

(Before I read the words of our text, I want to point out to you that Luther says of these words of Jesus that they can frighten the greatest saints. We do need to hear Jesus' words, for we are sinners. But remember your baptism into Christ. You are His saints, God's holy people in Jesus Christ.)

**Luke 13:22-30**

August 21, 2022

In Aesop's classic fable, *The Tortoise and the Hare*, the hare lost the race not because it was slower than the tortoise obviously, but because, midway through the race, it took a break and slept, enabling the tortoise to catch up and go on to the finish. The hare had every advantage. It was built for speed, while the tortoise could only plod slowly along. Yet the tortoise kept focus on the race while the hare was distracted. Its confidence in its own ability prevented it from taking the race seriously. When it awoke, it was too late to catch the tortoise, and it suffered a humiliating defeat.

Such will be the defeat, not of those outside the church, but of those in the church who resemble the hare in their attitude toward the race that they are in. Those outside the church are not even in the race. It is not the pagans in the world whom Jesus addresses in our text. It's God's people; those who are very familiar with Jesus, who on the Last Day will say, "*Lord...we ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets!*" But He will say, "*I do not know where you are from. Depart from Me!*"

No pagan of the world would say such things to Jesus on the Last Day. They will readily admit that they did not eat and drink in His presence, nor did He teach in their streets. They are neither the tortoise nor the hare. They are the unbaptized who never entered the race. And so, Jesus' words in our text are not for them. They are for you and for me; the baptized; the people of God; those who are in the race either as the tortoise or as the hare.

And indeed, it is a race, a grueling race that we are in. "*Strive,*" says Jesus, "*to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.*"

This word *strive* that Jesus uses is an athletic word in the Greek. St. Paul uses the same word in His Epistle to describe the contest we are in. In the Greek the word *strive* sounds like our word *agonize*.

And so, back to the tortoise and the hare, which of these two was agonizing in the race? Which of these two was striving to cross the finish line, or we could say, to enter through the narrow door? Not the hare. It was overconfident. It had what it took to win the race with ease. And so, it gave no thought to striving. Rather than agonizing to finish the race, it lay down to enjoy a pleasant nap.

Far too many Christians are like the hare. They do not strive and agonize to win the race. They hardly act like they are even in a race. Opening God's Word is far from a daily habit for them. Church may be a habit, but only when there is nothing better to do. And Holy Communion is something they can take or leave.

They are overconfident. They speak of how strong their faith is. And yet, no one who actually has a strong faith ever boasts of having a strong faith. Those who are the hare, as Jesus puts it, are those who are first but who will be last. But those who are the tortoise are those who are last who will be first.

And is not this whom I am addressing here today? You had something else you could be doing. But you came, and better put, God drew you here to His house today. Are you not one who, rather than being familiar with Jesus and His words, loves and trusts in Him, and delights in reading and hearing His words of life? And His body and blood in His precious Sacrament for you – you see it as the food and fuel you need to complete the race.

That tortoise was not a sprinter. It did not win because it was fast. It won because it stayed on course. It was not distracted. It kept going step by step by step. No gimmicks. No innovations. It simply kept its focus on the race.

This describes our Lord, doesn't it? He endured the most agonizing race of all. As our text says, He was "*journeying toward Jerusalem.*" His finish line was the cross. And He never looked back. Nor was He distracted. And thus, He declared victory with the words, "*It is finished!*"

He won His race, but not for Himself. For you. And He now is our strength to bring us through our race to the finish line. And more, He is our forgiveness. Because, and here is the absolute truth, do we not all at times act like the hare and not like the tortoise? Not one of us is the strong finisher we like to think we are. But Jesus is. And in Him victory is yours.

He who was first of all became last of all to bring us who are last through the narrow door. Jesus is the narrow door. And He will lead you through to the finish.

He will not forsake you for being too much the hare. He forgives you. Not just a few of you. Not just those of you who are acting more like the tortoise now. Jesus forgives each and every one of you.

And because you are the tortoise and not the hare, you will not see Jesus' forgiveness as a license to sin. You will not see His forgiveness as an excuse to be neglectful and to take a break from the race. Rather, as the tortoise, you respond to Jesus' forgiveness by focusing on the race, fixing your eyes on Jesus. Keep striving in this way and show yourself to be the tortoise God has called you to be in your baptism into Christ. Amen.