

“The Father’s Heart”

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of Johann von Staupitz, Luther’s Father Confessor (November 8)

Primary Texts: Psalm 143, Zephaniah 3:17-20. 1 John 1:5-2:2, St. Mark 10:46-52

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The sermon for today, the Commemoration of Johann von Staupitz, is drawn from all of the Scripture readings we heard earlier. The title reflects the fact that von Staupitz was Luther’s Father Confessor and that he helped Luther to see the true nature of our Father God-so this sermon is titled, “The Father’s Heart.” THE FATHER SHOWS HIS HEART IN JESUS, SENT TO A FALLEN WORLD THAT WE MAY BE RECONCILED CHILDREN OF GOD THE FATHER.

In the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod we commemorate today a man named von Staupitz who may be referred to by three first names. The Latin form of his name is “Johannes” the German “Johann”, which in English is “John.” His last name is actually of Czech origin and his family was a prominent one with royal ties. In fact, he even knew Frederick the Wise-who of course became the ruler of Saxony, as a childhood friend! He was born in Motterwitz, but we don’t know exactly when-but it was sometime in the 1460s making him about 15-20 years older than Martin Luther. Being from a prominent family and possessing keen intellect, Staupitz was able to be formally educated advancing to study theology at universities in Leipzig, Cologne, and Tübingen. Staupitz would become an Augustinian monk of the observant, or “strict” order, and quickly rose through the ranks.

1502-1503 when his old friend Frederick the Wise was beginning a new university in Wittenberg, Staupitz was called to be its chief theology professor. But he would not last too long in that position. His heart was really in preaching and visiting with parishioners. He was called to be the head of the strict Augustinian Order in Erfurt. This is where, as God would have it, that his path would cross with a young man who would soon enter the monastery at Erfurt, Martin Luther.

As we heard about in the Reformation sermon a few weeks ago, Luther spent the first decades of his life often terrified of death and fearful of God of the Father. We can hear David's cry in Psalm 143:4 echoed in Luther, "*Therefore my spirit faints within me; my heart within me is appalled.*" It is likely that Luther's view of God as a stern judge, more than eager to dole out swift and harsh punishments was influenced by his own relationship with his earthly father. Hans, as well as his wife and Martin's mother, Margarete were strict disciplinarians. This was typical of the time for German parents—they could be very demanding and expected absolute obedience. In one well-known example from his childhood, Luther recounts being beaten to the point of "blood flowing" for stealing a nut.

Father Hans had high hopes for his bright son. Hans had risen through the ranks and now operated several mines. Young Martin was expected to enter the family business and take care of his parents as they aged. In fact, his Father made sure that he went to Law school. But the inward spiritual struggle with God and a bargain with Him made in a thunderstorm would change the course of his life. Martin Luther would enter the toughest monastery that he could find—that of the Observant Augustinians in 1505. By 1507, he had been ordained as a priest. His father had gotten over his anger at his son abandoning Law School enough to

attend his first celebration of mass. However, in speaking to his father afterwards he shared some of his continued struggle over measuring up on the path he had taken. Hans responded by reminding him of the 4th Commandment, to honor thy father and mother. Luther would reflect later that these words cut him and stayed with him. So Martin Luther's experience with a father figure to this point had been that a father is demanding, quick to condemn, and no matter how much you tried was never really pleased with you. How could the Father God be different?

But it was in the Augustinian Monastery that Luther gained a new father figure, Johann von Staupitz. You see, even clergy need someone to confess to. This is known as a "Father Confessor." Staupitz was very pastoral and had to have the "patience of Job" with this young monk named Martin. Because when Martin Luther came to the Confessional, you better have your calendar clear for the rest of the day! Luther would spend sometimes up to 6 hours there! You see, the erroneous teaching was that if you wanted to be forgiven of a sin you had to remember it and confess it, and then often perform some type of penance. Luther was terrified that if he failed to confess one sin or another, then he would be damned by a vengeful God. While Psalm 143 is a Psalm of King David, you can certainly see Luther calling out these words, calling for mercy, for righteousness and feeling pursued, crushed, and in darkness. You can see Luther alongside "Blind Bartimaeus" in St. Mark 10 calling out, "*Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me.*"

In God's providence, he has assigned just the right Father Confessor to Luther in Staupitz. One who had a listening ear and assuring spirit. He would be a great comfort to Luther in his brooding. Zephaniah 3:19, "*And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into*

praise and renown in all the earth.” It was in the confessional of his Father Confessor von Staupitz that the seeds of the Gospel began to be sown into Luther’s heart.

