

“Eyes Focused on Jesus”

“... looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that we set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

This weekend we get the opportunity to celebrate and give thanks to God for the start of another school year at Emmanuel-St. Michael Lutheran School (ESM). And this opportunity led me to reflect on my experiences that I had in Lutheran schools like ESM. As I thought back in thanksgiving for those years, there was one memory that came to mind that I thought might be useful for our reflection on the readings in our service.

In seventh grade, I had my first chance to play basketball with a school team at Ascension Lutheran. My coach, the late Jerry Ratzburg, was a major influence on helping me learn and grow in the fundamentals of the game. And one of his lessons, that still sticks with me was about free throws. I remember him constantly reminding us of the value of this part of the game and how important it was to take advantage of these opportunities.

The biggest part of taking advantage of free throws is making them. Coach Ratzburg spent lots of time helping us build consistent form for this shot. Among the various mechanics that would need to be addressed was where our eyes looked. He demonstrated to us that just looking at the basket and backboard wasn't enough, our eyes needed to focus on something specific like the small hook at the back of the hoop where the net connected. Doing this increased the precision of our shot and led to more made free throws.

This lesson was something Coach Ratzburg would have to remind us of regularly. And one day, I remember one of our big men who was struggling to make free throws in practice getting a refresher on this lesson. This teammate was growing tired and frustrated and looked to be losing confidence in the free throw advice Coach Ratzburg had shared with us.

So, Coach stopped our free throw practice and had this teammate try and throw a basketball from a short distance at the wall pads at the end of the gym. The goal was to hit one of the lines in between the pads with the ball. At first this teammate couldn't do it, his attempts were all over the place. Then, Coach taped a tiny “x” on one of the lines and told the player to focus on that “x” and try again. Not only did this teammate's attempts improve dramatically, but also all of us watching learned quickly the importance of focusing our eyes on a specific spot on a target not just generally at the target even when were tired and frustrated and wanted to lose focus.

That simple lesson I learned years ago, can be a useful concept for our spiritual journey too. In our walk of faith, looking broadly at religious and spiritual related things isn't enough. The eyes of faith need to be focus on something specific. They need to focus on Jesus, on His words and work. Focused specifically on Jesus, what He has said and done for us, our lives receive certainty of salvation and purpose even when our circumstances become difficult and challenging.

Our first reading from Jeremiah and our Gospel reading from Luke share some reminders with us that the eyes of faith need to be focused on the Lord and His words and works. In that Jeremiah reading, the language you heard moments ago was a small section from the Lord to the people of Judah in Jeremiah's time. He was warning them about the false messages that unauthorized prophets were making in His name. The Lord had told His people through other authorized prophets that they were headed for exile in a foreign land, yet these false teachers attempted to say otherwise giving false hope.

The Lord shared that these false prophets had lost focus on Him, saying, **“For who among them has stood in the council of the Lord to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened?”** (*Jeremiah 23:18*). With eyes not on the Lord, the words of these false teachers weren't only wrong, they were dangerous because they continued to lead others astray! The lies of these spiritual leaders weren't guiding the people away from sin and towards the Lord's salvation and purpose

for their lives but making them comfortable in their sin and lost in their rebellion and their own sinful purposes for their lives.

Years later, the Lord would again address this struggle with His people but this time in person. Speaking to a crowd in our reading from Luke, Jesus scolds the crowd for being able to read signs that predicated upcoming weather conditions, yet they were unable to recognize the meaning behind the signs He was revealing to them. **“When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”** (*Luke 12:54-56*).

These people in the crowd also had lost focus. Their eyes had been distracted from the Lord so that even when He stood in front of them with signs and wonders they couldn’t recognize what He was revealing. Again, the Lord’s judgment was coming, and this time God was going to exile Himself from Himself! Jesus was going to be baptized in the judgement of the world’s sin! Dying upon the cross, Jesus’ ministry that would be so divisive for families, would culminate in His own separation from His Father.

Now again this weekend, our own focus should be examined. Where have our eyes been lately on our spiritual journey? Have we also been distracted with false teachings and false teachers? Are we currently seeking false messages that tell us what we want to hear enabling us to remain comfortable in our own sin? Have we gotten so sidetracked in trying to interpret the future of the culture, the economy, the politics, even the weather of this world that we’re missing what God continues to do right in front of us? Have we sought earthly peace within our family at the expense of the truth and forgiveness Jesus died to win for us and for our families?

We shouldn’t deny it, we too have lost focused. We have permitted unauthorized messages to fill our hearts and minds. We’ve gotten caught up in all the potential, future signs and wonders of this temporal world that we’ve forgotten about the actual, present signs and wonders of eternity that God has been delivering right here among us. And the most sobering part is that there’s one more exile coming. When the Lord returns, the judgement isn’t to be carried off to some foreign land for years, but to Hell for eternity.

Recognizing that our eyes haven’t been zeroed-in on Jesus and in repentance from our sinful distractions, we cling to our merciful God who has promised to restore our focus on Jesus. By His gracious words, the Holy Spirit points us back to Jesus, **“the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God”** (*Hebrews 12:2*). And He guides us to endure in our focus on Jesus even when challenging and difficult circumstances make us want to lose focus.

Yes, in these very words of this service, the readings, the songs, the prayers, etc. our God is at work! He is forgiving our failed attempts to focus on Him consistently in this life. He is restoring our hearts and minds from the false messages that have infiltrated them. He is strengthening us to cling to Him and His words and works even when life gets challenging and difficult. He is preparing us for eternity with Him in heaven forever.

Dear friends in Christ, let there be no doubt! Our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit has been refocusing the eyes of His people for generations! Those are the witnesses mentioned in our Hebrews reading. Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Rahab and numerous others are evidence that our God can keep His people focused on Him and His words and works. And like He has done before, our God continues to focus eyes on Jesus still today in our homes, our churches and our schools, like Emmanuel-St. Michael, as He continues again this year to use this place to educate for life and encourage faith for eternity. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan