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Pentecost 21 – Luke 24:44-53 – What Is *Too* Catholic?

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Here's a different kind of public confession: it's a pet peeve of mine when somebody looks at a particular church practice and says, "That's just so Catholic" or "that's a Catholic thing, we Lutherans don't do that" – especially if that person doesn't really know the history or symbolism behind that practice.

For example, there are three objects sitting here at the front of the church, and I've heard people say, "That's just so Catholic" about all of them. The one that's draped over the baptismal font is a pall cloth. Yes, you might see that at a Catholic funeral draped over a casket. But did you know that this white cloth and golden cross are actually meant to remind us of the purity of holy baptism, that when this person was baptized they were covered in the clean, white robes of Christ's perfect righteousness and now they're wrapped in his arms in heavenly perfection? Or the next one you see here is this really tall candle that's called a *Paschal* Candle – an Easter candle. Again, you might see one of these used in various Catholic ceremonies, but basically it's meant to remind us that because Jesus lives, we also will live – first spiritually through holy baptism and then eternally when he comes back for us on the Last Day. So you would see this candle used during the Easter season and during every baptism and funeral, because it connects all those things together with the resurrection life Jesus gives us. Then finally, the last thing you see here is a processional cross – somebody would normally carry it at the front of a procession into church for a worship service. Again, you might see one of these used at festival times in Catholic churches, but just like an ancient army standard that soldiers would look at and know "this is where I'm supposed to be and what I'm supposed to be doing," what this is actually meant to remind us is that in this world we are the church militant that always looks to Christ and follows him wherever he leads. He is the constant focus of our faith, our victorious Champion over sin, death, and the devil who is present with us and working among us by the power of his Word and Sacraments. So there's really nothing "Catholic" about any of that; those are just fine symbols of good Christian truth!

Again, none of those symbols are "too Catholic" for us to use, because they're symbols that aren't based in specifically Roman Catholic tradition or abuses. They're based in solid Scriptural truth. They're not Catholic with a capital C – that refers specifically to the Roman Catholic Church. They're catholic with a small c – that's an old word that just means ecumenical or universal; they belong to the holy Christian church in general, to all believers of all times and places, not to any specific denomination. That's an important balance for us to find here when it comes to the way we confess our faith publicly. It is a good thing for us to celebrate the common ground we have with all Christians everywhere. Yet at the same time, we need to have our eyes wide open to the real differences that exist between us as well. We promote the positives but avoid the abuses. And Jesus has something to teach us about that in our Gospel lesson for today.

It was Easter evening, the day Jesus rose from the dead. The Jews had rejected Jesus and put him to death only a few days earlier, but now everything was different. Christ was risen, his work was

completed, all his promises were true – even the promises made about him hundreds or thousands of years earlier. As Jesus said, "*Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms... This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.*"

See, what Jesus did and what he was trying to teach the disciples was based entirely on the Old Testament Scriptures. This is what God had always been working toward in this world! Even though the Jews rejected Christ, even though the Jews would resent Christians, even though there were significant differences in what those two groups believed, they both shared a heritage that could be used to find common ground and build on it. In fact, Jesus and the apostles both made a habit of showing the Jews how their shared Old Testament Bible history culminated in the coming of Christ. And the point of all that was what Jesus once told the Jews: "*You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. [and they were right! Because...] These are the Scriptures that testify about me*" (John 5:39).

Jews and Christians both believed in one true God. They both studied the same Old Testament Scriptures. They both knew that God promised to send a Savior one day. That was an excellent foundation for Christians to share their faith with Jews who didn't know Jesus and what he did for them yet! Jesus was the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament, and his death and resurrection won forgiveness and salvation for everyone who believes in him. That's not just true on some dusty, old manuscript or in some stuffy, academic dissertation. That's a truth that has real meaning for you and your life both now and in eternity. Jesus referred to himself here when he said to the disciples, "*Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.*" Jesus wanted his people to share the full significance of everything he did with the Jews and eventually with all the rest of the world, because believing the Scriptures and believing in Jesus means going to heaven and being saved for eternity.

In other words, Jesus wanted Christians to promote the positives with the Jews so that eventually they could open their eyes to the *prime* positive, Jesus himself as the perfect, promised Savior of the world. The Christians showed the Jews that their own history and worship practices all pointed to Christ and how he finally brought the forgiveness and life they were hoping for. And that's the same way God wants us to do things nowadays, too. When we confess our faith publicly, he doesn't want us to be aloof or standoffish. He wants us to build bridges so we can connect people to Christ. The devil is our enemy in this world, not our fellow people and certainly not our fellow Christians. So let's promote the positives and celebrate what we do share, especially with other Christian denominations. Yes, the Bible *is* God's Word. The one true Triune God *did* create us and this world around us. Jesus *is* our Savior who loves us. We *do* confess the same Creeds and speak the same Lord's Prayer. Forgiveness, life, and salvation *are* ours through faith in Jesus Christ. That's what it means to be Christian! So if you see someone crossing themselves or wearing ashes on their foreheads in Lent in the spring, don't think, "That's too Catholic." Those are symbols to help us remember that we've been marked as redeemed children of Christ and by his wounds we are healed from the sin and death we deserve, so instead let's be thankful for that simple Gospel message of faith in Jesus that we share with the entire holy Christian Church of every time and place.

