

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Cantate – April 28, 2024
John 16:5-15 – Every Perfect Gift
Rev Peter Wagner

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the risen Lord, Jesus Christ! Amen.

Watching the seminary call day services this past week vividly reminded me of a year ago, when I sat in the pews of Kramer Chapel at Fort Wayne with my fellow seminary graduates, waiting to hear for the first time where I would be called. It could have been any Missouri Synod congregation. That same night, many of you gathered eagerly to watch the livestream, hoping to hear the name of a pastor attached to the name of your church. You grew increasingly worried as the alphabetical list went down all the way to W. Maybe you weren't getting a pastor? But then finally, my name was called, and we both heard it for the first time. "Pastor, Saint Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Latimer, Iowa, Iowa District East."

Saint Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church. These were the words running through my head as I shook hands with the synod and seminary presidents and returned to my seat. Latimer, I had no idea where in Iowa that might be. But Saint Paul's is a good name for a Lutheran congregation that confesses the doctrine so clearly taught by the apostle Paul. And yet there was one word in your name that particularly stood out to me: Evangelical.

We often omit it, we easily forget what it means. Evangelical, "of, or relating to the Christian gospel." The evangelical gospel is the heart of your identity. So much that it's the central word of your name. The preaching of the law is for the sake of the gospel. The word and sacraments are for the sake of the gospel. You called a pastor to preach the gospel. The whole purpose of the existence of this church is so you might hear and receive and believe and grow in the gospel. And so many might come to saving faith, by hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ in this place.

The gospel is the good news of all God has done for us. Everything this church lives for, everything God gives you, every good and perfect gift from above is the gospel. The gospel of Christ crucified is what your namesake Saint Paul always preached, and what Saint James also had in mind in today's epistle, when he wrote, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights."

Every good and perfect gift is from God above. Nothing good is from anyone but him.

And so in the very next sentence, James summarizes all the good and perfect gospel gifts of God. "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." This sentence includes the whole gospel, all of our God's precious gifts of creation, redemption, and sanctification. Everything we confess in the Creed, everything our God chooses to give us of his own free will, everything this church exists to proclaim, and everything I'm called as your pastor to preach.

First, the good and perfect gift of creation. God is our maker and creator, who breathed into us the breath of life. Simply of his own free will, because he wanted an object for his love. He made us so he could give us every good thing. Of his own will, God brought me forth by the word of truth. He made me and all creatures, and still takes care of me, by his powerful Word. That is, by the living Word, by God the Word. The Word who was with God in the beginning, by whom all things were made, the Son of the Father of lights. By this living Word of truth he spoke, and it was so. He said, "Let there be light," and there was light. He said, "Let us make man in our image," and it was so. Male and female he created them, and it was very good.

And since my God has made me, he also cares for me. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this he does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true. Pure gospel.

But that is not all. "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." This sentence from James includes more. Making you and caring for you is only the beginning of the good and perfect gifts God rains down on you from above. Because of his own free will, when you turned away from your Maker, when you rebelled and followed the idols and desires of your heart that lead to death, your God also brought you forth again, into new life. Once again, he did it through his Word. Through the death of God the Word, to make you a firstfruits in him. He redeemed you to recreate you, to sanctify you and make you holy, so you might live in holiness before him.

Therefore, the second good and perfect gift of God is redemption. You were dead in your trespasses and

sins. But now you are redeemed and brought forth by the Son, the Word of truth. For us men and for our salvation, the Word by whom the heavens were made came down from heaven. To buy you back from eternal death and damnation, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. To redeem me, a lost and condemned person, purchase and win me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; that I may be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true. Pure gospel.

This is the heart of everything Saint Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church believes, teaches, and confesses. The most perfect gift that comes down to you from the Father of lights is the only-begotten Son. The Father gave his only begotten Son, to bring you forth and deliver you from your body of death. The Father gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Therefore Isaiah 12 declares, "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation."

He has become my salvation in Jesus. That is his name. Yahweh is salvation – that's what Jesus means. Trust this name, sing praise to him forever, and never be afraid of sin or death or hell. For Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, and he has become my salvation.

But still, that is not all. The holy, precious blood of Jesus and his innocent suffering and death do you no good, unless you believe it. And you cannot believe it, not on your own. I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him.

No, I cannot come to him, except for the third good and perfect gift from above. The Holy Spirit, who sanctifies you. I cannot come to the Word of truth, I cannot believe in him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

Not only has your God made and created you, not only does he still take care of you, not only did he give his only begotten Son for your salvation, but now he also gives you the Holy Spirit, so you might believe and be saved. Apart from the work of the Spirit, none can believe. Only in him, by his word and sacrament in the church, is anyone snatched from the jaws of eternal death.

Therefore Jesus teaches in today's Gospel reading, "I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you."

The Holy Spirit is the perfect giver, the bringer of salvation, sent from the Father and the Son together. The Spirit makes you believe. He brings you all the life and forgiveness that Jesus won on the cross, and he applies it to you day by day, in the evangelical church.

"And when he comes," says Jesus, "when the Holy Spirit comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged."

Here in the church, the Holy Spirit convicts the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. He convicts the world of sin by preaching the law. He uses the law to show us our sin, so we might repent and believe the gospel. Those who do not believe, he will convict on the day of judgment. They will perish in hell. But the Holy Spirit will also convict the world of righteousness. This is beautiful gospel. He will declare righteousness to all who believe in the Word of truth. He will convict us righteous. He will say to all believers, "You ought to be judged and convicted of your sin. But because of the atoning death of Jesus, and his blood that paid the penalty of your sin, I count you righteous. You are forgiven."

All this the Holy Spirit does in the evangelical church. Here he preaches to you through his word. Here he guides you into all truth, to the Word of Truth. Here he forgives you through the blood of Jesus, shed for you and poured into the cup we share in communion. Here the Spirit takes everything that belongs to Jesus, all his forgiveness and life and salvation, and applies it to you. He does it all through his means of grace, his word and sacraments, here in the church.

And now, the Spirit brings you one more good and perfect gift. Here in the church, he teaches you to obey God and walk in his ways. He begins working in you to do good works that are pleasing to God. This is the result of sanctification, that you live godly lives. James describes this result when he instructs, "Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce

the righteousness that God requires. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”

You have been forgiven, healed, and convicted righteous in the evangelical church by the Holy Spirit. And now, the Holy Spirit also teaches you to live God-pleasing lives. Be quick to hear, he says. Be slow to speak, slow to anger, and put away all filthiness and wickedness. And above all, receive with glad hearts the implanted Word, God the Word, the Savior Jesus Christ. Receive the Word of truth, through whom and in whom you have the gospel.

Praise God for this gospel! Praise him for the Evangelical Lutheran church that proclaims it! And praise him for the privilege and joy of being your pastor and preaching it to you.

And give thanks to the Lord! Call upon his name. Make known his deeds among the peoples, his deeds of creation, redemption, and sanctification. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, the church, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. In the exalted name of the Father of Lights, and of the only-begotten Word our Savior, and of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.