

"To Steal our Sin"

A Sermon on John 8:31-36

At a Celebration of the Feast of the Reformation

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+ In Nomine Jesu +

GRACE TO YOU and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—the Annoying One, in case you missed it just now. Annoying because he *will* not be content tonight with “these Lutherans” who believe in him. Annoying because he *does* insist tonight on sticking these Lutherans with more freedom than they *want* to believe in—more freedom, they think, than they’re able to bear. Notice, he did the same back then to those “Jews who believed in him.” They didn’t like it either. They liked it even less—so will we—when he ratchets up the aggravation by calling us out. “If the Son makes you free you’ll be free indeed,” he says. And here’s what comes next: “I know you’re descendants of Abraham, devotees of Blessed Martin, as the case may be. I know you divide the Law from the Gospel, I’ve heard you gasping those Augsburg Aha’s as some of you call them. And yet. Yet, he says, you keep looking for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. Not yet. Not really.

“What’s that?” I say. “You’ve got to be kidding, That can’t be me he’s talking to,” I say, “or if it is, how dare he”

“Gotcha,” Jesus says.

Amazing is it not, how this Jesus really is the Son, as in the

Father's spitting image. To soothe, he irritates. To clothe he exposes. To liberate he traps. To make us alive, yes, he will kill us first—only who of us wants to be dead? No wonder those savvy and perspicacious Jews who believed in him first are standing there at the end of chapter eight with stones in their hands.

Mind you, that's not where Jesus wants them, or us, to be. His aim, remember, is freedom. Our freedom. That means cutting us loose, first and foremost, from our pretensions. It means setting us loose on the world as sons and daughters—no, not of Abraham; still less of a Luther—but of God.

Something else to remember: this Jesus is no dilettante. He will get done what the Father sent him to do. So if to cut loose, if to set loose, he has to unloose first, where the thing unloosed is my inner stone-thrower, well so be it. He'll suffer those consequences. It's not as if he isn't used to it, you know.

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HERE'S THE THING about deep down serious sinning: the slaves are attached in more ways than one to the chains they hate. They can't imagine life without them.

For example: they didn't throw stones at me, but they did tell me, more or less, to shut up and quit aggravating them so with more Gospel than they were willing to repeat to the sons and daughters of God.

I was their teacher. Young, callow, gushing behind the ears. Prancing around under the lofty title, Lecturer in Theology. Given the person, place, and task it was a bit like saying "follicular designer" when what you mean is butch-cut barber.

They: they were my students, a ragtag collection of tenuously

literate men who were preparing for the pastoral ministry in a back-country corner of a very big island in the South Pacific.

Our topic that morning was Holy Baptism, comma, the benefits thereof. What good does it do? I pose the question, and someone who may have toiled through the text the night before, or probably not, puts up his hand. Baptism forgives sins, he says. OK, I say. What sins does it forgive?

With that the ghost of my namesake roars into the room—you know, Jerome, that brilliant linguist and shabby theologian of the late 300s? Luther slams him at one point for having said the very thing my students now say. What sins does my baptism cover? Original sin, says one. The sins committed before you were baptized—so says another. OK, I say, so what about those other sins—the ones you long ago baptized guys committed this morning? The ones you'll sin tomorrow? Is baptism good for that? No, they say. Can't be, they say. Baptism came first and the sins came later. For them you've got to go to confession. Communion helps. Otherwise you're stuck with them.

We in the know can hear John Tetzel salivating.

Came one of those rare, rare moments, for me at least, when the thought you need pops into your mind just when you need it. "Look," I say, "cut God some slack. Since when is God as chintzy as you make him out to be? Imagine an umbrella, I say. A big huge umbrella, one end resting on the moment of your birth, the other on the moment of your death—and where on the timeline the handle comes down, be it Day 8 or Year 8, Year 80 for that matter, that's quite beside the point. Whenever it happened, your entire life, beginning to end, was buried with Christ by baptism into death. What does this mean? It means that your yesterdays are covered by God's promise, well of course, but so are your tomorrows. It means that the sin you'll commit

tomorrow—and you will commit it, you know you will—that sin is already forgiven in Christ, even before you get there. So relax, and serve God with joy today. That’s what I tell them.

