RECONCILED TO GOD

Colossians 1:13-20
Luke 23:27-43
Last Sunday of the Church Year (Series C)
November 23, 2025
Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND
Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The sermon is based on both the epistle lesson from Colossians 1, which we read a little bit ago, and the gospel lesson, which we will read now. It comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 23, verses 27 through 43. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 23, beginning at verse 27, we read in Jesus' name.

> **27** And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were
> mourning and lamenting for him. **28** But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of
> Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. **29** For
> behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs
> that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' **30** Then they will begin to say to the
> mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' **31** For if they do these things when
> the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"
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> **32** Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. **33** And
> when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the
> criminals, one on his right and one on his left. **34** And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them,
> for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. **35** And the
> people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let
> him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" **36** The soldiers also
> mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine **37** and saying, "If you are the King of
> the Jews, save yourself!" **38** There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of
> the Jews."
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> **39** One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ?
> Save yourself and us!" **40** But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since
> you are under the same sentence of condemnation? **41** And we indeed justly, for we are
> receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." **42** And he
> said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." **43** And he said to him,
> "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We're going to deal with three questions today: *Who is Jesus? Who am I?* And by that, I don't mean me, specifically, but all of us. *Who are we?* Ask yourself, *Who am I?* And I will reveal the third question after we deal with the first two.

First, who is Jesus? I can't think of a more important question. And to answer this, we will be considering the epistle lesson from Colossians 1.

I have two true or false questions for you. First: "Jesus is the Son of God." True or false? True, of course. Second: "Jesus is God." True or false? Also true. That might sound a little weird. How can this be, that Jesus is God and he is the Son of God? We do not mean that Jesus is the Father. The Bible teaches that there is one God. It also teaches us about three different persons who are God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So it is true that Jesus is God, and it is true that Jesus is the Son of God.

When you stop and think about it, it has to be this way. If God has a Son, that Son must also be God. What else is he going to be? That's the way it works for species on earth. If a squirrel has a son, that son is also a squirrel. If a human has a son, that son is also a human. And if God has a Son, that Son is also God. He can't be a different species than his Father.

But here's where it's a little different than it is with humans and squirrels. Who is older: a human father or his son? The father, of course. And who is older: a squirrel father or his son? The squirrel father, of course. With people and animals on earth, the father is always older, because he has to exist before his children. But it's different with God. God the Father is not older than the Son of God. Why not? Because it is not God's nature to have a beginning. You and I had a beginning. Squirrels have a beginning. We have not always existed. But God has always existed. He does not have a beginning. It is his nature to always be. So if the Father never has a beginning, then the Son of God also does not have a beginning. The same is true for the Holy Spirit. So Jesus is God, and he is the Son of God, and he has always been the Son of God.

The one part of this passage that might trip us up in this regard is in verse 15, which calls Jesus "the firstborn of all creation." That kind of sounds like he has a beginning that was before everything else in creation. But the word translated as "firstborn" (πρωτότοκος) doesn't actually have anything to say about birth or origin. It refers to the first right of inheritance, which, in much of the ancient world, including Israel, belonged to the firstborn son. He would receive a double portion compared to his brothers. To call Jesus the "firstborn of creation" means that he is the inheritor of all creation, not that he has a beginning.

What else can we say about Jesus? In the verses we read, Paul says, "He is the image of the invisible God" (1:15). What does that mean? No one has ever seen God the Father (John 1:18), and no one has ever seen the Holy Spirit, but people have seen the Son of God, because he became a human being, and we know him as Jesus of Nazareth. We do not see Jesus now, because he ascended into heaven. But he is still a man. He still has a body. He lived on this earth and people could see him. And we will see him when he appears again.

Jesus also shows us that God loves us. This is part of what it means that "He is the image of the invisible God." Jesus reveals the truth of God's love to us, because he died to save us from our sins. We know that the Father is not angry with us, and he does not desire to condemn us for our sins. We know the love of the Father, because Jesus gave his life for us.

What else can we say about Jesus? Paul also says, "By him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible," and, "All things were created through him and for him" (1:16). By the way, this is another one of the ways we know that the Son of God has always existed. All things were created through him, which means that he was never created, because you can't create yourself. Therefore, he has always existed. "All things were created through him." We know that God created the heavens and the earth by speaking (Gen. 1). And another part of the Bible tells us that Jesus is the "Word" God spoke to create everything (John 1:1-3). So in the beginning, God the Father said, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3), and Jesus is the Word that

the Father spoke. That means that Jesus is the power that caused the light to be created. And he is the power the Father used to create all things.

What else can we say about Jesus? He is also a man. He is God, and he is also human like us. The only differences are that he had no sin; therefore, he could take our sins upon himself. And after he died and rose again, he can never die again. He can never get sick. His human body is perfect, the way humans were before Adam and Eve let sin come into the world. We are not that way yet, but we will be when Jesus appears again.

So Jesus is both God and man. Does this mean that he is part God and part man? Does it mean that he is sort of like God and sort of like a human? No. He is fully God and fully man. He has all the abilities and characteristics of God, and he has all the abilities and characteristics of a man, just without sin. Paul says, "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (1:19). This is a really amazing thing, especially when we think about Jesus as a baby and a child, not just a grownup. Even when Jesus was a baby, even before he was born, and he was still inside his mother Mary, he was God. All the power of God was in him. But he did not use that power or knowledge yet, because he was also fully human. He grew and learned, just like you and I do.

