

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 25, 2021

2 KINGS 4:42-44 | PSALM 145:10-18 | EPHESIANS 3:14-21 | JOHN 6:1-21

On Wednesday evenings this month, a small group of us have been reading the Small Catechism together. The Small Catechism is a little summary of basic Christian teaching that Martin Luther wrote about five hundred years ago. It's intended for families and use in the household, and so it's a good text to read together.

There is also a Large Catechism which is intended not for families, but for pastors. In particular, it is for pastors who are, Luther's words, "almost entirely incompetent and unable to teach."¹ And while I wouldn't count myself among that group, though some might beg to differ, I thought it couldn't hurt to spend a little bit of time with it. And I was reminded of this line in Luther's explanation of the first commandment. "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that really is your God."²

We often draw a bright line between religious practice, religious institutions, religious beliefs and their non-religious counterparts. And we usually just distinguish between the two by whether they use the word "God" or not. These beliefs and practices talk about God, so they are religious. These institutions and values don't talk about God, so they aren't religious.

Luther says that's not quite right. That religious practice isn't just about using the word "God," it's about what you trust. Everyone has some sort of God, something they trust deep down, some object of "ultimate concern."³ So the meaningful distinction isn't between being religious and not religious. Because in his mind everybody's religious about something. No, the meaningful distinction was between "up religion" and "down religion."⁴

"Up religion" means that you have to do something to get to God. You have to perform some ritual. You have to write some confession of faith. You have to make a decision. "Up religion" is all about what we do. "Up religion" is believing you can't have a vocation until you finish your degree. "Up religion" is telling kids they can't receive communion unless they take some first communion class or denying communion to people with dementia. "Up religion" is thinking that you haven't done enough to earn forgiveness. Up religion is all about what we do.

You don't have to believe in God to practice "up religion." "Up religion" is consumerism that tells me when I possess this one thing, I'll finally be happy. "Up religion" is needing to make ourselves endlessly marketable and investing our sense of self in a personal brand. One of my favorite examples of "up religion" is an article from a few years ago about five ways you can start loving your body today. And it was just core exercises. Essentially, "up religion" is trusting that if you make the right decisions and say the right thing and do the right program, you can make yourself worthy of love. You can get to God. And if you don't believe in God, you can get to fulfillment or realization or the ground of being or whatever word you want to use.

What we do as a community of faith, the tradition that we operate in, our expression in the community, is the opposite. It's "down religion." Because we believe that, in Jesus, God comes to us. You can see this in our practices. What do you have to do to receive communion? Just come to the table (or tell me to come to you). What do you have to do to be baptized? Pick a date on the calendar. What do you have to do to have your sins forgiven? Just show up.

¹ Intro to SC.

² Book of Concord 386-7.

³ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (Harper Collins, 2001), 88. "Faith as the state of being ultimately concerned implies love, namely, the desire and urge toward the reunion of the separated."

⁴ Timothy J. Wengert, *A Formula for Parish Practice: Using the Formula of Concord in Congregations* (Fortress Press, 2017), 51.

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But it's not just about practices. It's about our identities. That's probably the more important part. What do you have to do to be worthy of love? Nothing. What do you have to earn forgiveness? Nothing. What do you have to do to have dignity and worth as a person? Nothing. We believe that God does that for us in Jesus. Down religion is about how God acts for us.

Today's gospel reading is a great example of "down religion." The disciples have just fed the five thousand, and now they are in a boat somewhere halfway across the Sea of Galilee in the dark of night. It's hard to know which way to go. They're tired from a long day. Jesus isn't here. And then to add that on top of everything else, a big wind picks up. And now we have water coming into the boat, which is just great.

I think you can understand that feeling. Think back over the past year and a half. We've had, to state the obvious, a global pandemic that has killed at least four million people, maybe closer to ten million, led to a massive economic disruption, and upended our lives in many and various ways. We've had a very contentious election cycle that ended with the storming of the US Capitol. We had a racial reckoning with an uncertain legacy. As a congregation, we've had staff changes and a lot of movement of people in and out of our community. People died. People were born. People just got through the day. As a community, it's felt difficult to know where we're going or what the future has in store. And, to top it all off, we have water coming into the building, which is just great.

But Jesus comes to the disciples and us and says two very important words. *Ego eimi*. The NRSV, our translation of the Bible, uses a weird turn of phrase here. When Jesus meets the disciples, he says, according to our translation, "It is I." That makes it sound like Jesus is saying, "Hey, it's me. You know, the guy from the feeding of the five thousand."

But that's not how Jesus identifies himself. In the Greek, Jesus says, "Ego eimi." *I am. I am* is the famous self-identification of God from the Hebrew Bible. *I am who I am*. When St. John puts those words in Jesus's mouth again and again, nine times in his gospel, it's so that we see the identification of Jesus with God. Jesus doesn't say, "Guys, it's me." He says, "God is here. Do not be afraid."

Whenever we find ourselves in the midst of the storm, uncertain of what the future holds for us, unsure if we're in the middle of the sea or almost at the other side, Jesus comes to us again and again and again and says the same thing. *Ego eimi*. "God is here. Do not be afraid."

That's what "down religion" is all about. That instead of striving to get to God, instead of trying to earn God's grace or buy our salvation, we can trust that God is already here. To put it very simply, there is nothing you need to do, no place you need to go, and, perhaps most important, no one you need to become to be in relationship with God.

Does "down religion" mean that you can just check out of life's responsibilities? Nope. You can't drop anchor in the middle of the storm. You can't opt out of responsibility. You can't stop making choices. Life goes on, and we go on serving.

But it does mean that we never go, never act, never choose, never live without God acting alongside us, among us, and through us. The love of God isn't some end far away. No, to use the author of Ephesians's image, our entire lives are "rooted and grounded in love." Wherever we go, God is with us. Do not be afraid.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor