

Eight Sunday after Pentecost – July 14th, 2024
BLESSED ASSURANCE

Prayer

Father, help us to rest in the assurance that we are yours not because of anything that we do, but solely because of what our Lord Jesus has done for us.

AMEN

When Did You Become a Christian?

I'd like to start today by asking a question – no need to answer verbally but think of what **your** answer would be:

When Did You Become a Christian?

When I was active in a para-church ministry in college, that was a common question to be asked. Most of the people who I hung around with would answer with something like "When I invited Christ into my heart." Some of the more sacramental minded would say "When I was baptized." In wanting to be faithful to the scripture, I, along with some of my Calvinist friends, would give the answer from today's reading "From before the foundations of the earth."

Eight Sunday after Pentecost – July 14th, 2024
BLESSED ASSURANCE

Now it may be that people didn't **RECOGNIZE** that God was calling and electing them until those other events, but be assured that

[God] chose us in him before the foundation of the world.

The Death of Christ?

Verse 7 notes that our redemption is through blood; specially through the shed blood of God's beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

So why did we have to be redeemed? As we pray in our common prayer of thanksgiving:

In Your righteous judgment You condemned the sin of Adam and Eve, who ate the forbidden fruit, and You justly barred them and all their children from the tree of life.

And because we are sinners with a fallen nature, we commit sins – in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and what we have left undone.

And the cost of our redemption? As St. Peter wrote (1 Pet 1:18-19)

knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things

Eight Sunday after Pentecost – July 14th, 2024
BLESSED ASSURANCE

*such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ,
like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*

We Receive the Benefits of Jesus's Death

So how does this get applied to us? How do we receive the benefits of this redemption?

First, as noted in the text, God moves first. Luther understood that where divine grace is concerned, nothing hinged on human doing "in the presence of God."

Second, God uses means – whether it be the water and word in baptism, the spoken word that is announced; read; or preached, or the word that we eat - true body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine. All these point to the Word made flesh, Jesus, the incarnate word.

Third, as recorded by Matthew (Matt 18:3)

and [Jesus] said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Failure of Assurance

In good Lutheran fashion, I want to first explore the ways in which a bad understanding of this grace of God undermines the blessed

Eight Sunday after Pentecost – July 14th, 2024
BLESSED ASSURANCE

assurance that God does indeed provide to us. It starts with what the prophet Jeremiah wrote (Jer 17:9)

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick;

And because it is so, we can't trust our heart.

Calvinist: While there aren't many true followers of Calvin left in the world today, their misunderstanding of the extent of the atonement of Christ can gut their assurance. In their understanding of the work of Christ, He did NOT die for ALL, but ONLY for those whom God had elected before the foundation of the world. This is contrary to what scripture teaches. Calvin taught that those people ending up in Hell were paying not just the price of unbelief – rejection of the gift God offers – but also for all the sins that they themselves had committed during their lifetime. Where this theology guts assurance is in asking the introspective question "Am I one of the Elect?" They cannot answer with certainty since there are no objective measures by which a believer can determine, without a doubt, if they are one of the Elect. A person may act like they are elect: Attend church, pray, study the bible, and so

Eight Sunday after Pentecost – July 14th, 2024
BLESSED ASSURANCE

on, but such outward actions could come from motivations other than a loving, childlike response to our Heavenly Father.

Roman Catholic: The official teaching of the Roman Catholic church also destroys assurance. While we agree that God moves first, they believe that Baptism washes away original sin and sins committed to that point, and then provides only enough grace to enable a person to work with God so that they can try to do enough of the meritorious works they teach He requires of us. Certain sins, mortal sins, can also remove that even that initial grace and return an individual to a state of damnation. Here, the introspection the question become “Have I enough merit?” Sacramental actions provide some merit, and certain other actions done by a believer provide an indulgence, which remits the punishment for those sins that we personally commit. There is also a **treasury of merit**, which contains, in part:

The prayers and good works of all the saints, all those who have followed in the footsteps of Christ the Lord and by His grace have made their lives holy and carried out the mission the Father entrusted to them. **In this way they attained**

Eight Sunday after Pentecost – July 14th, 2024
BLESSED ASSURANCE

**their own salvation and at the same time cooperated in
saving their brothers**

These merits are accessed through indulgences administered by the church. Souls of the dead may also spend time in purgatory; a place of “purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven,” which is experienced by those “who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified.”

