

We're in the middle of graduation season, when students prepare to take their next step in life. Maybe the next step is deciding what school to attend in the fall; or what you're going to do with your summer vacation. If you get a job, how will you spend the money? How will the people you work with influence you; or better yet how will you influence them? That's just the beginning. We realize that our entire life is a series of next steps, each of which can take you in a number of different directions, situations and decisions that you weren't really expecting.

I like to know what to expect. I suspect that each of us likes to have some sense of control over those little corners of this world that we call 'our lives.' At the same time we feel a sense of relief that in every next step we take, every decision that we make, whether wise or not-so-wise, God is the One directing and making things work out for our eternal good.

The Father has chosen you to be his child before you were even born. He chose you, not because he knew you would make the 'right decisions' in life, but because of the Son who would make all the right decisions in your place, to live a perfect life, and then to willingly lay it down as the holy sacrifice God demanded for our sins. God's own Son did that – he overcame our most fearsome enemies by his death on the cross. And you believe that, not by your own thinking or choosing, but because God opened your eyes to this truth through the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the means of grace, through his holy word and baptism, the Holy Spirit made you his dear child. And he preserves you in this one, true Christian faith. The triune God has done all this, so that you know he never stops loving you.

That's what our Christian faith is all about. It's the certainty that one day we will see God face to face with complete confidence and nothing to hide. It's the yearning to be free from the effects of sin and death, no more crying or pain. It's the joy of knowing God's love for each one of us that guarantees that every moment of your life you are covered by the holy, precious blood of Jesus. You are forgiven, and you are righteous before God because of Christ. It's his gift to you every moment of your life!

Otherwise, if God wasn't the One giving us this gift, and it was somehow up to sinful people like us to make the right decision, we would be in a very bad way. People all over this planet have the best intentions to make the right decisions, to live their lives in a way that is honorable and admirable. And whether they believe it or not, that sense of right and wrong, what's honorable and what's not, is evidence of the will of God written into the hearts of every human being.

But it's not exactly right to infer that the conscience is the ultimate testimony of God's loving will. Sure it's another evidence of God's will, but the sinful mind and heart can ignore the conscience. The sinful mind says, "*I don't want a loving God who made me in his image. I want to be the one to make my own decisions and determine my own path in life.*" And to suggest that the same God who created us in his image also redeemed us from our utter helplessness and sin, that's when you see the smiles. Not the approving, happy smiles, but the pitying, ridiculing ones. "*You really believe that Jesus business?*" You get to see first hand what Paul meant when he warned that in the eyes of the unbelieving world the gospel is "**a stumbling block... and foolishness,**" (1 Co 1:23).

When we come together to worship with fellow believers, we get to bask in the glow of God's love without fear of being ridiculed or mocked. It's called a sanctuary for a reason. But there are those times in our day to day dwelling when it becomes crystal clear that we aren't in church anymore. The beliefs that you so boldly and proudly confessed in that sanctuary become a matter of questionable opinion in 'the real world.' You begin to wonder what others think of you. "*Who are you to say who's right and who's wrong? Do you really think that touting your personal beliefs as 'the truth' makes your life any better than the next guy's? You're living the dream, aren't you?!*" Knowing what God has done and believing that it is the unchanging, eternal truth is one thing.

Holding onto that unchanging, eternal truth is quite another thing. It's always been a challenge for believers of every age to cling to that gospel message. The Israelites, under the leadership of Moses and Aaron, heard that priestly blessing hundreds of times. "**The Lord bless you and keep you...**" The Lord gave them these words to remind them that the Lord is the source of every blessing and salvation. (Think of that when you hear those words at the end of a service.) Without that constant reminder of God's love, people can and will forget it.

When Jesus called his disciples to follow him, he knew they would need that same reminder and encouragement. There in that upper room, Jesus spoke some words that were literally unbearable for the disciples to understand and deal with. Only until the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost were they able to bear Jesus' words, to understand and embrace them. Granted it took them almost two months, but they understood and firmly believed everything Jesus told them. It all made sense, why he would just seem to give himself into the hands of sinful men instead of calling down a legion of angels at his command. Jesus had the power to do that, but he displayed an ever greater power by choosing to go quietly, a Lamb led to the slaughter. And just as he promised, the Holy Spirit "**guided [them] into all truth**" (Jn 16:13),

so that the horrible events of that Holy Week became the most beautiful and powerful story they would spend the rest of their lives telling!