Staupitz had begun to show Luther that a father figure could be loving, and in this Luther would begin to gain a fuller picture of our heavenly Father. Yes, God will not have fellowship with darkness. He will and must condemn and punish sin. His wrath is holy and just. But the fear of God is only part of how we rightly view Him, we also must have love. A good earthy Father should expect respect and honor, but in his disciple shows his heart of desiring to teach and guide their child in the correct path. Despite all Luther’s brooding and even anger at God, for as he saw Him at the time, creating such a miserable creature who was doomed to fail, von Staupitz recognized the brilliant potential in this young monk named Martin Luther. Remember that Staupitz had connections with the ruler of Saxony, Frederick and had served as the first professor of theology at the still new University in Wittenberg. He communicated to Frederick the Wise that he had just the right young man to serve as theology professor. Over Martin’s objections, he obeyed his father confessor and reported to Wittenberg in 1512 to teach in the University and to serve a preacher and minister there.

The importance of this move cannot be overstated if you know anything at all about the events that would unfold in the Reformation, as Wittenberg will become “ground zero” for the movement. And it as a theology professor and preacher that Luther will have his frustrations and questions answered. Because his new positions will require him, really for the first time in his life, to intently study the Bible. In God’s Word, the Holy Spirit works. Luther began to see that the image of God that he had in his mind influenced by his experiences, upbringing, and faulty theology of the

Roman Church of the time was not the same God that he read about in the pages of Scripture. Eventually he would come to the place where he heard and believed the words that Jesus spoke to Bartimaeus in St. Mark 10:52, *“Go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole. And immediately he received sight, and followed Jesus in the way.”*

But even before being sent to Wittenberg, Johann von Staupitz had begun the work of showing Luther the Gospel. Luther knew the Law. He had that down. He had no problem acknowledging as our processional hymn began, “Chief of Sinners, Though I Be”, but the problem was he needed to know the next part, “Jesus shed His blood for me”. So instrumental was von Staupitz for Luther that he would later write, *“If it had not been for Dr. Staupitz, I would have sunk into hell.”* Very late in his life, in 1545, he would write to Elector John Frederick (the brother of Frederick the Wise would later rule Saxony), *“Dr. Staupitz is first of all my father in this doctrine and gave birth to me in Christ.”*

So thus far we have heard of Martin Luther’s relationship with his earthly father, which at times was very strained. And we have seen that he found a compassionate father figure in Johann von Staupitz. But we still need to specifically see how he learned that his heavenly Father did indeed love him. If you have seen the Luther movie from 2003 (if not, watch it) it portrays the interaction between Luther and von Staupitz so beautifully. He is telling Luther to look to Christ. Because it is in Christ that we see the Father’s heart, His love for His creation. Yes, we are sinners but our Father God still loves. He still wants us as his children. As 1 John so powerfully states, and it is part of one of our liturgies of Confession and Absolution, *“But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If*

we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Notice that it says “all”, not “some”. Whether you can specifically remember every sin you have committed, which you can’t, God forgives the penitent in and through Christ Jesus.

So what became of Johann von Staupitz as the Reformation “heated up”? If we were writing a Hollywood script we may have him throwing off his monk robes and fighting alongside his protégé Martin against the abuses of Rome. But this is not what happened. Despite him describing his deep friendship with Luther as akin to Jonathan and David in the Old Testament, he remained part of the Roman Catholic Church. He would release Luther from his vows, a very painful break for Luther, but in this he freed Luther to do the work that needed to be done and removed himself from being responsible for punishing Luther. They would continue to correspond by letter, von Staupitz sympathizing with Luther but at the same believing he had gone too far in some areas. In 1520 he would take a position as an advisor to the Cardinal in Salzburg. This only lasted a year and he ended leading a small group of Benedictine Monks, dying in Salzburg in 1524. Even though he remained in the Roman Church, his writings were still placed on the list of banned books by Pope Paul IV in 1559 due his close association with Luther.

Despite what could be viewed an anti-climatic end to his life, God certainly used him in a powerful way in his role in mentoring and guiding Luther. The change in Luther was dramatic. This same young man: searching, brooding, frustrated, fearful, not knowing the true love of his creator and heavenly Father, could later write so wonderfully and powerfully about his and our loving Heavenly Father. Including this gem, “*Whoever*

sees Christ as a mirror of the Father's heart, actually walks through the world with new eyes." He could write this, *"If you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see him rightly but looks only on a curtain as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his face."* God had revealed to Martin Luther that He did in fact love him, despite his sin. The key to this-as it always is-is Jesus. In Jesus we see the love of our Father expressed in the most direct and personal way possible: He dies and rises again for us! And how do we know this? From God's Word, the Bible. God used Luther's father confessor, a man named Johann von Staupitz as a central figure in leading Martin Luther to this conclusion.

In closing, those simple but true words of our hymn of the day rang in ears when writing this sermon, *"Jesus love me! This I know, For the Bible tells me so, Little ones to Him belong; They are weak, but He is strong."* And don't forget that second verse either because it tells us the "why" and the "how", *"Jesus loves me! He who died, Heaven's gates to open wide. He has washed away my sin, Lets His little child come in."* So our joyful and bold profession is, *"Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so."*

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.