Big pause, you know; and for a moment, a brief lovely moment some eyes start to sparkle and dance—and then, to a man, the faces sag.

Jerry, they say, we *can’t* go preaching this in a congregation.

Why ever not, I say?

Because, they say, the Christians will go crazy. They’ll think they have a free pass to lie and steal and fornicate. They’ll stop putting their dimes and quarters in the collection plate. They’ll behave like wicked, useless pigs, and the church will be ruined.

And with I dropped the ball. What did I babble—something vague and silly about the Holy Spirit, I suppose. You want the truth? Way back here a little voice was telling me that they just might have a point.

I told you I was young and callow. Still stuck in my own sin. Or maybe, come to think of it, not stuck enough. Not stuck enough to see my sin, and theirs—and yours—for the horror that it is. Hateful, yes. But also useful. Finally compelling.

Lord of the Rings: you’ve read the book, seen the movie? Think Gollum, stroking the band that holds him in thrall. “My precious,” he purrs,. “My precious.” And even Frodo, our hero, can’t bear to part with it until it’s finally bitten away.

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WHAT I SHOULD have told my students that long ago morning was, in the first place, to relax, and to take some perverse comfort in the power of sin.

Have faith in sin, I might even have said, had I thought or dared to say it. Isn't that, after all, the primary faith we all keep living by? This assumes, of course, that you're willing to apply the term "living" to this stumble-bum existence we presently know.

Look, I should have said, you can preach the wild goodness of God until you're blue in the face, yet even so the Christians will toe the line, and not for holy reasons. So what if God massively forgives my sin? My neighbor the brute doesn't. And if, tomorrow, I sleep with his wife or steal his pig, he'll try to put a hatchet in my head. Now there's a sin I trust enough *not* to muck around with.

Chill out, I could have told them. The chains are on. Each sinner, looking to her own interest first. Each sinner in love with himself. That's me, I could have said, and were my brutish neighbor smart enough to know my sin he'd chill out too. I admire myself, you see. Self-respect, I call it. Guess what? His two-bit pig is safe, his wife as well—he can leave the axe at home. That too is how the law of sin will work—sometimes. Not always, never perfectly—by no means perfectly, the very thought is laughable. Yet somehow, as a rule, it works just well enough to keep the human race stumbling along till death do us part.

And there's this: every so often some brilliant sinner will come along and figure out how to manipulate the chains in such a way that things get better, incrementally, for lots of other sinners. I could have cited Adam Smith, or the founding thinkers of the U.S. Republic, though in that language, with those students, the hours of explanation would have been painful and very long. Suffice it here to say that the motto stamped on every U.S. coin is a silly lie. In God we do not trust. In sin we do. Hence those famous checks and balances that harness our self-interest in spheres both economic and political; that make

of it an engine that tugs us forward. If the harness breaks, then sure, let's pass the ammunition, but barring that you might say that sin has a lot going for it. It somehow works for us. In a weird and wicked way you might even call it precious. Our precious. And woe to the one who would rob us of it.

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BUT THAT OF course is precisely what Christ the Robber intends to do. Wasn't that, in fact, the first thing I ever heard about him, that he came "to take away my sin"? That he even died, so determined was he to grab my precious from me and to destroy it forever?

How might I, at this point, have conveyed to my students the agony this poses? Seems to me a time machine would have helped—a good

sized one, big enough for 15 men, teacher included, and we'd set the dial and zoom forward to this very moment, this very place, and we'd all look down. Did I mention that our machine is equipped with a "truthometer" that reads the hearts below?

They stand there faces shining as they sing the praise of God in Jesus Christ their Lord. They sit with straining ears as they listen to the Word; they itch, they ache, to hear the Gospel. These things we see. We see their great desire to please and honor God. They yearn to grow in faith, to serve Christ well.

