

“Saint Augustine”

Sermon on Sunday, August 28, 2022

Dear church,

Saint Augustine, whom we remember today, isn't one of the coolest, trendiest or most beloved saints and probably never has been. Few miracles are reported in connection with this North African Bishop. He wasn't a mystic or an advocate for the poor but a good old theologian who wrote books and treatises that frankly aren't good material for summer reading on the beach. In this past century he has been increasingly criticized and blamed for his teaching of Original Sin and his negative view of sexuality. Those criticisms are understandable, but they are only part of his legacy. Augustine was heavily influenced by the letters of Paul. Grace is at the core of our Lutheran teachings, and that emphasis was colored by this early church father who was born in a Patrician Berber family in North Africa, modern day Algeria. As for some of us, Augustine's family was divided about faith. His father was a proud pagan; his mother a devout Catholic. For most of Augustine's younger years, it seemed like his father's mindset won and his pious mother's attempts to grow his faith went exactly - nowhere.

Young Augustine studied rhetoric and philosophy. He enjoyed life in the flesh and prided himself on his intellectual gifts; he dabbled in astrology and was involved in philosopher's circles. Church wasn't part of his universe in those early years; maybe he deemed it below his intellect. Didn't a lot of uneducated people go to these churches? But the early education that he had received from the catechism classes somehow found a late echo in his heart. We know about that from his own memories.

Augustine was the first person in the history of Western literature who wrote an autobiography, his famous “Confessions.” As autobiographies go, it's probably part truth and part fiction and mostly the way he wanted to remember it. It's certainly written from the vantage point of looking at his life after his conversion to the Christian faith. The conversion is described in the Confessions as a dramatic moment during which he heard the voice of a child, urging him to pick up the book, the Holy Book, the Bible. “Tolle Lege! Tolle Lege!” the child chanted, according to his recollection. It means “Pick up and read!

Pick up and read!" There was never a question for this young man which book the child was referring to.

Augustine was in a garden at the time, and what he heard may have been an apparition or it may have been real, it was hard to tell. He proceeded to open his Bible randomly, his hands guided by the Holy Spirit, and found Matthew 19: 21: "*Go and sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven. and come and follow me.*" This was to become the guiding message for the rest of his life. Following that experience, he did not get married, as he had planned to. He sought to be baptized, which was done by Bishop Ambrose in Rome. He became a priest and then a Bishop, pouring his intellectual gifts into the work of the church. For 35 years he served as Bishop of Hippo Regius, which today is the Algerian seaport city of Annaba.

Two things strike me about St. Augustine's wild journey. I am intrigued by the story of his conversion and the appearance of a child, especially since Christ, in his teachings, often encouraged his disciples to receive the kingdom of God like a little child. Jesus once said, "*Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all.*" (Luke 18:17) Intellectually minded people often find that very difficult because they want to be in control with their brains in all aspects of life. Spiritually speaking that's often a dead end because you can only receive faith by giving up control, by trusting God and entrusting your life to a higher power. I believe it's no coincidence that Augustine heard this message, "Tolle Lege" from the mouth of a child. At that point in his tumultuous youth, he was ready to listen and receive this word of God with faith. And that willingness did not come from his head. It came from his heart. You could also say: it came from his mother!

The second thing that strikes me is that the three people in the history of the church that have spoken most powerfully about the importance of grace, were all intellectuals. I am probably leaving some important people out here, but to me these were Saint Paul, Saint Augustine and Martin Luther. All of them tried mightily to make sense of God and stay in control of their spiritual destiny. All three of them were smart and gifted people, over-

achiever types. And all three of them hit their heads against a wall about this “God” thing until they finally gave up with crushing headaches. And discovered something much more beautiful than what they had expected... which is the gift of grace. “Paul,” God screamed at him, “you don’t have to fulfill the entire law in order to be saved!” You don’t have to lead a perfect life in order to find favor with God, Saint Augustine!” Type A Martin, you don’t have to be a perfect monk in order to find favor with me!” And you, modern person, with all your perfectionism and self-criticism, with all your to-do lists, you don’t need to be perfect either. Hear the voice of the child, listen to your heart and entrust your life to Christ, who said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble and find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11: 29).

Saint Augustine carried this faith to the end of his life and he was carried by his faith even when the Roman world that had shaped his culture for hundreds of years fell apart at the end of his life. And we? In a time when we sense a major transition in our world, a seismic change, Saint Augustine is a voice of hope. And the voice of the child reaches our ears: “Tolle Lege!” “Take and read!” And begin to trust in a wisdom that is above your heads. God is here in this crumbling world.

Amen.