

“But Why?”

Acts 9:1-20

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

How often in your households have you come across the age-old childhood question that irritates every parent, “But why?” Do the dishes (BW). Clean your room (BW). Apologize to your sister (BW). Forgive your brother. “But why?” Ananias finds himself in a very similar situation in our first lesson this morning. The Lord has spoken to him in a vision telling him to go and be the Holy Spirit’s instrument of Saul’s conversion. And instead of simply responding with an immediate, “Yes, Lord,” Ananias says, “But why?” He says in response to the Lord’s command in verses 13 and 14 of our text, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” Surely, the Lord cannot mean to elevate one such as this to a prominent place in His ministry. Surely, the Lord is mistaken and doesn’t remember what Saul has done to Him and His Church.

This is a great teaching for us as Christians, and on this day as we welcome Levi into membership by his confirmation, it is an appropriate one for us to discuss. Ananias has been taught, as a disciple of Jesus, to trust in the Lord, and has gained much Scriptural knowledge in his time following Christ and learning from the Apostles. He has gone through his confirmation course, we might say. And having gained that knowledge, or rather, having had that knowledge revealed to him by the work of the Holy Spirit, it ought to be very easy for him to simply rise and follow the command of the Lord in his vision, right? In a perfect world of perfect righteousness, yes. But we do not live in a perfect world, and we certainly do not live in perfect righteousness.

We live in a world plagued by sin, and our lives are a constant battle with our Old Adam who would prefer we give in and succumb to our evil desires. The world wants to abolish the teachings of Holy Scripture which we hold to so dearly. And not even just the world, but even those claiming to be of the church, claiming to be Christ’s church, would prefer not to keep to the teachings of the one in which they claim to believe. This is Satan’s most conniving and evil attack, to lead the people of God to a place where they believe that the Lord’s Word is not enough. When we read about a particular teaching in the Bible, He wants your response to be, “But why?”

When the sin of adultery is addressed, the devil wants you to say, “Why shouldn’t I fulfill my desires and be happy?” Or when homosexuality is condemned, he wants you

to believe that it's not a sin because there's no possible way that a God of love would ever call my "love" a sin. These perversions of God's Word from Satan are the essence of today's society. They are the devil working to corrupt God's people from within. Because that is what is happening. The Church is being overtaken by those who, by their own admission, seek to upend the church from the inside out.

Their desire to follow the whims and pressures of society are a sign that they have been improperly educated. They have not been taught from the basis of God's Word, but from the basis that we cannot know God's Word. They believe, foolishly, that the Bible is just a collection of stories and has nothing to teach us, and that we just have to "figure it out ourselves." Ananias was taught to know better. He was taught to know that the Word of the Lord is pure and it is authoritative. And because of that teaching, He had the strength to resist the devil's temptation to ignore God and focus on Saul's numerous sins against the Church. And that teaching is what must guide the people of God today, as well. Because if we abandon the teaching and Word of our God, we have nothing, and like Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, "we are of all people most to be pitied."

The Church suffers from a lack of faithful teachers, teachers who are willing to sacrifice their own pleasures and desires for the benefit of others. The so-called "leaders" of the church, the ones who are the most boisterous and visible are the ones screaming the wrong message. But they are heard the most because they speak only the desires of the heart, of the flesh, and not the truth of God's Word. They neglect the teaching of the Lord from Paul in Galatians 5:17, which says, "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." The incessant desire for money and wealth, fame and self-gratification, that has pervaded these false churches is astounding, and one that we must always avoid lest we fall to the same temptation.

The ministry is not about money and fame, or about being the most important person in the room on Sunday morning. It is about teaching the truth of God's Word and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lord has called the men in His service to do just that—to teach His people by the words of his mouth that Jesus has redeemed the world by His blood and that only by that blood are we saved from eternal death. That responsibility to teach should never be taken lightly, nor should it ever be taken as trivial, or a "one time thing" that you can just check off your list of life's next steps. Confirmation is not a momentary teaching in your life that should be achieved and then forgotten. It is a lifelong commitment to learning and education in the ways of the Lord as they have been revealed to us in Holy Scripture. And those teachings are our guide as we walk this life and battle sin and the pervasive attacks of the devil on God's people.