I do have to say that many Catholics, maybe like many Lutherans, don’t fully understand or believe their church’s theology. Indeed, while some of these teachings have not been emphasized as much since the Second Vatican Council, they are still the official teaching of the church.

Baptist & Methodists: There are other groups that may fall into this category, but these two groups are reflective of what Lutherans call decision theology. They have “made a decision” for Christ, by praying “a sinner’s prayer,” by coming forth at an altar call, or by some other indication that they have “opened the door and let Jesus into their heart.” For these people, the introspective question becomes “Did I really decide – did I really mean it?” In seeking an answer, both our deceitful heart and the Devil are right there sowing the seeds of doubt.

Eight Sunday after Pentecost – July 14th, 2024
BLESSED ASSURANCE

Pietism: You can find these Christians in a wide variety of denominations, including some Lutherans. Their issue with assurance is not related to Justification (becoming a Christian) but to Sanctification (the life after they have become a Christian) by whatever means. Some modern groups put the issue in the form of a question “Jesus is your **Savior** but is He your **Lord**?” They hold that that once they are saved, their life should reflect this change, to live only according to their new nature – to both sin less and to become more faithful in the practice of Christian virtues, such as prayer and the reading of scripture. Their error lies in the misunderstanding that somehow that our very sin nature is changed when we become a Christian and that we can achieve a holy and sinless life this side of heaven. When they fail to do so, which is inevitable since we are, in reality, at the same time both sinner and saint, they can become despondent, discouraged, and may even renounce their faith.

Why Aren't All Saved?

In contrast to the Calvinists, Lutherans teach that Christ's death was for everyone. In contrast to the Catholics, Lutherans teach that Christ's

Eight Sunday after Pentecost – July 14th, 2024
BLESSED ASSURANCE

death was sufficient to merit salvation and the good works are the fruit or result of this salvation but are in no way the cause of it. In contrast to the Baptists and Methodists, Lutherans teach that salvation is truly a gift of God to dead men; that the church is a graveyard where Christ comes to make alive those who were dead in their trespasses and could in no way make a move toward God. And in contrast to the pietists, even those who claim Luther, Luther taught that we retain our sin nature even after God has created a new man in us. This is found most clearly in Paul's letter to the church at Rome (Rom 7:15)

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Which leads us to a final question – why aren't all people saved? The Lutheran answer doesn't make sense to some because it doesn't meet the test of pure logic. While dead men – who hate God – cannot make a move to accept His free gift of salvation, they can continue according to their sinful nature to resist and reject the gift that God had offered. It is ONLY this unbelief, this unwillingness to accept what God has done for us that results in damnation and an eternity in Hell apart for God.

Eight Sunday after Pentecost – July 14th, 2024
BLESSED ASSURANCE

Blessed Assurance - Reprise

So, If you ever have had cause to ask yourself that introspective question, "Am I saved?", you can answer "YES" because you have external, tangible evidence outside of your heart that you can remember when you ask yourself these questions:

- Did I get wet when I was Baptized? YES!
- Did I hear the words of forgiveness directed at me? Listen for the phrase 'for YOU?' YES!
- Did I eat and drink the bread and wine at our Lord's table and here here the word – "for the forgiveness of you sin?" YES!

Let us thank and praise our Heavenly Father in childlike faith, for the fact that he knows us so well that gives us evidence of His Love that we cannot deny.

AMEN