

"The First Stone"

Text: Romans 8:31-39

Grace, mercy and peace be yours in knowing that God loved you enough to sacrifice his own Son to pay for what you did wrong. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

There she stood, surrounded, terrified – guilty by any imaginable standard. She was at their mercy, and she knew beyond a shadow of any reasonable doubt that she was going to die.

She had been caught, and the penalty was clear and irrevocable: death. What she feared most was the first stone. She knew that once the first came, countless more would follow, until death mercifully took her.

So she just stood there, trembling, in that eerie silence, waiting for that first stone. That's what the man, quietly drawing in the dirt before her had declared. He had silenced the seething crowd by stooping down to draw in the dirt, had risen to give his verdict, and then had returned to his quiet repose.

She waited for the first stone.

It never came. One by one her accusers walked away, until she was left standing alone before the gentle man who was again drawing in the dirt before her. He was the only one left, and not just the only man left. He was the only one who could actually carry out his own sentence, his own decree. The verdict he had spoken was simple: **"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."** All others had left, for none were qualified to carry out the sentence. Only this man remained, but he *did* qualify. Unlike all the others, he had no sin. By his own judgment he alone was worthy.

Rising, the man looked around, and then at the woman. Speaking to her for the first time he asked her a question, **"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"** She said, **"No one, Lord."** And Jesus said to her, **"Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."**

Far from a detached, feel-good story, this account from John 8 is really not about a woman caught in the act of adultery 2000 years ago. It is now about you and me. You and I will one day stand before this same man, who will also serve as our judge. His will be the verdict that determines our eternal futures – heaven or hell. There you and I will also need to be concerned really only about one thing – the first stone, for if we are found to be worthy of any punishment, we will certainly be worthy of all. If one sin is charged by our Judge to our account, innumerable others will surely follow.

What will be his verdict, his judgment? How can we know? For answers we turn to our text for this morning, found in the 8th Chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans:

^{ESV} **Romans 8:31-39** *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died--more than that, who was raised--who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

So far the very words of God. These are *God's* words, and they are therefore holy, true and applicable in every conceivable way. We revere and study them accordingly, and to that end we pray, **"Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!"** Amen.

Dear Christians, endings are much, much more important than beginnings. Beginnings are just that – *beginnings*. Beginnings don't usually accomplish very much. An army that begins a campaign with stunning victories has made a good beginning. If that same army fails to achieve its final goal, the result can be characterized as nothing but defeat. We see this truth on display in the Middle East. Our ultimate objective was not achieved. Our soldiers were called home before the goal was achieved – if that goal could ever have been achieved in that culture. Despite the bravery, sacrifice, and staggering cost, the mission appears to have failed.

Apply these simple truths to faith and salvation. How many souls will spend an eternity in hell after having been given a great victory at the font in Holy Baptism? How many confirmands in the Lutheran Church make an excellent beginning of their communicant membership in a congregation, only to fall away and fail to achieve also the good ending?

And so this morning we begin with a question. Each one of you here today has made a good beginning in the Christian faith; that is, you have been converted or brought to faith by the Holy Spirit. *How will you now go about ensuring also a good ending to this good beginning?* To this we add

another question that is as enlightening as it is frightening: *When in your entire life have you ever been perfectly consistent - in anything?* Have you ever dieted faithfully, never cheating? Have you kept up with that exercise program you told yourself you were going to start and never quit? Do you slip up and stop reading your Bible for a time? Do you read it at all? Do you spend your hour, half-hour, even five minutes in prayer each day - or do you forget? Are you always patient with your friends and family like you promised yourself you would be? Is there even one thing in your life that you can point to and say, *"This I have always done consistently with perfection"*? What then makes you think that you can consistently hold out against the relentless attacks of the devil, the world, and your own evil desires? What makes you think that you can see this good beginning along until it one day is fulfilled with a good ending? What makes you think you will one day be able to stand before the Righteous Judge with no fear of the first stone?

