

***“The Whole Load”***

John 3:16 / Ephesians 2:8

March 11, 2018

The young Lutheran pastor, just out of seminary, slid and slipped his way across the yard that separated the parsonage from the church building. It was an icy Sunday morning that, he feared, did not bode well for worship attendance in his tiny, South Dakota, prairie parish.

As the worship hour drew near, his fears were realized when a quick survey of the nave revealed but one lone parishioner. Mr. Tolefson, a bachelor farmer, was seated in *his* seat on the back pew, and Mr. Tolefson never sang, in fact, rarely spoke.

What to do? Should he cancel the service; perhaps shorten it in some way, (like omit the liturgy and the hymns)? No, he decided, that would not be right. Mr. Tolefson had come to worship and worship he would. So, the young pastor marched in at precisely 11:00 am, singing the first hymn, *a capella*, and not too badly he thought. Mr. Tolefson stood...mute.

The liturgy was properly conducted, (the pastor sang the responses, although he wasn't quite sure whether he should sing: "And also with you." Or, "And also with me.") The lessons were read, sermon preached, hymns sung, offering received (actually Mr. Tolefson was the usher; that's why he was there in the first place, so he came forward with an empty plate), creed recited, prayers prayed (including one silent one thanking God it wasn't a Communion Sunday). and the benediction was...benedicted. The young pastor marched out to a solo rendition of the recessional hymn: "Crown Him with Many Crowns" all six very long verses.

He was rather proud of himself as he stood at the door preparing to shake Mr. Tolefson's hand. And, when he did, and Mr. Tolefson only grunted the obligatory "Mornin'," the young pastor just couldn't contain himself: "Mr. Tolefson," he said, "you were the only one here this morning."

"Yep" said Mr. Tolefson.

"But we did the whole service, just like usual," the pastor grinned, waiting for the complement.

"Yep," said Mr. Tolefson.

"Well, Mr. Tolefson," the pastor fished, "what do you think about that?"

"Not much," was Mr. Tolefson's gruff reply. "It's like dis, preacher; if I took a load of hay out to feed da cows; and there vasn't but one cow showed up, vell, ya, by golly, I'd feed her."

The young pastor smiled.

"But," Mr. Tolefson went on, "I sure as heck would not feed dat that one cow da *whole load!*"

Well, my friends, this morning, each and every one of us gets fed "da whole load." In the second lesson and in the gospel for the day are two passages of scripture that can quite rightly be said to comprise the "whole load." If you were only ever to hear two Bible verses in your life, these are the two to hear:

From the Gospel of John, the most familiar of all biblical passages...John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.”*

And from Ephesians 2:8, the passage that proves St. Paul was a Lutheran: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works.*"

Both of these passages have been referred to as the "Gospel in a nutshell," the essential message of the faith set to just a few words. Yes, but what words! Words like love, grace, faith, and eternal life. Words that name the gifts that our gracious God gives unconditionally to each of us.

It is the "whole load" that is fed to each of us every single day of our baptized lives; and all God asks of us is that: we show up to receive it, and then to live our lives nourished and replete in it, lives reflecting the love and grace of God.

Each of these passages interprets the other, and between the two, we are given the most important and essential truths of the Christian faith:

John writes: "For God so loved the world that he *gave his only Son...*" The truth is, that *it is not possible* to love more than that, and that is how God loves us. The truth is, God's love comes to us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

John continues, "...so that everyone who believes in him *may not perish* but have eternal life." The truth is, God's love for us is not deserved; rather, apart from the love of God, we destroy ourselves, invariably and inevitably. The truth is that believing in Christ, the incarnation of God's love for us, we have been saved for eternal life.

Paul writes: "For *by grace* you have been saved." The truth is this is *God's doing*, he has loved us and saved us because he chose to do so and through no merit of our own. The truth is this is an act of unmitigated compassion and pardon on God's part, for those who deserve only judgment and condemnation.

Paul writes: "You have been saved *through faith*." The truth is we perceive because we believe; we perceive because we believe; our hearts and lives are opened to what God had done for us, because we believe he has done it for us. The truth is: our faith does not make us worthy of God's love; believing is not something we do for which God rewards us with his love. But our faith does permit us to see that he does, indeed love us.

Paul writes: "... and this is *not your own doing*; it is the gift of God and not the result of works." The truth is, God's love and grace are pure *gifts*, and so is even *the faith* with which we perceive and believe. The truth is, the "whole load" is a gift, pure and simple. The truth is we were created by God for this very reason, to be the creatures to whom he could give his gifts. The truth is, as Paul puts in the next verse of Ephesians, "We are what he has made us." He has made us to be the creatures upon whom he can lavish his gifts; and because we are what he has made us, we are creatures who will surely perish without those gifts. And he does not want his creatures to perish, so he gave his only Son that we might not.

