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WITNESS, MERCY, LIFE TOGETHER: A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

by Bart Day

Faith in Jesus unites all Christians, transcending cultures, languages and geography.

THAT WHICH BEGAN AS the “very good” creation, teaming with life and light, at once was broken as the serpent’s seeds were sown, and the weeds of the enemy began to be harvested in the ears of men. There is no one that does any good, and there are none that are righteous.

What God created alive, man has sent into death and destruction. That death has gone to all the corners of the earth. There is not a race of man, a sex, a pocket of life or any piece of God’s perfect creation that has not fallen prey to death. Saint Paul, quoting from Psalms 14 and 53 says, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:11–18).

So what was for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden a natural fear, love and trust in God above all things, after the Fall is the complete opposite. Where life reigned, now death sits upon the throne of men.

This is the depravity in which we find ourselves across borders, cultures, languages and peoples. But what God places as the crown of His creation (i.e., man), He will not allow Satan to carry captive into the torment of hell. What

was life and then became death is life again by the power and work of the God that created life in the first place — for you and for me and for the whole world.

Consider with me the Gospel of Luke’s account of the triumphal entry. After Jesus had come into the city, some of the Pharisees tell Jesus to rebuke His disciples for their singing and shouting. Jesus answers, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out” (Luke 19:40). Those people were stones; the redeemed continue

Life together with Jesus Christ creates a worldwide phenomenon. What was before separated by borders, language, customs, pride, self-interest and all the other “children” born of a sinful nature, now is gathered together in one to live in forgiveness, life and salvation in Jesus.

to be stones that cry out the song and confession of praise to God for a Savior — the God-Man Jesus Christ. The reign of sin and death has made each one of us dead: dead as a rock, or rather, stone dead. The key, however, is what Jesus does with dead rocks — in other words — with ordinary rocks. He makes them extraordinary, like Him.

What does this mean for Christ’s hands and His feet, His lungs and His heart, His body, walking, running, moving all over the world? Examining witness and

mercy has less importance for the congregation of God’s holy people if we do not first define and examine that very congregation, also known as the bride of Christ and the body of Christ, which is the collective gathering of saints from all over the globe, even you and me.

Life together (*koinonia*) is a description of the stones that have become living. St. Peter picks up this metaphor in his first epistle: “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and

precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4–5). Notice first that St. Peter is talking about stones that are already living. The verse could be translated, “As living stones coming are rejected.” The stones have been forged into the cross shape of Christ, and their stance before God has been changed. He had once before rejected these stones, even as the “builders” had rejected Christ as the cornerstone. Now they are no longer rejected by God, but chosen and precious. Their acceptance is not of themselves, but from God.

“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him.” Thusly, Martin Luther began to explain the Third Article of the creed. He could have been describing a builder gathering stones. This builder searches the world over, looking for stones to build, not a tower into the heavens, but a temple where he can dwell with his people. You have to be a stone or else he will leave you in the field. And yet there is nothing to fear because we are all stones. We just lay there, without any power of our own. We have to be lifted, carried and placed into the right spot. Of course, this is unlike any other builder the world has known. God takes ordinary stones and makes them His own, living stones, ready to be built into a spiritual house. He does this through the means of His Holy Spirit. So it is that the living God, Jesus Christ, sends His Holy Spirit into the pastures and the high places, the low places, to this country and that country, to these people and that people to declare them living.

Luther goes on to say, “But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” At the very center of the Holy Spirit’s work are Jesus Christ and His work on the cross. The Holy Spirit does His work only by giving the good gifts of the cross to dead, cold, stones lying in the fields of sin and darkness (perhaps we should call them the “Valley of the Shadow of Death”). When cold and dead stones are washed in Baptism, preached the cross and fed the holy body and blood of Jesus, they are no longer cold and dead, but full of life. At the center of our life together is the work of Holy Spirit received through His means in this place and even to the very ends of the earth.

“Daily and richly He forgives my sins and the sins of all believers,” Luther adds, which brings us to our second point in St. Peter’s illustration: we are being built into a

spiritual house. That means that our stance before God is not a private one. How often do we carry on as “Christians” extolling the virtues of our personal and individual relationship with Jesus while ignoring or divorcing our brothers and sisters in the faith from that life? The work of God to forgive our sins and make us living and whole in His sight is one of stacking us in the correct order of paradise-like, architectural beauty and significance in an eternal community that is the Church. (This has a global significance in light of the visible/invisible Church: Christ uses the right stone from the right place to be part of His living house. In the spiritual house, there are no εθνη but only the nation that is the Lord’s: Israel.) The Holy Spirit has established a route for your exact and personal sins to be forgiven and destroyed, but He does so in the context of the spiritual house that is His Church. In this Church, He is daily and constantly active to forgive our sins and to tie us together.

