

Sermon on Luke 22, 24-35, 25.02.2007

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

24 A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 25 But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. 26 But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. 28 'You are those who have stood by me in my trials; 29 and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, 30 so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 31 'Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.' 33 And he said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!' 34 Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.' 35 He said to them, 'When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?' They said, 'No, not a thing.'

Dear congregation,

wouldn't it be strange when you were holding your last meal with your best friends, and you have to tell them that you are going to die, and soon after a fight breaks out among your friends and they fight about who is to be regarded the greatest. Hello...? That is like, you on your deathbed and your children fighting over whom you have loved better than the other. Isn't there anything more important to do or to say? If they need to fight at all, why don't they wait? Isn't it highly inappropriate to spoil the last evening with your dear friend, because you can not pull yourself together and care for once not about yourself, but about your friend?

This is awkward, isn't it? And then the second scene right after the first fight has been calmed down by Jesus saying: Everyone gets the best seat in the house when we sit around the table in the kingdom of God.

Curtain! Second scene: Peter - who does not know him, good old Kephias, the rock? Sounds like a star from the World Wrestling Entertainment, and it is not completely wrong if we picture him like this. He is a fisherman, used to hard work, a doer, but also as it turns out, a talker. He talks a lot and he is always present when something important happens around Jesus. *'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!'* He is absolutely convinced that he will be able to this. He is not a liar, not someone who pretends to be brave knowing that he won't do what he had promised. Peter is a good soul; he is an honest person. I do not know exactly why he is making this claim. Maybe he feels obligated to ensure his friend Jesus that he will be standing at his side. Maybe he is shocked about what Jesus is saying, which basically means: Peter, hang in there, it will be tough, Satan is trying to divide this group and I have prayed, that your faith will persist. Don't worry, Jesus *I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!'* But Jesus knows better. *'I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.'*

This conversation around the table in connection with the last supper is not over yet, there is more talk, but I think this is enough already. It feels as if we would like to step into this room where Jesus has gathered his friends and say: Why don't you just be quiet? Stop talking like this. It's your friend's last night with you people, don't you grasp it! - When I read this story again it annoyed me, at first, and I was asking myself what, in God's name, the reason were that this incident is recorded in the bible. And when I found out, it

stopped me right in my tracks. Do you know what the reason is? God is holding up a mirror and holds it right in front of our nose. This is not just the disciples talking. This is me, as well, this is us!

Jesus is present and we have sometimes nothing better to do than quarrelling over the question who is better, and who needs to be on stage and who doesn't. And when I compare ourselves with Peter we also at times have the tendency to promise God everything, especially when we are desperate and need a sudden success or immediate help from above; then we are quick to make God all kinds of offers. Do you know what I mean? – God, if you get me out of this situation, if you just help me this one more time, if you ease my burden, then I do this and that for you. God, if you let me win the lottery; I'll give fifty percent to the poor...? - Does that sound familiar? No? Then it's perhaps because you have not promised that much in case you win, right?

I guess we all have a pretty good understanding, that living in a relationship with God, or with Jesus Christ does not automatically stop us from behaving absolutely stupid. My biggest unease when I think about the judgement we have to undergo one day, - remember, Jesus on the throne, we right in front of him, he with this book in his hand, which by the way is Jesus' and not Peter's job, but that's beside the point – so again, my biggest fear is, that Jesus reads out to me, what I have promised to him and never did. I also do not hope that he has meticulously recorded all the quarrelling when I tried to be someone or wanted let anybody know that I am certainly not the one to be pushed around or did not want to be overlooked or did not feel valued enough for all “excellent work” I was doing – yeah, right! – Wouldn't that be absolutely embarrassing to be just read back all the silly things you and I have done and said? We would be ashamed of ourselves.

Do not get me wrong, I do not want to rub this in, but those texts in the bible are not only indicators of how the disciples were and what they did. These passages are meant to make the readers and listeners think for a moment about the question: What do I do in the presence of Christ? How am I talking to Jesus and to others well knowing that he is always present, always listening to what I am saying, always watching what I am doing?

