

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Easter VII -- Year C
May 28-29, 2022
Acts 16:16-34; St. John 17:20-26
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Sometimes, my curiosity gets the better of me. You see, sometimes in the Lessons assigned to be read in public worship, you'll see commas in the citations. Those commas, of course, represent verses have been eliminated from the reading. Now, to be sure, there are sometimes good and sufficient reasons for dropping a verse or two. I've done it myself in selecting Lessons for a funeral or a wedding. Sometimes those verses can be confusing or a distraction. Sometimes, they're not really necessary and may simply require more explanation than is possible in a typical sermon or Bible study. So, for example, I will almost always drop Romans 8:36 from a reading, because it's like a marginal gloss that interrupts the essential argument that Paul is trying to make. (Romans 8:36: you can look it up.)

Well, today's Second Lesson from Revelation graces us with not one, but two, commas, representing three verses. So, perhaps, your curiosity is as great as mine was. What do those missing verses say? Well, verse 14 tells us who are the "Blessed," those who will have access to "the tree of life" and who many enter the Holy City through the gates. But, then, in that missing verse 15, Jesus tells us who will be left outside the gates, namely, "dogs" (a catch-all term in Scripture for immoral people), as well as "sorcerers, fornicators, murderers, idolators, and "everyone who loves and practices falsehood." That's verse 15. And, then there are verses 18 and 19 which constitute a warning from Jesus not to add to the prophecy, the teaching, "of this book" and not to "take away from the words of this book," adding that those who do so will lose their share in the Holy City and at the tree of life.

Now, perhaps you noticed the same irony I did,....that the very verse in which Jesus warns against taking away from the

words of the book is exactly the verse someone chose to "take away."

But why? For years, I have feared that there is a side to Jesus that some in the Church simply do not want us to see. They seemingly want us to content ourselves with a Jesus who is kind and good, with a Jesus who is nothing but grace, with a Jesus who not only understands our weaknesses and shortcomings but also blesses them. And, so they turn Jesus's "parables of judgment" into riddles or mysteries, or morality plays. They exclude whole chapters of the Gospels, like Matthew 23, where Jesus excoriates the hypocrisy of those religious leaders, whose actions undermine the good and gracious will of God. They pick-and-choose from the Sermon on the Mount, so that we never hear Jesus's warnings about false prophets or about rushing to judgment against our brother or sister. Through judicious use of commas, they make sure we never hear of Jesus's thoughts concerning those who refuse to care for their parents or Jesus's condemnation of those cities which refuse His call to repent.

My concern is that a Jesus who is always gentle, meek, and mild, who turns a blind eye to our malice and deceit, who forgives, even absent any repentance and amendment-of-life, is ultimately not a Jesus who will ever be taken seriously. For, the same Jesus who came to be our companion and friend is the Jesus who came to put the world right and to establish His Lordship over it. The same Jesus who came to be our Savior and Redeemer is the Jesus who came to establish justice and peace for the nations and to claim the kingdom for God. The same Jesus who died and rose for us is the Jesus who today seems to want us to heed His words of warning.

If the only Jesus we present to people is a Jesus who "skips over the commas," is it any wonder that people finally feel that a Jesus who allows them to go about their lives pretty much as they wish is a Jesus who is basically irrelevant? If the only Jesus we present to people isn't outraged by our sinfulness, how do we explain that Jesus became sin for us, Who

knew no sin? If the only Jesus we present to people isn't a Jesus who weeps over our failure to be the people God created and redeemed us to be, how can we even begin to make sense of His journey to the Cross?

To be sure, if the only Jesus some people could see is the Jesus represented by what is excised by those commas, that would be no less a distortion -- and no less a tragedy. Sadly, too many people today seemingly see only what the commas obscure. They see only a Jesus who seems judgmental, even vindictive. How sad!

How essential it is then that we present all sides of a Jesus who is "both/and"! The same Jesus who is outraged at how we mistreat and deceive each other is the Jesus who goes to the Cross to reconcile us to each other. The same Jesus who weeps over the pain inflicted by every death is the Jesus who goes to His own death in order to end the reign of death. The same Jesus who sees God's creation "groaning in travail" is the Jesus who rises from the dead to signal the birth of God's new creation.

Let's not forget that Jesus launches His ministry with an exhortation to "repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." And, if Jesus was and is truly serious about establishing God's Kingdom of justice and righteousness, of mercy and peace, of reconciliation and truth -- which is another way of describing "the Holy City" -- then, how can He allow and make room for sorcery and idolatry, for murder and fornication, for the love and practice of falsehood? For these are the very antithesis of God's Kingdom and would bring about the utter corruption of the Holy City.

To be sure, there is a time and a place for commas. As writer and editor, I'm actually rather fond of them. But, if Jesus is speaking, let's skip the commas and listen to every word.

Amen