Just like Ananias, Levi has been taught and will shortly confess his belief in those teachings. But, Levi, that will not prevent you from having to daily battle your Old Adam. In times of struggle and strife, when you can't seem to find the answer, remember your teaching. Remember that despite the total depravity of your sinful flesh, the Lord has given you the necessary armor and weapons to fight this battle. And those weapons are not fashioned by your own hand, or made by the work of your own heart. They are the means of grace, given to you as a blessed gift from your loving God. He claimed you as His own in the waters of your baptism, giving you the necessary faith to do as Luther says in the Small Catechism, "by daily contrition and repentance" drown the Old Adam and kill him with all sins and evil desires which he brings.

He has given you the medicine of immortality in the Lord's Supper—the body and blood of Jesus Christ, your Savior, for the forgiveness of all of your sins. There he has shown you His loving mercy, the undeserved kindness to take all of Your sin and bear it to the cross that He might declare you righteous before His Father in heaven. And though your instruction is necessary to receive the Sacrament, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11, it is not what makes you worthy to receive it. Your faith, given to you by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and your belief by that gift in the words of Jesus, "given and shed for you for the remission of sins," are what make you worthy of receiving this Holy Supper.

As one who has been taught in the faith, and for all of us here together, when our Lord commands us to do something, do it with the joy of knowing that you are redeemed for the sake of Jesus, not because you have to or because you need to understand why He is commanding you to do it. We are going to have doubts, and we are going to question and study, and want to verify the truth of what the Lord has said, but we are not called to ask, "But why?" We are called to rise as the Lord commands, and go forth in faith to advance His kingdom according to His good and gracious will. That is what Ananias ultimately does. He rises and goes to Saul, blessing him as the Lord commanded and his eyes are opened that He might become the great instrument of the Lord's Gospel proclamation.

To stand as the Lord commands is not something that can be done of our own power and volition. We need the power of our faith to have the strength to move past the, "But why," and get to the, "Yes, Lord," that only our faith can give in response. By the work of the Holy Spirit, we learn at the feet of Jesus by the Word of God which He has revealed to us, and by that knowledge our faith is strengthened and we are given the ability to "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father," as Paul says in Philippians 2:11. We make this confession today, side by side with our brother, Levi, who will now be welcomed into full membership in this congregation. And by that

welcome, we commit ourselves to sustaining and keeping him in the faith by pointing him to the truth of God's saving grace, that he would come to receive the Sacrament for the strengthening of that faith, so that he will persevere until the end.

Ananias gave that gift to Paul in our text. He, by the work of the Holy Spirit, opened Paul's eyes to the faith which he had been given, and the faith which now saves him. And it cannot be lost on us that *immediately* he was baptized. He immediately availed himself of the means of God's saving grace, that He might be washed by the water of regeneration for the forgiveness of his seemingly insurmountable sins against God. All was forgiven, to the last drop. Paul no longer needs to fear the wrath of God, for he has been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb who was slain. And he goes forth, strengthened in His faith to begin the work that he was called to do, to spread the Gospel in all the world.

But the true gift that he received is not the knowledge of doctrine, or even the ability in Paul's case to create doctrine by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The true gift which Paul received in his conversion is eternal life. No matter how many times he might turn to the Lord and say, "But why," he has the gift of faith which will carry him through the ups and down of life and into the arms of His loving Savior when He is called home. And that is where Paul is when John writes about the heavenly host in our Epistle Lesson today. He stands among the angels and the firmament of the saints proclaiming, "To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

That is the goal of our teaching. That is the goal of your learning, Levi. No doubt, somewhere along the way, the childish question arose within you as you were going through class, "But why?" Well, the answer to that is that you might have the understanding of the Lord's will for you that you be His child for all eternity, and that you would know the truth of your salvation as being the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, who died for you that you might live among the saints of heaven in the presence of Your Lord and Savior forever and ever. So, when any of you have those doubts, remember the truth of your baptism. Remember the truth of the Lord's promises in the Holy Supper of His body and blood. And remember that by that washing and eating, you are made new, joined into Christ's death as one body with Jesus, to await the resurrection of the dead, when you will be reunited with your bodies in never-ending heavenly bliss and glory. Amen.