**+SESSION 5**

**“THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND FAMILY SYSTEMS”**

**1. The Christian faith is one of repentance**

A) Jesus says: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:15)

B) Repent means “to think differently”. *Metanoia*, the Greek word, means “a change of mind”. It is to see life in a different way. It is to come to the realization of how things actually are (objective), and not like we’d like them to be (subjective).

C) We live in relationships—to God and to one another. Those relationships, as we have seen in systems theory, are affected by anxiety and all that goes along with that. There is conflict, distance and cutoff. Christians call that “sin”. Sin separates us from God and one another. In fact, we confess that “we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.”

D) In the “Sermon on the Mount” Jesus says, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye’, while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” (Matthew 7:3-5)

E) As humans, we have an amazing capacity for self-deception. To the question: What is your part in this? We often say, “Me? My part?” and we have difficulty answering that question. We are, however, quick to blame (Adam: It’s Eve’s fault. Genesis 3:12). We love to diagnose—seeing that speck and telling others where they are wrong. In our spiritual pride and self-righteousness, we are often blind to the part we play in the system: how our emotional functioning actually increases anxiety and reactivity and contributes to the problems we face. We are clueless about our “steps in the dance of life”. We have no idea of the depth of our sin within us. As St. Paul writes: “There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:22-23)

F) What now? Pain is a great motivator. When we have truly seen ourselves as in a mirror and confessed our sin, we are pushed to Christ Jesus—there to hear a Word, that when spoken, does something to us. It brings about repentance, forgiveness and new life.

**2. The theology of the Cross**

A) While we like to “look on the bright side of life”, one look at the world tells a different story. There is suffering of all kinds. Much of that suffering comes about because we are at odds with God and one another. So, in the theology of the cross, we can’t help but look at all things through suffering and the cross.

B) St. Paul tells us that in Christ Jesus, God was reconciling the world to himself. (2 Corinthians 5:19) To do so, God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save it. (John 3:17) Hearing that news, we are drawn into the story and we become participants in the story, not just observers. The “cross story” claims us—the life, suffering and death, and the resurrection of our Lord. The cross is the key to unlocking the story of God in Christ reconciling us. The cross becomes our story—in which we see our rebellion, our bondage to sin, our self-deception, our self-righteousness, and our spiritual pride.

C) The theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. It calls a spade a spade. This way of speaking leads to plain and honest talk about what we do and what happens to us. This direct, plain, clear, entirely unsentimental talk is difficult for us to take and usually is offensive. The truth is—we are predisposed to distort things, to see wrongly, and to speak falsely. Then God’s Law speaks and the truth comes out because through the Law my sin is revealed. (Romans 7)

-Like this quote from Arthur McGill’s Death and Life: An American Theology. “No American child is taught: ‘You will constantly find yourself with needs that cannot be satisfied, with destructive circumstances that cannot be controlled. Therefore, learn courage and endurance to bear needs and in need learn how to receive and how to give. Learn not to be emotionally overthrown by unrelieved pain and unforeseen disaster’ .” (p. 15)

D) What then? Our ears are finally opened and ready to hear the Gospel. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:8-10)

E) Our life is cross-shaped or “cruciform”. We discover that life is lived in tension. It is “the battle within”.

-Between Saint and Sinner: between the one forgiven by God and the one who at the very same time is a sinner. For we are saints and sinners.

-Between Law and Gospel: between the Law which convicts us of our sin and the Gospel which sets us free by the forgiveness which is ours in Christ.

-Between individuality and togetherness: between those two life forces that work against each other, where togetherness seeks to have us lose our individuality.

-Between differentiated and undifferentiated: between thinking and feeling, being an “I” when people are demanding “we”, taking maximum responsibility for one’s own emotional life rather than going along with others, working on self rather than others.

-Between life and death: between the life we live and the death that we know will one day come.

**3. The life of faith**

A) If we take the Apostles’ Creed as our starting point, that helps explain the basics of the Christian faith. If someone were to ask you what you believe, the Apostles’ Creed would be a good place to start.

1) The First Article (or first part) talks about God, the Father, who creates you and me and all that exists. (See Genesis 1 and 2) The world is God’s gift to us to “steward” or take care of as best we can. In that world, God provides us what we need for life—food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all we need from day to day (the Small Catechism explanation of the First Article).

2) The Second Article talks about God, the Son Jesus Christ, who redeems or saves us. He saves us not because of what we have done, but what He has done with his holy and precious blood and his innocent suffering and death (Small Catechism). (See the section on “The Theology of the Cross”.)

3) The Third Article talks about God, the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies us and keeps us in faith. In fact, we hear the truth “I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.” (Small Catechism) I can’t believe, not on my own and not by my choice. But the Holy Spirit uses the “Means of Grace”, the Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, to raise up faith in those who hear. That’s because faith comes from what is heard. (Romans 10:17) The Holy Spirit calls, gathers us with other believers, enlightens and sanctifies us (that means making us holy by the forgiveness of sin). Faith is God’s gift to you, worked in you by the power of the Holy Spirit.