You can't. In fact how unsettling to hear from so many Christian sources that it is up to *me* to keep myself in the faith. Every possible outcome of this salvation strategy is disastrous. If you, on your own, try to shoulder the burden of keeping yourself in the faith, you will fail. Satan is far too clever and far too powerful for any man – save One. The only other possible result of such a spiritually self-sufficient attitude is that, being kept in the faith by God the Holy Spirit, we only *imagine* that we are responsible. In such a case faith is quickly replaced by pride as we take credit for at least a part of our own salvation. The end, again, is disaster.

It is eternal life and death we are talking about here, and yet how casual we are about it all. In the end, nothing else in life matters, and yet we seem to be so lax and careless with our eternal future. In Philippians 2:12 we read, ***"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling..."*** Understand that Paul is here telling us to be very afraid of ourselves and of the terrible power that we have to throw away that good thing we have been given. Yet he also here teaches us not to trust in ourselves for our own preservation for he goes on to say, ***"for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."*** God is the only source for anything truly good – including the strength and perseverance to finish our race. That power is offered to us freely in Word and Sacrament. Many have despised this *means of grace* and have starved themselves to death. Paul referred to them as ***"those who have made shipwreck of their faith."*** These were Christians who may have heard the Apostle Paul himself. Some had seen amazing miracles, heard sermons that converted dozens, hundreds, even thousands. Some had even spoken the words of truth themselves (such as Hymenaeus and Alexander mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:20). Still they failed in the end.

So then we ask ourselves, *"What about me? Is there any evil of which I am not capable? As long as I live on this earth I will always have this old Adam*

with me. What guarantee do I have that this old Adam will not win out in the on-going battle with the new man in me?"

Here is where our text for this morning shines, and how we ought to thank God for it! Our text is *God's answer, God's solution*, to our infidelity problem. Here is God's answer to our fear of the first stone.

God in our text assures our troubled Christian hearts and minds of two facts, two truths that offer us tremendous comfort and assurance that we are indeed heirs of Eternal Life. God the Holy Spirit through Paul assures us first *that No one can condemn us*, and, secondly, that *Nothing can now separate us from the love our God has for us in his Son*. Note that our text does not point inward but outward (to Christ) for our comfort. We are to look to ourselves just long enough to see how sinful and naturally unlovable we really are, and then we are to look to Christ and marvel at his love for me, the unlovable sinner.

In a human court of law a man cannot be charged with a crime and condemned unless someone accuses him. In our country, for example, all of the most serious crimes represent a breaking of the laws of the state - the *people's law*. That is why "The State" (also known as "The People") is most often the accuser – as in "The State (or The People) vs. Hannibal Lecter." The accuser therefore is the party who has been wronged, or whose rights or laws have been violated. It stands to reason therefore that there could only be one *accuser* in spiritual matters - God. *God's laws* were violated when we sinned. God alone therefore can be our accuser on Judgment Day.

This is exactly what is behind Paul's profoundly insightful statement at the beginning of our text: ***"If God is for us, who can be against us?"*** Paul is not saying that we have no enemies. We've all got a whole world full of enemies. He is, in fact, talking about *endings* not *beginnings*. In the end one thing alone matters for the Child of God: whether or not saving faith is present in our hearts on Judgment Day. It is with this in mind that Paul asks the rhetorical question in our text: ***"If God is for us, who can be against us?"*** In other words, if God does not condemn us, who else can? God is the only possible accuser. The laws we broke were *his laws*. We are answerable only to him. If he does not condemn us, no one else can.

Paul goes on in the next verses to make this fact even clearer: ***"Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died--more than that, who was raised--who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."*** There are many areas in the Christian faith where we are to "pluck out the eyes of our reason" and accept what God says in faith. There are also many places where we would do well to apply our God-given powers of reasoning. This is one such place. Our text is

Scripture Readings

encouraging each one of us to reason it out. God the Father has *justified* the entire world; that is, he has declared the whole world 'Not guilty!' God the Father will not now accuse us on Judgment Day, not when faith is present in our hearts. In God's judicial opinion, faith in Jesus Christ is an acceptable substitute for a perfect life. Paul goes on to say that it is nonsense to imagine that *Jesus* will be the one to throw that first stone. Jesus is the one who *died* to make the sacrifice God the Father now accepts as payment in full for all sins. He came to earth to have all those stones thrown at him. What is more, Jesus now sits at the Father's side and pleads our case for us. He is our *Advocate*, and our own Advocate will never seek to condemn us.

