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Talking to Jesus

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Talking to Jesus

President Meyer delivered a version of this essay to the LCMS Council of Presidents on April 27, 2014.

I've been thinking for some time about how I talk to Jesus. This isn't especially about prayer, although talking to Jesus is obviously an act of prayer, whether the talking is formal, informal, thoughts or even sighs. What's perplexing me is how I approach him, how I think of myself over and against him. We approach different people in different ways, depending upon who they are. You approach a fellow pastor in a different way than you would approach a confirmand, and so on. We know Jesus in many ways. How do I approach Jesus as he truly is, and avoid talking to him in some way I might incorrectly imagine him? Talking to Jesus in a proper way is not a casual consideration for me. Most of my life is over, so I'll soon be coming before Jesus in judgment. How I talk to him now is in some measure how I will talk to him when I enter eternity. But what Jesus will I meet? Do I envision him as a gentle Savior but I will be shocked to see him as a stern judge? Do I anticipate hearing, "Come you blessed of my Father" but I'll be shocked when he says, "I never knew you"? How do I talk to Jesus in a way that is not self-delusion? Martin Schalling's words are heavy, "Let no false doctrine me beguile; let Satan not my soul defile" (*LSB* 707, verse 2).

I've come to realize that I'm a modern Pharisee. Had I lived in Israel in the first century A.D., I probably would have been a Pharisee. I suspect you might have been one too, because the Pharisees were an attractive religious group. In Matthew chapter 23 Jesus pronounces seven woes upon the Pharisees. Jesus had "x-ray" vision, as it were; I don't. He looked into their hearts but I would have been impressed by what I saw in the Pharisees. They were preachers and teachers. They were visible in the community—today they would use social media. They were into missions and evangelism. "You travel across land and sea to make a single proselyte," Jesus said, and we recall that the Pharisee Saul went to Damascus on a religious mission (Mt 23:15; Acts 9:2). They were masters at theological distinctions; are we like that? They had an active and very-well defined stewardship program. Liturgical practice was one of their hallmarks, as was reverence for the fathers of their faith. Yes, had I lived then I suspect I would have been a Pharisee.

It was my formation that gave me many affinities to the first-century Pharisees. "Formation" is a word we use for theological education and we are wont to locate formation at the seminary. But formation begins way before seminary, in baptism, in family, in home congregation, in school and in whatever work experiences a person has before entering ministerial study. I was formed in the mid-twentieth century. The Enlightenment had exalted reason above all else, especially over sectarian religion. Progress in science, progress in learning, progress in culture, progress in philosophy—in every way you had "to admit it's getting better, getting better all the time," as the Beatles sang. I was formed to avoid rationalism, but there was one common bond

between the LCMS and modernism, that was the belief that someplace there is absolute truth. For us the truth was and continues to be revelation; for others it was some branch of reason. One side might disagree and even condemn the other, but there was a common ground and we could engage in rational discussion. That was a convenient *modus vivendi* but the world outside the church in which I was formed was changing. The last century brought wars and genocides and failures in science, technology and economy on an unprecedented scale. The grand edifice of reason that had been our western cultural mindset for centuries was pretty much done in by the end of the twentieth century. While the popular mindset was shifting from modernism to post-modernism, the LCMS continued to hold to objective, absolute truth, the pure word of God to us in the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. Thank God! You and I continue to believe that there is objective truth, we're thankful for the faith handed down to us, *fides quae*, and the doctrine drawn from God's word is our love. My faith formation in a milieu of modernism has parallels to first century Pharisaism, and it isn't all bad. First-century Pharisaism and twentieth-century LCMS formation both had a doctrinal core, different as they may be. Remember that Jesus commended the scribes and Pharisees for their teaching. "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you'" (Mt 23:1-3).

Today we have pastors and people who faithfully and valiantly hold to God's truth in a changed and often hostile culture which boasts, "I have my opinion; you have yours. Who are you to tell me that I'm wrong?" Melancthon called that "Epicurean indifference." We're striving to hold on to and promote our doctrine in a strange new world. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps 137:4). For me, and all of this inquiry is strongly driven by my anticipation of death, this shift in the world outside the church to post-modernism has been a spiritual blessing because it's teaching me to be cautious about how I talk to Jesus. Post-modernism calls us back to Augustine's truth that faith seeks understanding. Modernism tempted us to believe that our understanding, our reason, establishes our convictions about things temporal and eternal. In modernism reason was magisterial. Post-modernism reminds the church that reason is to be ministerial. "Our reason cannot fathom the truth of God profound; who trusts in human wisdom relies on shifting ground." (LSB 587, verse 1) So truth is not as dominant in society as it once was, but you and I still hold on to revealed truth. The question is how do we hold on to the doctrinal truth of our church?