If we were all perfect, this would go right into our hearts and would be saved on our hard drive and we would walk out of here and never ever do something similar again. The thing is – we are not perfect and even if we have understood and thought about it and agreed that we need to change, the next thing you know is that we turn around and behave like before. (Just wait until the Annual Meeting – just joking!)

So what now? Is that all we can learn from this passage? – Someone wrote that the concept of what the reformation tried to spell out is hidden in this text. If you were with us in Camp Edgewood on our retreat you would know and probably never forget again, that the keystone of the theology of Martin Luther is that we have a merciful God. God always makes the first move towards us. He loves us, therefore he reveals himself to us as a merciful Father, he gives us faith, so that we know him and love him back. But he always comes down to us. God always comes down to us. No good deed can establish this relationship with God but his love for us! This is extremely important. And as an illustration you can see, when we look into scripture again, that Jesus does not give up those people who quarrel and say I am going to die for you. How does Jesus react here? Does he pound his fist on the table and say: You get out of here, all of you? Does he say: Haven't you understood anything I have been telling you for 12 month now? Is he angry? Does he rebuke them and yell at them? No! The answer is always: No! -

The dispute over who is the greatest among them and what does Jesus say? *'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. 26 But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. 28 'You are those who have stood by me in my trials; 29 and I confer on you, just as my*

Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, 30 so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Although you quarrel I'll give you the paradise. Would nice if you could serve each other instead trying to rule over one another, but heaven still awaits you!

Although Jesus knows darn well that Peter will deny knowing him he says: *I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*' This means, I still trust you, Peter and you will become the motor of the Christian church!

I want you to understand that there are three principles in this text which need to be understood:

1. The principle of grace

Jesus is showing to us God's new principle of how he treats people. Jesus tells us that the time of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is over' as far as God is concerned. He makes absolutely clear that to sit in God's kingdom is not a matter of doing everything right or being perfect in the first place. This is what Martin Luther called the justification through faith. God loves you although you are a sinner.

2. The principle of equality

One other principle which is talked about in this text was also rediscovered through the Reformation and that is the principle of equality. Have you noticed? *Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat.* What does that mean? If you sift something you end up with some stuff in your, in your sieve and a pile of other stuff which fell through the cracks. And this is an image for the following: In Satan's realm there is division. The evil which influences us day in and day out tries to tell us that there is an 'us and them', there are those who are better and those who are worse. And the whole trick is that we believe this to be a godly principle, but as a matter of fact it is satanic. – This is nothing new; we think it is a harmless distinction between 'us and them'. But this is where all the trouble and all the quarrelling and all the prejudice and all the hate generate from, especially we when we try to use this as religious or Christian principle. That is when everything starts to get wrong. Us and them, whereas in the family of God there should be no separation, no two class system, because what it says in the bible is, that Jesus dies for all and that all are created and treated equally by God. I can not elaborate on this but the priesthood of all believers and the clear understanding that we are all sinners was meant to eliminate barriers, and we as a church have to be very careful and cautious that we do not establish them after Jesus has torn them down. There us not an 'us and them' anymore there is just a 'we and HIM', meaning God.

3. The principle of trust

Jesus does not exchange his disciples after this conversation; he sticks with them and still believes in them. Jesus also sticks with us and trusts us as well. This trust gives us freedom to act. Since we do not have to be afraid of God and since God has chosen us to be a) his children, and b) his church, we can continue our path knowing that God trusts us that we still be able to do the right thing. We do not have to be afraid of our mistakes and failures, but we have the freedom of to correct where we err, to enjoy our accomplishments and to be proud to be followers of Christ as long as we do not get overconfident and arrogant, as long as we do not loose touch with Christ and as long as we do not think that we don't need him anymore.

The three principles of grace, equality and trust are the bread and butter for the work in our congregation. They should be and remain our motivation and our guide, our path and our goal in all we have to do in the future, be it as individuals, or as a congregation. These principles will help us to do the right things despite all our faults. As a church of the Reformation, let us never falter and forget to live by them. Amen.

And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.