

**Sermon – 11<sup>th</sup> Pentecost**  
**Luke 13:22-30**  
**August 25, 2019**

**“Predestination – Not Prequalification!”**

Predestination is a teaching that suggests God decides a person’s salvation prior to their creation. It concerns only that one aspect of a human life. So, God may or may not know, or much care what you’ll eat for breakfast or wear to work each day. If you’ve heard the phrase “predestination” you likely know it’s a loaded one – fraught with implications about the very character and goodness of God. It’s not preached often, if ever, from Lutheran pulpits. We believe salvation, defined as a relationship with God through faith in Jesus that promises eternal life, is possible, indeed the will of God, for every person who ever lives.

Yet whenever I’ve solicited ideas for sermon or Bible study topics predestination pops up. By way of today’s parable about a closed door and next week’s parable from Luke 14 about who you should invite to a dinner party we’ll give it some thought. In Christian theology, including Lutheran, the “pre-knowledge” of God is affirmed. This is sometimes referred to as “foreknowledge” –as it was in a Lutheran Confessional Document from 1576 called the Formula of Concord – where it states “*God’s foreknowledge is nothing else than this: God knows all things before they happen...*”

I won’t get into all the implications of that – other than to reaffirm that foreknowledge doesn’t concern itself with our wardrobe or culinary choices. Predestination concerns itself with people’s salvation. In its earliest forms, as with the great 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian Augustine, it affirmed that God is by nature gracious and extends that grace to all creation – God does not “exclude” anyone from his love. The graciousness of God was vigorously affirmed by Augustine because God saved him from a life of immorality and unbelief.

But predestination in later Christian minds came to mean that while God is “predisposed” to be gracious, God nevertheless “predetermined” who he would be gracious toward. God obviously desires that people know him, serve him, even enjoy him, but selects those who will, and by implication, those who won’t. That’s where grace, or the withholding of it, gets “particular” or personal – and moves away from being general or universal.

What led some Christian writers to think like that – most notably John Calvin – a 16<sup>th</sup> century contemporary of Martin Luther, was passages like Ephesians 1:11, which says “*in him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will*”, and, most notably, Romans 9:22-24, where Paul says “*what if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory, even us.*” The oft maligned Calvin, like Luther, believed God loved all people – as Augustine did. Calvin’s now infamous teaching on predestination – “*double predestination*” actually, some to eternal life and some to eternal punishment is one even he concluded “*must frighten us.*”

Much like Romans 9 was, Calvin’s teaching may have arose from a perplexed mind and exasperated heart - like Paul writing of the dilemma of unbelief among his kinsmen the Jews. Neither could connect the dots

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between a God of power and love and an unbelieving heart. It was a conclusion drawn from human observation as much if not more than Biblical revelation. There is no teaching of the Bible that says God created some people to spend eternity in hell – to forever be “*the objects of his wrath.*” None. Even Paul concluded, in Romans 11:29, that the gifts and call of God are irrevocable.

Yet in our parable of the “closed door” the very epitome of grace – our Lord Jesus Christ, seems to slam a door in the faces of some of God’s beloved. The question is “*who were those on the outside?*” When I consider my own sin, it’s not at all hard to imagine me beating on that door asking admission to a party I find I’m no longer invited to. Maybe you’ve felt the same. That’s a condition resolved through confession and absolution however. Getting on our knees and coming to the table each week addresses that.

Those ‘on the outside’ in our parable were not people who’d been pre-excluded from the graciousness of God – but those in whom the grace of God through the forgiveness of sins in Jesus name was disregarded. These “outsiders” were former “insiders” – people of Israel, “*the first becoming the last*” now actively denying that in Jesus the grace and forgiveness of God was before them. They were not people who, absent any knowledge of God whatsoever, by chance or design, are suddenly shown the consequences of not knowing God.

Lutherans are in a bit of a bind here. We confess that we “*cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus our Lord or come to him.*” But we also believe that God calls us to such faith – and never stops. Some may run out of time to hear, or are too set in their ways to hear, or too far embedded in sin or false belief to hear, but God never stops calling. You were “predestined” to hear this word of grace and truth. And right here is where God does his “predestining” to a good and godly way of life prepared for you and an eternal life “kept in heaven for you.”

A final word - in verse Luke 13:24, Jesus says “strive” to enter the narrow door. That word also makes Lutherans nervous – why strive for that which you can only receive? In Matthew 7:13-14, near the conclusion of his famous “Sermon on the Mount” with all its challenges and promises, Jesus says; “*enter the narrow gate-for wide is the gate and broad the road that leads to destruction, and many enter it*” - a virtually identical phrase. In Jerusalem of ancient days as now, there were wide gates you could pass through side by side with others, and a few so narrow you had to go single file.

Our Lord sets aside any notion that we can know and serve God and still “*go with the flow*”, taking our favorite ideas and precious things with us into the kingdom of God. Jesus is a narrow gate – his way, truth and life demand much but promise more. Your sins are yours...no denying that. But forgiveness and grace are his...there’s room enough for these and only these in the narrow gate. There he takes what is yours and gives you what is his - as you were created, that is, “predestined” to do. We’ll say more next time. AMEN