In 2 Corinthians 5:7 the converted Pharisee Paul says, "We walk by faith, not by sight." Now that line isn't as black and white as it sounds. If you walk by faith and not by sight across a busy highway, you'll quickly find yourself in heaven. In fact, eternity is the ultimate destination that Paul has in mind when he sharply distinguishes between faith and sight. "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor 5:10). How I handle the revealed doctrine is a question of walking by faith or walking by sight. Here's the temptation: We take the body of doctrine, God's word and Luther's teaching, and shift it from the faith side to the sight side. We see it, we study

it, we write about it, we publish our thoughts about it, we talk it about amongst ourselves, we use it to substantiate our own positions, and through it all we say we have the word of God in its truth and purity . . . but it is now no longer is a matter of faith seeking understanding but by our understanding we presume to be owning the faith, the *fides quae*. Ministerial reason in service of the divine revelation has become magisterial reason that presumes to own the doctrine. If the beginning of the twenty-first century is marked by “Epicurean indifference,” the temptation to doctrinally focused people is, quoting Melancthon again, “Pharisaic pride.”

What Jesus said to the ancient Pharisees can help us resist this subtle temptation to imagine that we own the truth. “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Mk 12:24). “The power of God.” I once asked my students if they want to help their future parishioners get rid of fear and guilt and other unpleasant feelings. They nodded, “Yes,” but I said, to their great surprise, “No, you don’t want to do that.” Unpleasant emotions—I’ll stick with fear because in some ways I am afraid of dying—can be healthy when we use them to move ourselves and our people from the subjectivism of our time to the revealed objective truth of God. *Phobos* in the Bible describes a range of feelings. At one extreme is the feeling you have when something comes at you that is bigger than you and threatens imminent harm. A terminal diagnosis, a spouse walking out, the collapse of your financial house, and the like evoke feelings of fear. At the other extreme of word usage is the feeling you have when something far greater than you comes at you, but—here’s the significant difference—comes to help you. That greater, more powerful, for-us-not-against-us power is God in Jesus Christ and the gospel promises that free us from fear of the law and its consequences. Totally beyond us, incomprehensibly greater than us, God comes to help us. The reaction is, or should be, “Wow! Shut up, Dale!” Awe, reverence before the power of God. This feeling is the “fear of God.”

I’ve been traveling throughout the church for twenty-five years, most weeks in different congregations and synodical settings. I’ve come to the conclusion, and this is obviously a personal impression, that the fear of God is largely missing in the LCMS today. “We should fear and love God” the Small Catechism instructs us, but you don’t hear much talk about it, if any. Sermons don’t reference the fear of God, parishioners misunderstand or dismiss outright any talk about fearing God, and conduct in church meetings from the local voters’ assembly to the national level is often not tempered by wholesome fear of the Lord. In his third thesis of the 1518 Heidelberg Disputation, Martin Luther said, “Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sin.” Let that thesis soak in. I can’t imagine anything more “attractive and good” than our occupation with God’s word and the Lutheran Confessions. Handling the body of doctrine ourselves and handing it on to the next generation is a very good thing. Yet Luther says, “Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sin.” In Thesis Seven he offers the corrective, pious fear of God. “The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God.” Handling the beloved body of doctrine and presuming to hand

it onto others would be a mortal sin if we touch these holy revelations without pious fear of God. Thesis Eight is similar: “By so much more are the works of man mortal sin when it is done without fear and in unadulterated, evil self-security.” We should handle the body of doctrine with fear for your own, my own, judgment. And Thesis Eleven: “Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is fear in every in work.” Perhaps *koinonia* will come more from the fear of God than from anything else. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (Jas 3:1). “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he had done in the body” (2 Cor 5:10). How shall I talk to Jesus? By knowing from Scripture the power of God. “Oh, my God! Be merciful to me, a sinner.”

In trying to figure how to talk to Jesus, I’m encouraged by the example of another Pharisee. “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus . . . This man came to Jesus by night” (Jn 3:1-2). Jesus said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (Jn 3:10). I’m coming to Jesus in the darkness of my understanding, so tempted to Pharisaic pride by my formation in the truth. Jesus led that Pharisee to a proper understanding of faith, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). So also he led the Pharisee Saul, an exemplary product of first century Pharisaic formation, to know the righteousness of God revealed in faith. In their conversions they learned in a new and wonderfully comforting way the salutary fear and love of God. If we in our changed time want to be faithful to our Lutheran heritage, I suggest we stop talking about “doctrines.” The Reformers talked about the *corpus doctrinae*, the one body of doctrine. That is the evangelical doctrine, Jesus Christ come as Lord to save us in this world of hurt and from the feared judgment of eternal death. The doctrine has its parts, what the Reformers called “articles” or “topics,” but the fear and love of God leads us to see that it’s all bound together in the one evangelical doctrine. “Whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (Jn 6:37). “If you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile” (1 Pt 1:17).

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