Christ Jesus will sustain you.

And always remember, dear brother, that you are baptized into our Lord Jesus Christ. Holy Baptism brings with it a rich spiritual life for you here and now. The Small Catechism confesses with simplicity and brilliance everything the baptized life truly entails:

“It indicates that the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

Thus, where afflictions and temptations disorder your life and lead you to sin, your baptismal identity keeps on calling you to repentance while also speaking Christ's absolution and the promise of His abiding presence wherever you go. Thus, the sinful self is spiritually crucified and buried with Christ, drowned and killed day after day as you confess your sins. That's what you teach your people—so remember to practice it every day for yourself.

When you do, a new man spiritually emerges and arises with Christ, cleansed and purified by the power of His resurrection, newly created in His image to walk in newness of life. Brothers, this is more than just a nice metaphor or intellectual idea. If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). This new baptismal life is the genuine article. It gives you a clean conscience, wherein the new man walks in faith and the virtues of Christ, even as you daily cling to Him and His abounding forgiveness.

So this brings us full circle. The baptismal life is the life rooted *in* Christ, filled *by* Christ, and filled *with* Christ—His words, His prayers, and His own body and blood. From these blessed realities flows our ability to: ¹⁶**Rejoice always,** ¹⁷**pray without ceasing,** ¹⁸**give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**

Your pastor and your brother in Christ,



Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford