

Gaudete

7 December, Anno Domini 2023

St. Matthew 11:2-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear prisoners of the Gospel,

You are not alone in your suffering and your struggle. Every brother and sister in Christ here and around the world is suffering and struggling with you. And you are certainly not alone in wavering in your faith as the mounting pressures of sin and death surround you and threaten to overwhelm you. Even John the Baptist was not immune to doubting. He learned the hard way that the world and its devil hate God with an unquenchable hatred. No punishment is too severe for those who dare to speak the truth of God's Word. Mockery, chastisement, ostracizing, imprisonment, even death. Whatever it takes to silence God's voice. The devil and the world hate God and His children and want you to enjoy nothing good - no rest, no peace, no joy.

When you take the Word of God seriously and say out loud what the world wants you to keep behind the closed door of your lips, you will meet resistance. And with that resistance, because our faith is not yet perfected on this side of heaven, we begin to question if what we are saying is true. We begin to wonder if our trust and hope has been misplaced. After all, we are relying on a book written millenia ago. We might expect that the Word of God Almighty would march through the world like an invincible army, that all who hear of Christ would gladly believe that God had come to save them. We might expect that once we were made Christians everything would be better, easier, and happier. You would hope that finally your suffering would be over because you believe in Jesus - no sickness, no poverty, no temptation, no depression, that every story has a happy ending on this side of heaven.

But you and John, Peter, Paul, Abraham, Jacob, and especially our Lord Himself, know nothing could be further from the truth. Faith in Christ and adherence to His teaching in thought, word, and deed is inevitably met with the fiercest opposition because there is absolutely nothing more deeply hated by the devil than someone who has been snatched out of his hands by Christ, who seeks to resist his attempts to lead them into sin and back into the darkness of unbelief. He will send against you every fiery dart, every affliction, every temptation, every heartache that he has at his disposal to finally drop you on the field of battle. He will seek to cause you to despair of the promises which Christ has made to you in Baptism. His goal is that you would return to his kingdom where he is happy to fill your belly, make your life easy, and make the world love you as you merrily dance down the path toward eternal death.

And is it not true, as we have said many times, the world, as our Lord foretold, is only continuing to descend deeper into darkness and sin. There is no wickedness we can imagine that someone will not attempt to carry out. If you have been in Adult Bible Class, you have heard of the terrible tribulation that is unleashed in the world after Christ's ascension in order to destroy His work. In our day we have warnings of economic collapse, we hear rumblings of technology that may turn against man or at the very least be used to enslave man, we see the powers of government, science, business, schools, and even the church being weaponized to cause us to fall into unbelief, despair, and other great shame and vice.

Dear Christian, this is exactly why Christ instituted the Office of the Holy Ministry, the Pastoral Office. He knew that you, like John, would face deep trials of mind, body, and spirit. He knows the beasts of Revelation are mounting their assault on His people. He knew there would be seasons when everything around you with one voice shouts "Where is your God now? If He loves you why does He allow these things to happen to you? Some God!" It is for this very reason that God has sent His steward, your pastor, into your midst to declare to you the eternal Word which He has spoken. Christ sent him to affirm to you the promises He has made by holding your Baptism before your eyes, by speaking the word of Absolution to you when you repent of your sins and want to do better, by feeding

your hungry and battle-wearied soul with the very Body and Blood of the triumphant Lamb which testify to the iron-clad promise of God to deliver you. Your pastor, along with the gifts of Christ that he brings, are God's answer to your cries of doubt and uncertainty. They lift your eyes above the battle and the gloom to the throne room in heaven and the Lamb who reigns and who will cast down all His enemies in utter defeat on the Last Day and share His victory with you. He gives them to you to point you to His mighty works of old and His faithfulness to all of His children laid before us in the Bible.

This is one of the great blessings of the Holy Scriptures. They contain account after account of God's faithfulness to His children in their fiery trials - Abraham, Joseph, David, and Job just to name a few. Though we know these to be saints of great faith, we know well that they wavered and doubted, but God remained faithful to them. God does not turn away from you in your wavering but draws even closer by sending the servants whom He has called and ordained.

Like the mysteries they bring, these stewards are not impressive. They are men like you, sinners who suffer great affliction and trial. They are filled with flaws, times when they doubt, moments of weakness. They are purposefully so, so that you don't put your trust in them but in that which they bring and the one who sent them. They mess things up. They disappoint you. Sometimes they even say things that you don't want to hear. But God wants you to listen. He wants you to listen and to hear in their voice the voice of the Good Shepherd who leads His flock, who neither crushes the bruised reed nor snuffs out the smoldering wick, who picks up the lost and terrified lamb and rejoices to carry it home.

It is Jesus through your pastor who cries out to you "I am your comfort because I am the assurance of God's love and deliverance. My Blood is the Testament of God's faithfulness. I am the double blessing which has been poured out upon you. Look at the works I do. My works and my goodness are poured out upon the blind, the lame, the dead, and the poor in spirit. I am not needed by those who think they are already good enough or those who are offended by weakness and humility and suffering. I don't have anything to offer those who want nothing more than

success, health, wealth, and ease in this life. What I offer is a promise of eternal blessings, the certainty of the forgiveness of all your sins, the assurance of the love of God the Father Almighty for His Baptized children, the guarantee that no evil, however great it seems, will be able to take away my goodness and my protection. I have come for those whom the world runs over rough-shod, whom the world casts aside as evil because you will not buy into its lies and poison. You can weather any storm, any fiery persecution, any heavy cross that is laid upon you because I am with you. My dear children will not be snatched out of my hand or deprived of my kingdom. Even death itself cannot take you from me because I have made your grave a safe bed of rest for you. On the Last Day I will awaken you from your rest and take you to be with me where I am forever away from sin and death and pain and suffering and sadness.”

This is the cause of our rejoicing and hope even as we weep and cry out in our pain and fear and sorrow, as our crosses threaten to crush us. We know and are certain of the life and deliverance Christ has promised. We have the comfort of Holy Scripture. We don't look for hope or good in this world. It can't offer you what it doesn't have. We have no expectation that things in this life will get better, regardless of who gets elected, what medical advances are made, or what economic policies are put into place. We are looking always forward, preparing ourselves to meet our Lord with joy when He comes for us. He alone is and will give what is good. What Christ promises you in this world is His Word, His Church, His Sacraments, and persecutions. And to all who endure, who cling to the Means of Grace, who are not offended by the Christ who works through suffering and crosses, who are not ashamed to take up their own crosses and bear them in faith, Jesus will grant the crown of everlasting life. It is to you that the faithful stewards of Christ call out “Comfort! Comfort! Your warfare is ended. Your iniquity is pardoned. Your life which is as fleeting as the grass of the field is precious to God. Through faith in Christ you will join the Baptist in kingdom of God rejoicing without end in His faithfulness, His righteousness, and His salvation.”

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.