Like Jesus said in our lesson, the work of public confession is the work of *witnessing*. A witness is someone who knows what they have seen and heard, and who shares that message clearly and faithfully with whoever needs to hear it – the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! Well, even though we didn't see and hear Jesus with our own eyes and ears, we can still be his witnesses by faith and by the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word that we speak. That means our job is to share that simple Gospel message of what Jesus did for us and for our salvation with everyone we can. We don't change it and we don't shirk it; we tell it loudly and proudly, just as it is!

But remember too, that being a witness in this sinful world sometimes also means testifying *against* someone or something wrong. Jesus did it, Paul did it, all of the disciples did it – and the world hated them and even tried to kill them for it. That's not easy work, but that's why Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit here, so they would have the strength to say what needed to be said and do what needed to be done. Yes, the early Christians had lots of common ground with the Jews that they hoped to build on to lead people to see Jesus as the promised Savior and the fulfillment of the whole Jewish faith, but not all the Jews saw it that way. The Jewish religious leaders especially were violently opposed to Jesus and fought fiercely against the idea that salvation came through any other way than keeping the Law of Moses. And in the years to come, false teachers would come into the church teaching that circumcision is essential for salvation, or the resurrection already happened and you might've missed out, or in one way or another *Jesus wasn't enough*. Well the apostles couldn't just sit idly by and let all that stand. They knew that in the real world, in this sin-broken world, speaking up for what's right also means speaking against what's wrong. And in order to do that, they would need the power of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of Jesus – so that's exactly why he gave them to the disciples and to us.

Yes, that work can be difficult and draining, there's no doubt about it. But when Jesus was ready to ascend and leave the disciples to continue his work, they didn't grumble or shake in their boots. Actually, considering the enormity of the task that was before them, their reactions were really pretty amazing: *“While [Jesus] was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”*

The disciples knew what was in front of them: a lifetime of witnessing to the world about Jesus that would bring them rejection and persecution. But yet, they considered it a joy to suffer for the Name of Jesus, because that meant they were following him faithfully. They praised God for the privilege of sharing Jesus and the truth of Scripture, no matter how burdensome and uncomfortable it might be sometimes, because that was the best way for them to love and please their Savior and it was the only way for them to drive out the darkness of unbelief and the devil's lies and bring the unadulterated light of Jesus' salvation to sinners.

And friends, as we continue to take up that mantle nowadays, we can do it with those very same attitudes. As those early Christians publicly confessed their faith, they promoted the positives and avoided the abuses – but they didn't avoid them just by not talking about them and pretending they're

not there, like some churches do. Would it help to treat a cancer diagnosis that way, or a threat on your life? No, ignoring those kinds of problems doesn't do anybody any good. Those early Christians avoided abuses by refusing to fall into them and actively warning against them, because false doctrine always leads away from Christ and damages faith. And that's the way it still needs to be for us now too, even in our modern-day, ultra-sensitive, politically-correct American culture. We still need to actively avoid spiritual abuses, because they can still hurt souls and ruin faith. And if there's ever a proper sense to say, “That's too Catholic,” that would be it. Praying the Rosary, doing mandatory penance, buying indulgences, paying for Masses – those are things that detract from Christ and his perfect, completed work for us. Putting too much attention on your emotions or your decision for Christ or treating the Sacraments as ordinances you have to keep – those are things that make *you* the real focus of your salvation. Theological liberalism, trusting more in science and academia than in Scripture, even attitudes like “We're all Christian, we're all going to the same place, so what's the big deal?” – that all compromises the very foundation of our faith and opens us up to the contamination, the *gangrene* that the Bible says false teaching is. Yes, when we confess our faith publicly, we want to promote the positives, there's no doubt about it. But we also have to consciously and clearly avoid the abuses and all the dangers that come with them, because the only way we can keep our souls healthy and safe is by giving them God's Word in all its truth and purity.

There's an old story I've heard about the WELS that tells you what kind of reputation we have in American Christianity. It's kind of funny, but kind of sad too, because it probably means we haven't always communicated our faith as well as we should. The story says that a person had just died and gone to heaven, and they were getting their welcome tour. Well, all the different Christian denominations from back on earth had their own rooms there in God's mansion. But when the tour came to the Lutheran room, the tour guide said, “Now be quiet as you come by here; you don't want to startle those WELS folks, because they think they're the only ones here.”

Now I hope you know that that's not what we actually believe or teach or confess. We believe in the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints – we believe and rejoice that everyone from every time and place who trusts in Jesus as their Savior will be together in heaven one day, regardless of their earthly denomination. In other words, we want to promote the positives between believers! But that can never come at the expense of avoiding the abuses of false teaching, because that's how we stand up for the truth and that's how we show real love to our Savior, his Word, and the souls of our neighbors. If we don't avoid the abuses, they might damage or even destroy faith, and our Lord would never want that – he did way too much in his life and death and resurrection for us to ever let that slide. No, our strong public confessions aren't just about being right or winning arguments. They're about presenting the truth of Jesus and Scripture and our eternal salvation in as clear and pure a light as possible. So really, the only way something can be “too Catholic,” or “too Baptist,” or even “too Lutheran” (!) is if it takes our focus away from Jesus and puts it on us and our own traditions and works. No, friends – let's always keep the focus of our faith squarely on our Savior and fight with all our might against anything that would cloud that, because then we will be the kind of joyful, God-praising, Spirit-powered witnesses of Jesus' death and resurrection for our life and salvation that he truly wants us to be in this world. God grant it. Amen.