And on our screen some other thoughts too. The former teacher now standing in the pulpit seems to glow with them. For example, "How good it is that we are here. How sweet it is to stand in worship for once with the little band of those who get it as others do not, we with our precious system for parsing texts and contexts, for crossing real life with real word, word read rightly, that is, and properly divided. Lord, we do thank thee that we are not like other Christians, or even like those other

Lutherans, so careless of theology—the rubes we're forced to cluster with at synod assemblies, at your district conventions; who infest those seminaries and headquarters of your own most holy and ill-served Church, and abuse your congregations. *We* read your confessions and put them to work, we treasure your cross."

Do those old students in their fictive time machine up there see what's going on? How the wretched slave, their old teacher, is still chained to fantasies of his own worth? How the thing precious to him is not in fact the rightness of Christ *for* him, but his own rightness in teaching or preaching Christ? How the yardstick he measures others by is not the rightness of Christ *for them*, but his own rightness about Christ and whether they happen to share it.

Forget old students now—their task is done. What matters is that *God* sees what's in this heart. Remember Paul's big point about this God, how he hates our boasting and will not endure it? Go figure, this is the same God who once so madly stretched a baptism over the whole of this life, this present patch of ugliness included. You might even say that this God in his wise folly or foolish wisdom has chained himself to *me*, of all creatures. In any case, he bites his tongue. He doesn't tell me simply to drop dead. Remember, he's done that once already, with another Son—and once was enough for all. So now he sends that Other Son, risen from the dead, to free the slave, to strike those other chains, to drag the fool kicking and screaming from fake living into real living. Yet again. For the umpteenth time.

Says Christ, "You're killing me. You've squeezed me out. Now give me that sin, that precious self-regard you mock me with. Hand it over before it finally does you in. The house is for children, remember? It isn't for slaves."

"My precious," I snarl.

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LOOK, IT HURTS to lose the chains. To live without regard for something I call my own— my kids, my money, my skills, my pedigree, my handle on the Gospel, thank you—to count these as nothing is downright scary. So yes I've kicked, I've fussed, I've thrown my share of stones at Christ my Lord who comes to steal that regard, and you have too. We'll throw some more tomorrow. You know we will. And so does Christ.

How astonishing, then, that he himself should come again tonight to drape us yet again in his inexplicable regard for us, and in God's regard for him. Look, this makes no sense, no sense at all. The word is "crazy." Yet, "Take eat—the body you helped to kill, the blood you drew, given and shed for you." Now off you go, he says, and have another crack at remaining in *this* word of mine. Starting tonight, in the context of this very conference you find yourselves at.

Could be that means for some of you what it means for me: an extra extra-wide helping of humble pie, especially on the subject of other Christians and fellow Lutherans in particular, the ones in apparent thrall to lesser and poorer accounts of the Christian Gospel than the one we get to confess—purely as a gift, by the way, through no merit of our own. Far be it from this slave to despise another for wearing chains of a different hue.

Or to turn that around and say it as Christ insists that it be said: far be it for this son to denigrate that daughter when the only thing going for either of us is the alien righteousness—you gotta love that term—that she was baptized into just as I was.

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A FAST FINAL thought:

They panicked, remember, about Christians going crazy as in sinning up a storm? Silly boys. They forgot how stingy sin is with the slack it gives its minions.

Christ's approach is altogether different. "Go nuts," he says. "You're as free as free can be," he says, "to paint the town red with my high regard for sinners. Bottom line: God counts as right those who are wrong because I their Christ am right for them. Go ahead. You do it too. Lavishly. Excessively. Beyond all reason or sense, common or uncommon; for they are God's "precious," insanely so, on my account; and so are you. It's time for you and them together to start *living* up a storm. Enjoy!"

"Oh," says Christ, "and by the way: to this end I'll stick with you, annoying you always, to the close of the age. Count on it. This time with joy."

May the peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

+ Soli Deo Gloria +

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