The truth is: Jesus was born for you.

The truth is: Jesus lived for you.

The truth is: Jesus died for you.

The truth is: Jesus was raised from death for you.

Here are the truths of the faith. That's the "whole load," presented so succinctly and eloquently by St. Paul and St. John. These are the essential and basic truths of the faith. And, I assure you I'm referring only to myself when I say: Hey, this is the **Gospel for Dummies!** Okay,

maybe a couple of you, too.

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 So, what? So, what difference, what *substantive difference* does it make in your life that Jesus was born for you, lived for you, died for you, was raised for you, has saved you? **How does that change who you are and what you do?** In other words, what has that got to do with *real* life?

What does it have to do with the wars in Afghanistan and Syria?  
 What does it have to do with the untimely death of friends?  
 What does it have to do with schoolkids being slaughtered?  
 What does it have to do with the anxiety of aging?  
 What does it have to do with broken families?  
 What does it have to do with losing your job?  
 What does that have to do with the 35,000 children  
 who die daily from hunger?

What does it have to do...with anything...*real*...in our lives and in our world? Nothing. Nothing, really, unless you believe it! Do you...believe it? Really? Well, here is how you can tell if you really believe it.

I saw two independent polls recently. One queried people as to whether they believed in God. More than 95% of people in the U.S. said they did indeed believe in God. The other poll asked people whether religion made “*a difference*” in their lives. About *one-half* said it made at least *some* difference. Is there something wrong with this picture, that half the people who say they believe in God, also say it doesn’t make any real difference in their lives?

No, that shouldn’t be surprising. Simply to profess belief in God does not necessarily mean it makes a difference in the way we live our lives. It takes something more before faith becomes a *powerful, life-affecting reality*; it takes **action**.

Look, you can come here every Sunday and profess the Creed: “I believe...” but until that profession of faith is acted upon, it is as hollow as a noisy gong or a clanging bell<sup>1</sup>.

**Action is to faith, as electricity is to a light bulb. Action! It’s what turns faith on!** “Oh, wait a minute,” said the Lutheran, shuddering, “Is ‘action’ the same as ‘works?’” Yes, it is. **You best believe it is! “Faith without works is dead,”** says St. James. “What difference does it make,” says James, “if you say you have faith but you don’t *do* anything with it? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” *without* giving them the things needed for the body, what difference does it make? **None! Because, faith, by itself, if it produces no works, is dead.**<sup>2</sup>

“Well,” asks that same good Lutheran, “what about Ephesians 2:8-9, ‘We are saved by grace through faith...*not because of works.*’” Quite right, but we’re not talking about being saved; you’re already saved. You knew that didn’t you? That’s a done deal! You’ve already been saved, by grace, not because of works. But now the question is: What are you going to do with that salvation you have received?

Well, you have to read the rest of that passage from Ephesians. Paul says in the very next verse, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for good works.** Our good works do not earn us salvation. They are our *response* to the salvation that has

<sup>1</sup> I Cor. 13:1

<sup>2</sup> James 2:14-17 (paraphrase)

been earned for us through Jesus Christ. And those works are the means by which our faith (also a gift from God) gets *turned on!*

**To ACT in response to the gift of our salvation is the key to unlocking the joy of the Christian life.** So, it's okay for even we Lutherans to ask what are you *doing* with this salvation by grace through faith that you have been given? Am I asking you to list your "good works?" That sure wouldn't be very Lutheran would it? To ask you ...

Whether you give generously to your church?

Whether you fix meals for homeless families?

Whether you remember to bring your can of food for the hungry?

Whether you make it a point to speak to visitors  
who come to our church?

Whether you forgive when you have been wronged?

Whether you pray for the safety of our troops?

Whether you do everything you can to build up the church  
and avoid any talk that would tear it down?

Whether you help the stranger and love the unlovely?

Whether you treat your spouse and children  
as the gifts from God that they are?

Whether you **believe and therefore do** those works  
which God calls each of us to do?

Am I asking you to make that kind of "good works" list for yourself? **Yes! Why?**

Because anything less is *cheap grace*. Because we have been given the "whole load," all that we could possibly need or want from our gracious God, life and hope and salvation, and we have even been given the faith to believe in Him. **But, that faith, without those works, without acting on the faith, without doing the faith out in the world...that faith is dead!**

No wonder there so many grim Christians wandering around! Show me the Christian who thinks that all the faith is about is hanging on through this veil of tears until we finally reach our happy, heavenly home, and I'll show you a Christian who has wasted *a life-time of joy* in the faith. And, who desperately needs a copy of "**The Gospel for Dummies!**"

**Acting out the faith, doing the faith, living the faith,** that is what **turns faith on!**

That's the key to what makes it *exciting* to be a Christian! And, that is how joy-filled Christians get to be that way!

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