We want to imagine that a spiritual house made of living stones does not need any mortar, but it does. It is our Lord Jesus Christ’s blood coursing through the midst of us. As soon as that blood is blocked or mopped up, the house begins to crumble. We need our Lord in our midst in order to hold us together. God told the people of Israel that the “life was in the blood.” The life of this spiritual house is Jesus’ blood. Without it, we are back to being cold, ordinary stones. With it, we are a vibrant, living and active Church. Also important to note is how this blood, the intervention of the Holy Spirit in all His means, makes us active. We find our life from outside of us.

And the Christ-given life, surging through the midst of His Church, makes a new Eden. The spiritual house is a paradise and a foretaste of what is to come. No longer are we rejected by God, but in Christ Jesus, in the Church, we are called, chosen and precious. In this Church, we now have a new definition of love. If you can say that Lutheranism has “experience,” it is in the giving of our whole selves to others.

Before our encounter with God’s Word, we thought of love as an emotion, or if we thought of it as an act, it was associated with lust and passion. Each living stone is placed by God specifically in the context of other believers. There, we are given a heart for love, to bear one another’s burdens: to bear the weight of the stones pushing down on us, pushing down on the Cornerstone. We learn of love by being loved first. No greater love has a man except that he lay down His life for the world. Since Jesus laid down His life to love us, now He has made us little Christs

to love the world. To be a Christian is to be a little Christ, like the crucifixion, to give your life for those around you. So it isn't shocking that life together in Jesus is not idle. We cannot divorce the body of Christ from Christ. As the head of the body, Christ Jesus pushes us out into the world: walking, running and moving to all corners of the earth, a spiritual house that can move and, indeed, does move out to meet the burdens and needs of those around us and those in the world. But Christ's spiritual house also moves with the Gospel upon its lips. A life together in Jesus is always a life of mercy and of witness.

A "very good" new creation in Christ and His cross is teaming with life — serving and speaking forgiveness in Christ to the nations. This is a big shift, is it not? Once the venom of asps filled our lips, but now the Lord has opened our lips and His praise tumbles out. That which was destroyed in the Garden of Eden is restored in the cross of Jesus. We all find our beginning in — and trace a lineage of death and sin back to — our father Adam. We were scattered each to our own language and people because we desired a name for ourselves that is not and was not the name of Yahweh. But Jesus has come to where we are to gather us together again as one people with His name upon our hearts and foreheads, as those who have been redeemed by Christ the crucified.

It was the will of God that what was scattered at the Tower of Babel would be gathered in Jesus' death and resurrection. Of course, we see this great reversal in the events of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2, and it continues even now as the name of that God-Man Jesus has been given to us in the waters of regeneration and renewal of Baptism. The washing of the Holy Spirit makes rocks alive, and the name placed upon hearts and foreheads makes its way to lips and tongues.

God does not build this spiritual house in a vacuum. The songs of confession and praise do not entirely reverberate off the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem. For a time, the song of the Church and the confession of the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world must be sung in cramped quarters while under attack. The Church finds itself being nurtured and grown in the midst of a vile, dark and sinful world. The "very good" new creation — that is, the Church of God — dwells in the shadow in the valley of death. The light of Christ shines forth, breaking into the darkness, shattering a comfortable environment for the enemies of God. As John put it, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). Indeed, the darkness has tried to

overcome it even as it cannot understand it. The darkness is attacking it and trying to destroy it.

The world would speculate that this "thing" is something from the past. Maybe it is a prophet that has come back to life or a spirit from yesteryear. Those who know the sacred writings of the people of Israel might even get closer, naming him Elijah, Isaiah or some other prophet, or even "terror on all sides" himself: Jeremiah. Different peoples and cultures will try to discredit this spiritual house and call it one of many worldviews. They may say to ignore it, like Gamaliel suggested to the Sadducees and leaders of the people: "Keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:38). There is more truth to Gamaliel's statement than he knew. For, indeed, this is an act of God. God has created a living, breathing and active Church for Himself in the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. And it will not fail, but living stones already have their victory in that Jesus who hanged on a tree. This message and this act are what confirm us in our faith and carry us into the midst of our enemies' territory.

