

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

JESUS LOVES ME

John 15:12-17; Evelyn Burmeister Funeral; July 23, 2021

As we were planning for today I was reminded about Evelyn's love for the hymn, "Jesus Loves Me." It reminded of the time that, while I was visiting with her, she started singing this song. The hymn is considered a children's song or a Sunday school song because of its simplicity, but its simple words reflect a rich theology of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Evelyn never considered the hymn childish, though she taught her children to sing it and would continue to sing it to them and with them throughout their lives. Her faith was in Jesus in this life, her Lord and Savior who loved her.

This faith in Jesus who loved her was given to her in her Baptism into Christ when she was just two weeks old. One of Evelyn's earliest memories was of her younger brother, Gerald it must have been, being baptized when she was about four years old. In her reminiscences she recalled how the preacher had such a loud voice – this was in Rutland Township – but her brother was a happy baby and didn't seem bothered by it at all. Evelyn was a nice woman and would not want to put anyone down, but what she omitted, or what you might be able to read between the lines, is that preacher scared her.

She told me that the pastor always yelled loudly at the congregation in German, which eventually led the family to move their membership to St. Paul, Fairmont when she was young, where she remained for the rest of her life. Faithful pastors need to be stern in their preaching of God's law in its fullest, and God certainly gets angry when His children sin against Him, but the love of God in Christ Jesus needs to predominate in preaching. God can and does get angry and no one can stand up before the wrath of God, but God, finally, is love itself. Evelyn's earliest memory of church was that her pastor always seemed angry and yelled at her, which seemed to contradict what she believed: Jesus loves me.

"Jesus loves me this I know, For the Bible tells me so." In our Gospel Reading from John 15, Jesus instructs His disciples, "**This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.**" This is one of the places in the Bible where Jesus declared His love for us, where He comes right out and says: **I have loved you.**

When Jesus says He loves us, it is not just a feeling He has, but who we are to Him and what He does for us to show His love. He explains what He means by love when He said to His disciples: **Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.** Jesus considered His disciples His friends. This took nothing away from the fact that He remained their Lord and Master, but His friendship reflected His humble attitude toward them, and us. Despite being true God in the flesh, Jesus came in humbleness. **“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many”** (Mt. 20:28). Another favorite hymn of many begins by making this very point: “What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear” (*LSB 770*).

Jesus shows us that He is our Friend, not just in words, but in deeds. Jesus laid down His life on the cross for us, His friends. The second stanza of Evelyn’s beloved hymn begins by noting this. “Jesus loves me! He who died.” Evelyn knew and believed that Jesus loved her and was her friend because He had taken all her sins on Himself to the cross, suffered and died to forgive and save her.

I find it distressing that people have started reinterpreting how the death of Jesus should be understood. Something as simple as the statement, “Jesus died for the sins of the world,” no longer means that He died to save us from our sins, but that Jesus only died because sinners nailed Him to the cross. It is said now by some that Jesus did not really need to die to pay for our sins and satisfy God’s justice, the righteousness of God; if God the Father sent His Son to die for the sins of others it would be a form of divine child abuse they say. Some claim that Christ’s death was an unfortunate tragedy that could have been avoided.

This false teaching denies the clear Word of Jesus that states that His suffering and death was the express plan and purpose of His coming. **“For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from My Father”** (Jn 10:17-18).

Others claim that Jesus' death is primarily an example for Christians to follow, which changes the cross of Jesus from the Gospel of our salvation into law, something we have to do. Jesus does charge His disciples to love one another as He loved them, even laying down their lives for each other. But our love does not save anyone from sin, only Jesus' love does. Jesus came to sacrifice Himself on the cross to forgive our sins and pay the ransom price to set us free. We are not saved by following His example but by believing in Him and His saving sacrifice for us.

*Jesus loves me! He who died Heaven's gates to open wide.
He has washed away my sin, Lets His little child come in.*

Evelyn never stopped being the "little child" of her heavenly Father, who has now welcomed her soul into heaven. The very gates of heaven were opened wide to her by the blood of Jesus.

Some people notice that Lutherans sing "Jesus Loves Me" with some changes in words as they were originally written by Anna Warner. Her original text said, "He will wash away my sin," and the Lutheran version says, "He has washed away my sin." What difference does it make? A lot! All sin was paid for and forgiven by Jesus on the cross. Jesus' death accomplished our salvation, as Jesus Himself noted from the cross. **"It is finished."** The washing away of Evelyn's sin was by the blood of Jesus that flowed from His wounds on the cross, and that cleansing was applied her at her Baptism.

From that day Evelyn was and forevermore will be God's own child. The last verse of Psalm 121, which was her Confirmation verse, describes how God promises to keep us His own through life and death. **The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore** (121:9 KJV). This very verse is used in our church's baptismal rite as a blessing for those about to be baptized (LSB 270). God was with Evelyn as she went through life as God's child, and now He has brought her into heaven to dwell with Him there until her body is raised from the dead in glory. Why would God be willing to do this for her, for us? Evelyn knew and was always happy to sing her faith. "Jesus loves me, this I know... Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so" (LSB 588). Amen.