

The Church in Its Most Beautiful Form

Tim Saleska

In a worship service on May 17, 2025, the Concordia Seminary class of 2026 received their Certificates of Vocation that permit them to be ordained and called into ministry serving the congregations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The speaker for the day was Rev. Dr. Timothy Saleska, who had served as the seminary's Dean of Ministerial Formation during their preparation for ministry. His text for the day was taken from John 16: 23–33. His message dealt with the centrality of Jesus' love for His people and their love for Him and for people.

Out of the tangled web of sentences that make up today's Gospel lesson, there is one sentence that I invite you to meditate on with me today. It's verse 27, where Jesus tells the disciples, "for the Father himself loves you, because you love me and believe that I came from God."

I don't know if you saw this or not, but several weeks ago, the *NYT* had a story about an 85-year-old French woman living in Alabama who was arrested by Homeland Security. Marie-Thérèse had married her American husband just a couple of years ago and was in the process of applying for permanent residency. She had hired a lawyer and was following the legal process—when her husband died suddenly—leaving a small bungalow, a little cash, and no will.

Evidently, she and her stepsons were in a dispute over the property. Things got so bad that one of the stepsons reported her to an ICE officer for overstaying her 90-day visa. So, ICE officers woke up this 85-year-old woman, handcuffed her, and took her to a jail still wearing her pajamas and slippers. From there, she went to detention centers in Alabama and Louisiana, chained to other inmates by her wrists and ankles.

Marie-Thérèse was imprisoned for 16 days until the French government intervened and she was flown to France, leaving every earthly possession behind. But



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after two weeks of detention, she had lost hope and didn't think she could survive much longer. "I was waiting to die, really," she said. "I knew I was not going to make it."

I'm sorry, but this is a horrible thing to hear. But something else happened in that jail too. Something beautiful. In that prison, there was a group of women who showed Marie-Thérèse acts of kindness that gave her hope. Fellow inmates helped her move to the bathroom and shower, she said. They made her hot chocolate and offered her cookies. The night before Easter, they sang hymns that brought her to tears.

And Marie-Thérèse said this, "They were wonderful. I found God in that jail through those women." I found God in that jail through those women. What she meant was that the God she found was not the cruel, uncaring judge that she had experienced up to that point, the compassionless face behind the law, but the God who loved her and cared for her. The God who offered hope.

This is what I want you to think about: Marie-Thérèse found a loving God through these women, because through those women, she met Jesus. Through their love and care for her, she experienced the love of our risen Lord and Savior, the subject of those Easter hymns. She met the Son, who came into our world to make known the loving, tender heart of His Father. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," Jesus said to Philip. That is no less true today than it was back when Jesus first said it. "By this, all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God." "No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." The New Testament is very clear about the central place love plays in our Christian faith and Christian life.

So of course Marie-Thérèse found God through those women. And there, in that filthy jail cell, was the body of Christ, the Church in its most precious and beautiful form.

Jesus says to His disciples, "God himself loves you, because you love me and believe that I came from God." Or, in the words of Marie-Thérèse, the disciples found God through His Son, Jesus. That is, they found the heavenly Father who loved them and cared for them and promised them life instead of death. Not the God of condemnation, but the Father of mercy and forgiveness.

So, how could the disciples not love Jesus? Look at how patient and kind he was with them. Look at how much grace He gave them. Look at how He cared for the most desperate souls around Him. Look at how He loved people so completely and fully—to the death. Jesus' presence in this world was an incredibly graceful presence of God himself. Offering comfort, and healing, and hope at every turn in His ministry—even from the cross.

And of course Jesus could say to those disciples, "God himself loves you because you love me." That word "because" is not transactional. It's not that the disciples earned or merited God's love. It's like this: I have three children that I have loved since before they were born. They didn't earn my love. It just sprung up in my heart,

which almost burst with joy when each one was born. This love came into my heart from nowhere. It was a divine gift. Now I have two sons-in-law and a daughter-in-law, and I love them like I love my own kids. They didn't have to earn my love. They loved my kids, and so I love them too. Divine gift. They are part of my family, and so I love them dearly.

So, it is as if the Father says to His disciples, "Ah, my Son loves you, and you love my Son. Of course I love you too. You are my children. Welcome to the family." You see? In the Father's heart, there is always room for one more. There is always room for one more.

And here again, in the disciples gathered around Jesus, you see the church in a precious and beautiful form. The body of Christ, whose heart and head is Jesus. The church—a tangible expression of divine love: The love of the Father for His Son and the Son for His Father. The love of the Father for this world—so great a love that He sent His only begotten Son to us to save us. The love that the disciples have for Jesus, and of course the love of Jesus for His disciples—a love so deep that he gave them His life. And the love that marks the relationship God's people have with each other and with people in our world. "Love one another," Jesus says. And St. Paul adds, "Above all else put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

But of course, a lot has changed with the church in the long intermission between Jesus' resurrection and His return—and, mark my words, He will return. In the meantime, a lot has happened to the church. One thing, for example: the church has developed into an institution (or many institutions) with all the accoutrements, good, bad, or indifferent that accompany secular institutions in our day and age. "Organized religion," some people call it, none too kindly.

