**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“Trusting Jesus Without Calculations”**

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“[Jesus said], ‘The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?’ And they discussed it among themselves, saying, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” He will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?” But if we say, “From Man,” we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know” (Mt. 21:25-27).

As next year’s presidential election approaches, candidates are being asked questions. “What is your position on the immigration crisis?” “What is your position on the LGBTQI+ agenda?” “How about abortion -- What is your position on that? No limitations whatsoever? 15 weeks? Exceptions for rape, incest, the mother’s health? Zero tolerance?” Often, we see the candidates calculating their responses. As they answer, they are thinking about red and blue and purple voting demographics, new and changing opinion polls and news bites, and how certain answers will affect the voting. “If I say this, they’ll think I’m extreme and draconian and I’ll lose half my base. On the other hand, if I say this, they’ll think I’m weak and spineless and I’ll lose the other half of my base.” And so, they calculate and give long, convoluted answers hoping to appeal to the greatest number of voters.

This phenomenon does not just play out in politics. It happens in *our* daily lives as well. Conversations around the water cooler at work. Facebook profiles are carefully cultivated for mass appeal. Even the dinner table with friends is carefully monitored. “If I say this, then they will think this.”

I know a man with adult children. He is smart, articulate, and has well-developed points of view. His children are the same way. But dad and his adult children disagree about many things. When the children come to visit, they all avoid the hot topics. But dad isn’t content with that. He told me, “It’s like having polite houseguests. Can’t we have any deep and candid conversations?”

Jesus invites us to practice a faith that ***is*** bold and candid. He invites us to trust in Him without reservation. He invites us to live and speak as His children without calculating what others will think. There is a difference, after all, between believing something because it’s safe in our culture to do so, and believing something because it’s true and right, *regardless* of the results it will bring.

In our text, Jesus is in the Temple being questioned by the religious authorities. They are seeking to entrap Him and to get Him to say something blasphemous so they can arrest Him and maybe even execute Him. The day before, Jesus entered Jerusalem with an unauthorized parade. He rode into the capital of His nation like a king, with large crowds waving palm branches and shouting “Hosanna to the King!” He stirred up the whole city and refused to silence His noisy supporters.

Then He proceeded to the outer courts of the Temple where vendors were running a brisk business exchanging money and selling animals for sacrifice. Enraged, Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold sacrifices. Then he turned to healing people right there in the Temple courts (Mt. 21:12-14).

The next day, Jesus returned to the Temple. The chief priests are there along with the elders, and they’ve been waiting for him. These are the highest religious authorities in the land, and they aim to keep it that way. “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” Translate that. “Just who do you think you are?”

In response, Jesus says, “I will ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” Is it of God or just of some guy?”

The religious authorities were trying to entrap *Him*. Now they find *themselves* entrapped. Rather than answer, they feel the need to calculate before they respond. Notice, they do not take time to discuss what they believe. They do not search the Scriptures. They do not discuss whether John was sent from God or not. Instead, they discuss the merits of what happens if they ***say*** they believe one thing or another. Faith for them has become a calculated social posture. What they truly believe doesn’t matter anymore. What matters is what others will *think* of them if they say one thing or another.

Their view of John is clear enough. They hated him and his message. But to voice this view of John would expose them to the anger of the crowd, with jubilation fresh in their minds following His Palm Sunday entrance. And to say John’s baptism came from God would be insincere and would expose them to ridicule, because their rejection of John and his message was well known (v. 32).

Today, everybody knows that social disapproval of the Christian faith is growing in our nation. People are becoming ever more impatient and hostile to Christians and to the Christian faith. Therefore, the temptation for us is to live a calculated faith. Like politicians, we feel the need to be careful when we share what we believe. But Jesus shows us where those with a calculated faith end up: trapped and silenced. They are unable to confess because of the repercussions if they say one thing or another. They are unable to follow the Savior.

Jesus does not want our calculated responses *as if* they were faith. He does not want us to say we believe when we do not, to say we care for immigrants or the unborn or the poor when we do not, to say we honor marriage and the marriage bed when we do not, to say we speak truthfully when we do not.

The Christian faith is not about saying the right words to wiggle ourselves out of a pinch. Faith is not about giving the correct, calculated response. Ephesians 4, “Put away falsehood, and let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor” (v. 25). 1 John 3, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (v. 24). And from 3rd John 1, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (v. 4).

As Christians, we are not out to garner votes, or to collect the thumbs up. Our aim is to live faithfully, lovingly, and with Christian integrity as His people, according to the Lord’s Word. Psalm 51, “Behold, You [Lord] desire truth in the inward parts” (v. 6), not just nice little sound bites on the lips, but truth in the innermost parts. So,

* Speaking the truth in love is the Christian way (Eph. 4:15). Equivocating is not.
* Always being ready to give the reason for the hope we have is the Christian way (1 Pet. 3:15). Beating around the bush is not.
* Confessing our faith clearly and succinctly is the Christian way (Rom. 10:2-10). Throwing up a rhetorical smoke screen is not.
* Standing firm in the faith is the Christian way (1 Cor. 16:13). Sitting on the fence with a forked tongue is not.

Jesus has come to free us from the game of calculated responses. He has come to free us from the internal dissonance we have when we don’t live true to our faith.

We follow Jesus today not because it’s fashionable to do so, but because He is Jesus. We follow Him because He forgives our sin. We follow Him because He gives us a new life, a free life, a transparent life, a bold and uncalculated authentic life in Him.

It’s not that we will no longer sin and never calculate our words again. We know we will and acknowledged the same early in the service, saying we have “sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone . . . and justly deserve His present and eternal punishment.” But, we also know Jesus took ownership of our sin, including all our calculated responses. Like sheep, we’ve gone astray with our clever, nuanced confessions and our fearful silence, but the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. On the cross, Jesus became guilty and damnable in our place, and was crushed for our iniquities. The only calculation He made on the cross was to continue suffering the punishment of your sin and mine until it was thoroughly satisfied. Not until every last iniquity (past, present or future) was accounted for, did Jesus say, “It is finished.”

So, let the devil and the world rage against us. It’s the judgment of Jesus that matters and He has declared us innocent and righteous. Do not fear the sniveling reproach of the world. “Though an army encamps against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rises against me, even then I will be confident” (Ps. 27:3).

Jesus has won the victory over sin, death, and the devil, and God gives you the victory through the means of grace. He promises to return soon and bring us into His presence. So, look beyond the frowning rejection of those in the foreground, to the smiling acceptance and love and of our gracious Lord on the horizon. He’s coming. He’s coming soon. Isaiah 35, “Therefore strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” (vv. 3-4).

In His presence, you will feel no pressure or need to make calculated responses, only a deep need to praise Him. No fear of recriminations there, no sniveling disapproval from Him, only fullness of joy in His presence and eternal pleasures at His right hand (Ps. 16:11). Thanks be to God. Amen.