As with the woman caught in the act of adultery, so now we also find no one left to condemn us. So now Paul goes on to give us some desperately needed assurance that he will never withdraw his love for us. He begins again with a question: **"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"** This is not saying that the love *we have for Jesus* will be able to weather all assaults. It is *the love that Jesus has for us* that will never fail. What a proud and arrogant statement it would be - and how out of character with the rest of the text - if Paul were here bragging about how *he* would always love *Jesus*, rather than the confidence that Jesus would always love him.

Our text therefore offers great comfort to every child of God, promising us that Jesus continues to love us no matter what he allows to come into our lives. It is in fact because he *does* love us that he allows even difficult things to happen to us. Note well that our text directs our thoughts always to what *God* has done or said or promised. God has declared the world not guilty because of what his Son Jesus has done. Who will throw the first stone? Certainly not Jesus Christ. As he once in gentle humility knelt in the dust before the adulterous woman, so we also now recognize our gentle, humble, loving Savior who came to reside for a time in earth's dirt so that we might stand clean, guiltless, and without condemnation before him. Having done everything to win our salvation, what now could possibly take away the love the Savior has for us? Nothing at all in heaven or on earth.

Here then is where we place our trust, our hope, our confidence. Here we can say confidently, as did the Apostle Paul in Philippians 1:6, **"(We are) confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."** So also each one of us can also now say with our text: **"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."** The only One who could accuse us, the only One who could condemn us, is on our side. Amen.

^{ESV} **Genesis 22:1-18** After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." ² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." ⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. ⁹ ¶ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." ¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." ¹⁵ ¶ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

^{ESV} **Mark 1:12-15** The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him. ¹⁴ ¶ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

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The First Sunday in Lent – February 22, 2015

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 145 (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus, Refuge of the Weary"

The Order of Service – Hymnal page 15ff. (Red Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Genesis 22:1-18) This is the dramatic account of Abraham when he was commanded to sacrifice his only son. So full of emotion and faith, the greatest message is to be seen in the ram, which was sacrificed instead of Isaac. The ram, not Isaac, is a picture of our Lord. The ram, like Jesus, was sacrificed in our place.

The New Testament Lesson: (Mark 1:12-15) Jesus was no stranger to the wilderness. From the moment He was born He lived in a wilderness called Earth. In this wilderness the only food to be found is the "bread of life." He who will not eat this bread, and eat it regularly, will surely starve. That bread, of course, is the Word of God.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 22. (Red Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 422 (Red Hymnal)

"Savior I Follow On"

The Sermon – Text: Romans 8:31-39 (Printed on the back of this bulletin)

"The First Stone"

The Offertory – (Hymnal page 22)

The Offering followed by the Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 156 (Red Hymnal)

"Not All the Blood of Beasts"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Red Hymnal page 24ff)

The Distribution -Hymn 163 (Red Hymnal)

The Nunc Dimittis (Red Hymnal page 30)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 48 (Red Hymnal)

"How Blest Are They Who Hear God's Word"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (32) Average (50) Wednesday (31)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	–Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
Tuesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
Wednesday	-7:00 p.m.	– Mid-Week Lenten Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Redemption of Lynnwood, WA has called Pastor Mark Tiefel. Pastor Michael Gurath has returned the call to Calvary of Marquette, MI. Pastor Michael Roehl is considering the call to Resurrection of Corpus Christi, TX. Teacher Jeff Karnitz is considering the call to Gethsemane Lutheran School of Spokane, WA. Both the Food Services Manager and Girls' Dorm Supervisor positions at Immanuel have been filled.

Mid-Week Lenten Services – Our second mid-week Lenten service is this week, 7 pm.

Confirmation Class – Confirmation Parents please meet with the Pastor during the fellowship time to set our schedule through Lent.

Mission Helper and TVBS Trips – A reminder that anyone interested in participating in either this summer's Mission Helper trip, or in one of the various projects carried out by the Travelling Vacation Bible School (TVBS) please speak to the Pastor as soon as possible for the information you will need.

Devotional Reading Schedules – for the Lenten season are available on the entry table. Please help yourself to a copy, also available on our church website: www.bismarcklutheran.org under "Daily Bible Reading Schedule."