St. John says in his first epistle, "For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree" (1 John 5:7-8). Indeed, those three are witnesses of the crucifixion. They are not just some three nondescripts from the olden days; they are alive and active in your life, in the Church's life, pulling and building the structure of Christ's body. They flow forth from Christ, delivering the victory over sin and death that was won on the cross and your justification in His resurrection. Jesus gives up His Spirit. Water and blood flow forth from His spear-pierced side: the **Spirit**, who has called you by the Gospel and the gifts by which He enlightens you, **water** that He used to wash you in your Baptism and **blood** by which He bids you drink that you never thirst again. These things have come to be inside you, but they cannot be contained inside you. Faith grabs hold of these witnesses and pushes the message of their testifying to the lips of the church. They must burst out from your heart onto your tongue and out your lips. Even as faith pushes the message of the cross to the lips of the church, the church asks for God to be the one that opens each of our lips (Ps. 51:15). We only know how to speak, because the Holy Spirit has brought the words of the Father to us in the first place. Children learn to speak by listening to their parents. People of other cultures and languages learn one

another's language by listening first.

The message that they carry is very specific. This message is centered on Jesus Christ and focused specifically on the cross (forgiveness won and life for the world). It is a message that the Spirit moves the church to speak, to sing and to confess before peoples, lands, kings and presidents. The Gospel is not something that gets rid of persecution and opposition, but it is not squashed by these either (the gates of hell shall not prevail against Christ's church).

So, the Holy Spirit encounters more obstinate unbelievers and uses the Church to call them by the Gospel and to enlighten them with His gifts. When our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, told the apostles to make disciples of all nations and to baptize them, He willed that the entire life of the Church be one of witness. Francis of Assisi is often credited for saying, "Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words." This quote mingles (and confuses) witness and mercy. The Gospel is always upon the lips of the Church. To preach is to declare and to witness is to tell. The entire life of the Church is one of telling and proclaiming, even as our Lord says that His Holy Spirit will declare all things to the Church (John 16:14), the Church will declare those good gifts to the world.

This does not mean the Church does not demonstrate mercy. It does. The difference is that when the Church is doing acts of mercy, it does not stop using its tongue. Loving the neighbor in action does not mean a cessation of loving the neighbor in witness. The two can survive simultaneously, and they do. Also important to note is the powerful, creative and changing Word of God. To speak the Gospel is performative, and therefore, to speak the Gospel is to love the neighbor. To speak the Gospel is the Holy Spirit being active in the midst of the spiritual house, which is the body of Christ.

Now a body has lips and a tongue, but also has hands and feet. As the Church moves around in the world, it cannot help but be active in the response to the world around it. We often say, "The Church is in the world, not of it." One of the great light-bulb moments for Martin Luther was that to remain in the world and not of it did not mean to seclude oneself from the world, but rather to remain connected to the Word of God and Christ's good gifts of forgiveness and life.

The Church goes at the command and direction of Jesus into the world. She crosses all borders and barriers. She knows all languages, and she has incorporated all

peoples. Remember we said that God has and continues to search the world over for living stones to place into His spiritual house. That spiritual house returns to those fields to love and to speak and care and to nurture the world.

The Church is not of the world; she is of Christ, in the world to speak the Gospel and to love the world she meets. The Christian life is one that flows forth from the life of Christ. We know love and what it means to do acts of mercy because Christ has first loved us and laid down His life for us. "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16).

We have been grafted into the vine of Christ. We now are part of a much bigger plant, and the fruit that comes from our branches is there because of the blood of Christ that binds us together and surges through our veins. We cannot help but bear fruit, and when we do not, the Father comes with His pruning shears to make sure we do soon. We have a new definition of love compared to the weak and self-serving definition the world uses. Love for us is death. Love for the Church is laying down our life for the needs of others and for the world. Love for the Church is Christ in the midst of us, filling our mouths with the Word of God and pushing us into the world to love our neighbor.

Life together with Jesus Christ creates a worldwide phenomenon. What was before separated by borders, language, customs, pride, self-interest and all the other "children" born of a sinful nature, now is gathered together in one to live in forgiveness, life and salvation in Jesus. Life together is at the same time dynamic and always moving into the world for the sake of the other. We only have our identification and life in Christ, but that Christ gives life and love to the words we speak and the work we do. It is, in a way, a new culture; it is for certain a new people with a new language and a new food. For once we were dead rock, and we were not a people, but now we are living stones being built up into a spiritual house and we have a God: Jesus Christ who has laid down His life for us and picked it up again. He is our head, our God, our life, our Word and language, and He is our work. We do not have to come up with anything on our own. He supplies all we need.

So, as we describe what the Church is, it is defined and shaped by the work of the Holy Spirit. He gathers, enlightens and fills us with heavenly things even while we are on earth.

But soon that will not be the case. He will raise us and

all the dead and give eternal life to you and me and all believers in Christ. Then we will be a spiritual house with no darkness at our walls, no persecution and no pain. We will be with the whole host of witnesses that have gone before, and we will know mercy purely and perfectly forever being together — one life — in the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world — our head and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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