B) If we believe what the Creed tells us about creation, redemption and salvation, we find ourselves set free to live in the world for the time being. It places us back in the creation there to live out our faith.

C) Each day we are “born again, born anew” as we thank God for the gift of faith. Remembering our baptism, there is a daily dying and a daily rising to faith. There is “repentance” where we think differently and we see life in a new way. It is like St. Paul said: “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:19-20)

D) This is a down-to-earth faith for the day-to-day world. In that day-to-day world we find ourselves in our families, our church and our work. We live in the midst of the systems of government, economics, and other institutions. (Lutherans have called these the “orders of creation” where God orders the natural life of humanity by the concrete historical structures that help hold life together so that we can live in relative peace.)

E) These “orders of creation” are all systems. That means knowing something about systems theory is very helpful, maybe even crucial, to living in all these systems.

**4. Down-to-earth faith**

A) In our day spirituality has really taken off. It is as if that is pictured by a movement inside to our center, then upward toward the heavens to get away from the muck and mud of everyday life. (I suppose we could add that to our list of ways people “distance”.)

B) Being religious is still quite popular, too. It is one of the ways that we seek to deal with God, who, we must admit, can be rather hidden and mysterious. Being religious and all that goes with that, makes us feel relatively safe as far as God is concerned. As if to say: “God can’t help but appreciate me because I….” and we fill in that blank with all our efforts, our piety, and that “I’m a pretty good person” stuff. (Maybe you have heard that old saying: “He/she is so heaven bound they are no earthly good.”)

C) What God has in mind for us is to live where God has placed us for the time being. To be sure, there are great challenges to that and our life is lived in the midst of tension. But now we need not be concerned about our “salvation”. That has been secured for us by Christ Jesus, our Lord. We are free to be his people, living out our lives in light of the promise which is ours. That means down-to-earth, here and now, in the world God has given us. In this world, we can live out our faith.

D) Jesus told us about the great commandments. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:30-31) In Ephesians we heard: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:8-10)

That can be our theology in a nutshell.

E) If you are looking for meaning and purpose in your life, there you have it. We are created in Christ Jesus for good works. That’s our way of life.

F) A great resource for that “way of life” is what I call “the Lutheran Bible”, the Small Catechism. When we read through that, we catch a glimpse of the Christian life in the day-to-day world. Take, for example, the 8th commandment “not to bear false witness against your neighbor”. The Small Catechism teaches us: “We are to fear and love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbor, but defend him/her, speak well of him and explain his actions in the kindest way.” Imagine a world where that sort of behavior was commonplace—defend him, speak well of him, and explain his actions in the kindest way.

**5. The problem with good works**

A) Our systems theory study has showed us that we have great difficulty seeing our own steps in the dance of life. We may think we are being helpful when we’re really not—over-functioning in a relationship. We may diagnose and blame without seeing our own part in the problem. We want to work on others rather than work on our emotional self. We do for others what they can do for themselves.

B) Jesus said, “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24) In order to deny your self, you have to have a self. Work on self, not others. Be clear about what you believe, what you will do or not do. Be a servant, but not for your own emotional payoff.

C) So, ask: Is my help really helping? Is my care needed? Have I left them stronger and less dependent? Answering “yes” to those means you are on the right track in caring for your neighbor.

D) While doing good, monitor yourself. We monitor ourselves for over-involvement where we’re taking on other people’s problems and responsibilities and over-functioning in their space. That may feel good for us, but may actually be detrimental to the ones we’re seeking to “help”.

E) “Repent”. Think differently. See life in a new way. Systems theory helps us to just that.

**6. The rhythm of life**

A) Living life in repentance is not easy. Living under the Cross is difficult. This cross-shaped life leads to plain and honest talk about what we do and what happens to us. This direct, plain, clear, entirely unsentimental talk is difficult for us to take and usually is offensive. The truth is—we are predisposed to distort things, to see wrongly, and to speak falsely. It is so true—we are in bondage to sin. Now, knowing what we know, we might even be able to make that confession.

B) System theorists tell us that no one does all that well in putting systems theory into practice. About the best we can do is a “C”. (That is extremely hard for the 4.0 folks to hear.) Yes, we work at it and work at it, over and over again.

C) But we are not left to our own devices (our own spirituality or our religiosity or even our good works). God in Christ Jesus moves in toward us—bringing the Word we so desperately need to hear. “In Christ Jesus your sins are forgiven. You are free to begin again living amidst the gifts and the promise I have given you.”

D) When those gifts and that gracious promise take hold of you, you begin again. You repent. You see things differently.

E) We receive those gifts and that promise when we come to worship so that the Holy Spirit can use the “Means of Grace” to do what needs to be done—forgive and bring new life. We repent.

F) Then we head back out in the real world of every day—there to live out our down-to-earth faith in the day-to-day world. But in that world, our faith takes a beating. We try our best. We kid ourselves. That’s why we return to church so that we can encounter the living God who is active in our lives.

G) There’s a rhythm to the Christian life—worship…living…worship…living. We can do no other because God’s Word in Christ is vital to our lives in this world. Then, we can live out our faith, a down-to-earth faith, in the day-to-day world in which we live.