One of those disciples, John, lived to tell the gospel story longer than any of the others. During his lifetime he was faced with the looming threat of the false teaching known as Gnosticism. The followers were known as Gnostics, and they believed that all physical matter is evil and that only the soul is pure. For that reason, according to their man-made beliefs, Jesus was simply another human being and not true God. According to Gnosticism, he became the Christ when God's Son incorporated his human body at his baptism and then split right before the crucifixion. In other words, it was taught that God's Son really didn't die for the sins of the world.

John was very concerned about the next steps that his younger fellow Christians would take. Would they follow the testimony of these false teachers whose arguments seemed so appealing in terms of avant-garde philosophy? The sinful nature loved the fact that this new way of looking at life made more sense than the testimony of the apostles. It even encouraged people to give in to their baser desires and lusts of the flesh, since physical matter and what they did with their bodies didn't matter anyway. "*It's all good,*" was the simple translation. How do you argue with that?

You don't. That's why John pointed to the testimony of God himself. And the central figure of God's testimony is none other than Jesus Christ, "***6 This is the one who came by water and blood...***" John's reference to water and blood may seem a bit cryptic and difficult to understand. But we can understand this as a reference to Jesus' earthly ministry which began at his baptism ('water') and ended on the cross ('blood'). In his earthly ministry the God-man Jesus Christ actively obeyed his Father's demands for our salvation by fulfilling all righteousness, obeying God's commands perfectly to be the sacrificial Lamb without blemish or defect. He passively obeyed his Father's demands by shedding his blood on the cross and dying for our sins. This is the testimony of God himself.

His testimony continues to be just as powerful and effective through the word and sacraments. John alludes to these means of God's grace when he says, "***7 For there are three that testify: 8 the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.***" That's because the word of God and his sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion all proclaim the same gospel truth: "***11 ...God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.***"

John had the privilege of seeing Jesus and knowing him during his time of 'water and blood.' He received the power of the Holy Spirit to give testimony about God's own Son who suffered and died and then physically rose from the grave. He says, "*Don't believe it because I say so; believe it, because God says so. And anyone who believes has life.*"

Fellow believers, you have life. Through faith, you have Christ, God's own Son. "***12 He who has the Son has life.***" One day we will experience a "*complete revitalization of our inner spirit and our physical bodies.*" We live each day with God's promise of eternal life in heaven with him. Again John writes, "***12 He who has the Son has life.***" It's a present tense verb. Because the Spirit has given you faith to believe in Jesus, you have the Son, and you have a new life right now.

There are those moments and days, though, when you wish you had a different life, because the one you're living right now (let's just say) could be better. On the one hand, God says that you have the greatest life in the world, because you have Jesus. But for some reason, it's almost like we're trying to hold back that smirk that says, "*Yeah, right. Following Jesus is a real walk in the park.*" God says that the believer "***5 ...overcomes the world.***" Then why do we feel so defeated and frustrated so often? Are we supposed to just muddle through life, trying to figure out the next steps we need to take so we don't mess things up. Is this an exercise in 'grinning and bearing it?' We experience hardship and disappointment, and we struggle to believe that having Jesus really is all that wonderful. Maybe we need something more out of life?

The world will tell you 'yes;' so will the devil, and so will your own sinful nature. For giving in to these doubts, for not embracing the new life that is yours and wishing for another without Christ, you have failed to appreciate God's love. You have pushed him away and have sinned against him. For that you deserve that he push you away from him forever.

Recognize your failures, knowing that any one of them deserves God's eternal punishment. Then look to the One whose own Son endured that punishment in your place, who died on the cross and rose again. His Spirit has opened your eyes to the truth of God's forgiveness and love, and by that forgiveness and love of God you are growing in faith and overcoming the world and your sinful nature. He empowers you to live the life that reflects your Savior more and more.

Whatever your next steps in life may be, you have the testimony of your triune God, that wherever you go, he goes with you. Unlike the world in which we live, God's love is perfect and changeless and will not disappoint. It's a love that echoes in our hearts and lives through the testimony of God's word and sacraments. May his Spirit empower you to rejoice and give glory to our triune God with each day of your new life in Christ! It has already begun, and it will continue on forever in the unending joy and peace of our heavenly home. Amen.