Now there are a lot of things we could say about this development (good and bad), and many people have. But there are two observations I want to make today. *First*, one of the dangers of an institutionalized church is that our love gets separated from the person—Jesus—and invested in things. Things—some are good things—but things, nonetheless: love of orthodoxy, love of ritual, love of worship style, love of power, piety, politics. Things like that. We can be honest with ourselves. People don't exactly identify us Lutherans as the group of people that "loves Jesus," do they?

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A *second* thing that happens is that love gets separated from belief, when for disciples the two were inseparable. As a result, our faith can get reduced to merely intellectual assent to correct doctrine or a checklist of correctly worded doctrinal points. As one of our CTCR documents put it already decades ago, "We can start to

use truth as a dividing rather than a uniting tool, and our relationships can become loveless.” “Look how they love each other!” Nope, I haven’t heard people say that about us recently.

All of this says to me that the problem for us Christians, and all of you getting your theological diplomas today, is not only outside of us—the tribulation that comes our way in the world—but the real problem is inside of us, in hearts gripped by sin—sin we hide and sin we justify. Self-interest, self-righteousness, selfishness, envy, greed, strife, arrogance, fear. Failure to love (sin is failure to love) or love misshapen and misdirected. It happens all the time. I am thinking of my own sin as I speak. We have big heart problems.

So, the only advice that I am going to give to you today—the Lord knows you have had enough advice lately—is to suggest a small, daily devotional practice: Take some time to pay attention to your heart every day of your lives. Take a hard look at what’s in there. It’s a humbling experience—that look into the recesses of your soul—that look behind the masks you put on for the world. But it’s so important for you personally and for your ministry to have a deep realization that behind all the pious externals in which we take pride, your hearts are just like the hearts of the people you serve, and that you need God’s love and forgiveness just as they do. If you do not know this, you put yourself in great spiritual danger.

That honest look is often shameful and distressing. “Oh, wretched man that I am,” Paul said when he took a look. But no matter what, you need not despair. And it is not where you should remain, brooding on that heart of yours. The other part of your devotional practice is to move from that awful contemplation to a bigger and glorious reality outside of you. If you hadn’t noticed, the apostle John has a lot to say about love. Among many other things, he says this, “For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.” God is greater than our heart! Yes, He is. God is greater than our heart. Think about what this means: God is greater than your heart.

No matter what God sees in your heart of hearts, no matter how awful your sin, God will not break that promise. He will not un-adopt you. He will not abandon you. God is greater than our hearts. That is grace beyond our comprehension.

It means that our cold, dark hearts will not separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. On the day that you were baptized, you became part of God’s family. Brothers and sisters of Christ and children of God. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” No matter what God sees in your heart of hearts, no matter how awful your sin, God will not break that promise. He will not un-adopt you. He will not abandon you. God is greater than our hearts. That is grace beyond our comprehension.

Instead of condemning you, God forgives you for the sake of His Son, who loves you with an everlasting love. When your hearts condemn you, remember that your

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Father is eager to remind you of His love. In His Supper, He is eager to tell you again and again that He forgives you. When the pastor announces God's forgiveness to everyone in the room, God is reminding you that He forgives you even the most secret of sins and vices. He is greater than your heart. When you share forgiveness with each other, you can be certain that our Father is saying, "I forgive you too," as the Lord's Prayer says. I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you. God is greater than our hearts.

Now, I must tell you, this Word of grace is not just a promise that gives us hope for the distant future when we die. This promise is, of course, a living and powerful hope. But no, it is much more than that. This message of God's love in Jesus is an incredibly powerful and beautiful thing for our lives here in the present. When you share the love of Jesus with another person, when you share His forgiveness and grace with others, the Holy Spirit is at work in your hearts to create faith and love and joy and peace and comfort that is no small miracle.

The embodied love that we as the church are commanded by our Lord to show other people—how we treat them—our words of kindness and gentleness towards them—our hands and heart that reach out to them with the love of Jesus—this is God's tangible grace in action, and its effects are real. If you don't believe me, try showing humility and grace when you are in a bad or angry relationship with other people. Just try it. Show grace, not self-justification. Grace—not righteous indignation—but grace. Show the grace of Jesus where it is unexpected. Share His forgiveness. Show others the love of Jesus through you. I am telling you now, the Holy Spirit can work so powerfully in human hearts to kindle faith and love and peace and joy out of . . . nowhere, really. It's a divine gift.

When the Spirit strikes, He can jolt your heart, impel your hands and feet, sweeten your words, utterly transform your relationships, change your life, change your world. Through you, others can meet Jesus and find the God who loves them.

And there, in the middle of all the mess we have made in our lives, in all the sweet lies we tell ourselves, and even in the midst of all the callousness and coldness with which we often treat each other, there, gathered around Jesus whom we love and who loves us so very much, who has redeemed us miserable sinners, there, sharing His love with each other and with the world around us, there will be the church in its most beautiful and precious form.

So, my simple prayer today is to ask that the Holy Spirit continue to form all of you into people of grace, people who love Jesus and share His love with everyone around you. And, in that place where you serve, I pray that other people will meet Jesus and experience His salvation in their minds and hearts and bodies—a salvation so beautiful, so compelling, so full of love—that they could not have imagined it if they tried.

Amen