Why is this important? It was important for Jesus to be fully human, so that he could fulfill God's commands for us. You and I do not obey all of God's commands. We have sin in our hearts, and we sin whenever we disobey God's commands. Jesus kept all of God's commands for us. And in order to do this, it was important for him to start being perfectly obedient as a baby. He had to become human, so that he could be the perfect substitute for us.

What else can we say about Jesus? He is the King. Paul says that God the Father "delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (1:13). Jesus is the King over all of heaven and earth. This is really good news. Jesus is always in control, and nothing can separate you from his love.

And he is the head of the Church. Pastors or other leaders are not really in charge. Jesus is the head. We serve him. He leads and guides us through his Word. He does this so that we will know him and be saved. The Church is where we see the Kingdom of Jesus on earth.

So who is Jesus? Jesus is the Son of God. He is fully God. And he is fully man. All things were created by him. He is the King of Heaven and earth. He is the head of the Church. All of this is quite marvelous.

Second question: *Who am I?* And I especially mean who we are without Christ. There is less to say about this, because we're not that important. I am a sinner. I have sin in my heart, and that works out into actual sins of thought, word, and deed. Without Christ, we would belong to "the domain of darkness" (1:13). All of mankind, without Christ, belongs to "the domain of darkness." Our hearts love the darkness more than the light (John 3:19).

This is hard for us to admit, but it is necessary. We might think we're not that bad. That's because we often compare ourselves to other people, not the perfect standard of God's Law. Then we round up, however much we have to, in order to view ourselves as pretty good. But what does it really take to become a sinner? Just one sin. It doesn't matter if you are a little bit better than other people if they are sinners too. If you murder one person, does that make you a murderer? Yes; that's how it works. If you tell one lie, does that make you a liar? Yes; that's how it works. If you commit one sin—any sin—that makes you a sinner. James says, "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2:10). Even one sin makes you a sinner. Never mind that we are born guilty of sin and that we sin in many different ways each day. So who am I? I am a sinner, and that is the problem.

But that is really only half the problem. The other half is that God is righteous. If we only had to deal with other men, who are also sinners, most of us would not be condemned. But we have to deal with God, and God is righteous. The standard is not how we stack up to other men. It is how we measure up to God's righteousness. It exists in himself, and it is manifested in his Law, which we have broken. Take your eyes off other people, and fix them on the righteous God. Now how do we look? Not so good. For God to give approval to this would violate his own righteousness. And it is not like he wants to approve of us, but is unfortunately bound by his righteousness. No. It is his very nature to be against everything evil. And that is good. But it is a problem for us who are by nature sinful and unclean.

And this leads to the third question: *How can I be reconciled to God?* Perhaps I should stop sinning. Would that reconcile me to God? No. A murderer who stops murdering is still a murderer. A sinner who stops sinning, if that were possible, would still be a sinner. We cannot reconcile ourselves to God.

It is only God who can reconcile us to himself and himself to us. And this is his great pleasure. So Paul says, "God was pleased ..., through [Jesus] to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (1:20). To reconcile means to take two sides that don't fit together, or they might be angry with each other, and to bring peace and make them fit together again. We were separated from God. The problem is that God is perfectly righteous, and we are not. We needed to be reconciled, so Jesus reconciled us by dying for our sins.

This reconciliation is for all who trust in Christ. It does not matter how righteous or sinful you think you are. Consider the scene at the cross, which we read from Luke. The rulers, who considered themselves righteous, mocked Jesus. Even one of the criminals mocked Jesus. He showed no remorse for his own sin, but vainly asked Jesus to save him from the cross (23:39). Many grieved for Jesus (23:27). But one man confessed his sin—the other criminal. He admitted, "We are receiving the due reward of our deeds" (23:41). And just to be clear, his penalty was death. He admitted that it was right for him to be put to death for his crimes. This man is included in Scripture to assure us that no person is too sinful to be reconciled to God through the blood of Christ. Your sin is great, and you need to confess that, but no sin is greater than the blood of Jesus. Are you as sinful as that criminal? Maybe. Maybe more. No sin is greater than the blood of Jesus.

It's a miracle of the Holy Spirit that this condemned criminal looked at Jesus, another condemned criminal, and saw the King of Heaven and earth, and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (23:42). For one thing, Jesus doesn't look much like a king. His crown is made of thorns. The sign above his head, reading, "This is the King of the Jews," was a joke. And he was dying. What about that looks like a king? And if Jesus does gain a kingdom, what makes that criminal think he could have a place in it? The answer to both questions is that he saw Jesus in his place, reconciling him to the Father.

Here is Jesus' gracious answer: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (23:43). In this statement we see the mercy of Christ. He grants the dying criminal's request. no hell. No purgatory. Just paradise. It is totally undeserved. We also learn about Jesus' Kingdom. When does Jesus come into his Kingdom? That was the day, for on that day he purchased sinners for his Kingdom.

His Kingdom is not like any other. Jesus gained his Kingdom by dying on the cross. Think about this: how does a person become a king on earth? The easy way is to inherit it from his

father. Other kings take their kingdoms by defeating the old king. Or a person becomes a president by winning an election. But none of those are how Jesus gained his Kingdom. He purchased it "with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death" (Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*). Jesus died in order to save you from death and bring you into his Kingdom. He paid for all of our sins, so that we could belong to his Kingdom.

Lord God, Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving your Son, to become human, to live, suffer, die, and rise again to reconcile us to you. Help us to trust and follow Jesus as our Savior and King. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.