**Sermon Epiphany 6C (Philipp Melanchthon, *Confessor*)**

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**Text:** *Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength… (Jeremiah 17:5-8)*

I’ve been a lot of places and met a lot of people. While I was studying in seminary, the year 2017 rolled around, and with it the worldwide celebration of the Five Hundredth Anniversary of the Posting of Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses. Or, for short, “Reformation 500.” The congregation where I served as field worker was hosting a Reformation party, and for the occasion one of my seminary classmates planned to dress up as Philipp Melanchthon. Now, my companion stood head and shoulders over most of the congregation. I joked about him playing Master Philipp: a historical figure who was barely four feet tall. Ever the king of wit, he replied by pointing out that our pencil-thin pastor would be playing Luther (who in his later years grew fairly rotund).

It takes all kinds. As far as physical and personal stature go, Philipp Melanchthon was unimposing. He seems to have gotten hit with the proverbial “ugly stick.” His name doesn’t roll easily off the tongue. Yet Melanchthon’s confession of Christ is worthy of being remembered no less than the looming figure of Luther, his lifelong companion and brother in the true faith. Melanchthon wrote a manifesto of the Gospel-centred being taught at the University of Wittenberg where he served as professor of Greek. This textbook is called *Loci Communes*, or “Commonplaces.” Therein the doctrines of the Church are elucidated, with a special focus on justification by faith alone.

Although Melanchthon specialized in Greek, he was no slouch when it came to the Hebrew of the Old Testament. In his *Loci* Master Philipp comments on our text for today from Jeremiah, chapter seventeen: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come.” (Jer 17:5-6) “The arm of flesh shall fail you; ye dare not trust your own,” as we sang a few moments ago. Melanchthon reminds us frail human creatures that, “since outside of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the powers of human nature can do nothing but sin.”

Master Philipp continues, “Paul plainly teaches in Romans 3 that all are under sin’s dominion and those who believe are justified freely.” Yes, freely. Some would be surprised to learn that the foundational Confession of the Lutheran Church was written, not by Bl. Dr. Martin Luther, but by his lesser-known colleague Melanchthon. These words proceed from the latter’s pen: “Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ’s sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight (Rom 3, 4).” (AC IV)

To return to our text, however, it is not all bad news. The prophet Jermiah continues: “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.” (Jer 17:7-8) These words of the prophet are deliberately reminiscent of the First Psalm: *’asher ha’ish*, “Blessed is the man… whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.” (Ps 1:1-3) There is, yes, a role to play in this grand scheme.

Just as firmly as the Augsburg Confession hammers down the pillar on which the Church stands or falls, the Fourth Article, the Sixth Article shows those who believe in Christ how we are to “meditate” on God’s law “day and night.” The Word is meditated on when put into practice. “It is also taught among us that such faith is bound to bring forth good fruits and that it is necessary to do the good works commanded by God. We must do so because it is God’s will and not because we rely on such works to merit justification before God” (VI 1-2); and further down, “Hence it may readily be seen that this teaching is not to be charged with forbidding good works. On the contrary, it should rather be commended for showing how we are enabled to do good works.” (XX 35) There is nothing at variance with Jeremiah’s charge that those who trust in the Lord “bear fruit.”

In fact, a couple verses beyond the scope of our text, the prophet tells that “I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.” (Jer 17:10) The Lutheran Reformation was about renewal and repentance. It condemned works done outwardly, for show, that did not spring from a genuine love of God but from a mercenary attitude. God is not impressed with our merits. And touching what he does expect, he has given us more than enough to do with the Ten Commandments. Those perfect and bright commands shine beyond self-devised routes to a manufactured sense of holiness.

St. James brings us back to them in his Epistle, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” (Jas 1:22-25) James soundly writes these words with those of his brother, Jesus, at the back of them: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.” (Matt 7:24-25)

How can these realities, though, be held in tandem: we are justified by faith without works, but faith is never without works? Suffice it to say that no one, not even Master Philipp, had all the answers. If anyone could reason it out, that would be a work of the mind in which to glory. Although he may at times have said too much, Master Philipp never lost sight of the chief article. Who could have – having written something like this in his *Loci*?

faith is nothing less than a certain and constant trust in God’s good will toward us … where is the security if consciences are constantly in doubt about God’s will? Therefore, we must be certain of God’s favor and goodwill toward us. This is what the Lord says in Jeremiah 9[:24], ‘Let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me.’ God wants his will to be known, and he wants us to rejoice in it. What then is more godless than to assert that the will of God either cannot be known or ought not be known? Indeed, nothing could be more godless, since God has revealed his will in his Word.

“To know Christ is to know his benefits.” The case is that we measure and compare the value of our own deeds when we forget that our sins have been forgiven freely, for Christ’s sake. Knowing that we have a gracious Father who would rather sacrifice his only Son than see any of us lost, we truly come to realize that “for all this” (over and on top of his good gifts of creation) “it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey him.” Before Jesus’ perfect life and satisfaction, we then become humble, like the servants in his parable: “So you also, when you have done all you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.” (Luke 17:10)