



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Reformation Sunday**

**October 30, 2016**

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### **“Phantom Pains”**

*(John 8:31-32)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him,  
‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you  
will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’” (John  
8:31-32).*

**COLLECT:** Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

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As many of you know my wife Gail works at UW Hospital as the upper extremity rehab manager. Her own specialty is on the rehabilitation of the hand. It's amazing how many different ways we have to injure our hands. This past week the pumpkin carving patients were at the hospital. In early July, it's the season of firework injuries. Then there are the lawnmowers and chain saws and corn pickers and hydraulic presses, and of course, the ever present bagel injury. If you ever want to get a reaction out of Gail, just take a really sharp knife and start cutting a bagel while holding it vertically like this. She loves that!

Some accidents are so traumatic they lead to amputation. That, in turn, often leads to phantom pains coming from the limb that has been removed. Their minds tell them their missing hand can make a fist; or their missing finger needs to be itched, or the lost leg is burning, tingling, or freezing cold. The limb is gone, but the pain is very real and miserable. Apparently the nerve endings at the site continue to send pain signals to the brain that make the brain think the limb is still there.

It's a very difficult thing to treat. For most, phantom pains diminish over time, but for some, phantom pains can last for the duration of their lives. And these pains can be triggered by any number of things: cold weather, changes in barometric pressure, touch, even smoking.

In the same way, I know many Christians suffer from spiritual phantom pains. They feel convicted by a sin that God had long since taken away. The sin is gone, but their phantom pain is not. Psalm 103 says "As far as the east is

from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (v. 12). The sin is far gone, but the guilt and regret just won’t go away.

A woman in St. Louis came to me. She had had an abortion some twenty years before our meeting. Yet her tears were still hot, and the guilt a heavy, heavy burden. She was in college when she got pregnant. And the boyfriend didn’t want anything to do with her anymore or with being a father. And she didn’t want to be a disappointment to her family. So she chose an abortion. Almost immediately, she was filled with regret and grief. For a long time she avoided church; she didn’t feel worthy. Eventually she came back, received communion, but the pain and guilt would not go away. In fact, different things would trigger it. The anniversary of the abortion was always a hard time of the year. Or when she saw children walking home from school at the end of the day. Even one Saturday in June, because the high school was celebrating graduation, and her child would have been a senior. Phantom pains. She had confessed her sin, received Holy Communion. The sin was gone. The pain was not.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus says, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin . . . But if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Jesus is addressing Jews who had believed in him, and he’s encouraging them to, quote, “abide in my word.” What does that mean, to abide in his word? It means to accept his teaching and remain faithful to it . . . to cling to it alone above everything else. Proverbs 3 says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (v.5). We go adrift when not anchored to the Lord’s word. Problems arise when we start trusting our reason and senses more than God’s Word.

An example: Jesus said, “This is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” But it sure looks like wine, smells like wine, tastes like wine. Our reason and senses conclude it must be wine. But Jesus insists, “It’s my blood”, and the rest of God’s Word seems to agree. So we have a collision between God’s Word and our reason. Who’s going

to win? We should let God's Word win that argument.

If we choose to trust in our reason instead, then this remains only bread and wine. If it's only bread and wine, it can't do anything for us. If it's only bread and wine, then the whole exercise is about you and me going through some ritual together in which we remember that Jesus died for us. And that's good, but haven't we been doing that already? Isn't remembering Jesus a part of singing the hymns and listening to the lessons and the sermon? Of course, and that's precisely why churches that believe it's only bread and wine only celebrate the Lord's Supper once in a while because it's really not that big of a deal. It's just another way of exercising your memories.

Now let's see how it plays out the other way. Let's abide in God's Word and submit our reason to his Word. If we do that, then somehow this is his body and blood. God doesn't tell us how, nor do we really care. He never explains any of his miracles. We just ask, "Did he say it? Does he promise to give us his body and blood?" Because he does (it's right there in his Word, in multiple places), we know now that his body and blood must be in the bread and wine. And why? He tells us: "this is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." So, abiding in his Word we know it's there for us for the forgiveness of our sins. You can see his forgiveness, hold it, smell it, and taste it. God gives your faith something physical to hold on to. As soon as I taste the bread and wine on my tongue, I know, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed my transgression from me" . . . because he promised.

Moreover, now you also know his forgiveness is for your body, not just for your spirit, because he put his body and blood into your body. And what does that do for your body? Abiding in his Word, let's see. In John 6 Jesus said, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (Jn. 6:54). Could he have said it any clearer? Luther said the Lord's Supper turns our death into "Kinderspiel" - child's play (WA 45, 199). So, abiding in his word, we see the Lord's Supper

is not about what we are doing; it's not just about stimulating our memories. It's about what the Lord is doing for us, and in us. He's putting flesh and blood his right into our mouths in a way that we can receive it. It takes away our sin and gives us his life.

That's potent stuff he's giving us. Annie Dillard writes, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?" She suggests instead of handing out bulletins the ushers should be giving each of us a crash helmet! (Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 58).

With all this in mind, how often are you going to want to receive the Lord's Supper? Very! And how often are we as a church going to want to offer the Lord's Supper? Every single weekend! Who are we to withhold it from folks bearing a heavy load of sin and guilt. In the 4th century, Chrysostom described in vivid language about how eager an infant can be for his mother's milk and how it will latch on with a singular focus and vigor, and how it will scream bloody murder if something were to interrupt that precious time. So also we, with even more eagerness should approach the Lord's Supper. "Let it be our great sorrow [as infants] not to partake of this food." In other words, scream like a baby if something or someone prevents you from this food (NPNF 10, 496).

Let's go one step further. What about those phantom pains? Say you've just received the Lord's Supper. His body and blood are in you. The sin is gone. He's washed it away. Yet you still feel guilty and sad. What now?

Well all I can say to you is abide in the Lord's word and submit your feelings also to his word just as you submit your reason. There's a collision going on between your feelings and God's Word. Who's going to win? "Abide in my word" Jesus said, "and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Cling to his promises above everything else, including your feelings. Feelings make excellent servants, but terrible masters. Your feelings, if you let them, will drive you all the way to despair. Abide in his word instead.

Here's Luther: "The love of the Son of God is so great toward us that the greater the filth and stench upon us, the more He gives Himself to us, cleanses us, and takes all our sin and wretchedness, lifts them off our shoulders and lays them on His own back . . . He says to me, 'You are no longer a sinner, but I am. I step into your place – you have not sinned, but I have. The whole world is in sin, but you are not in sin – I am. All your sins are to lie on Me and not on you . . .' The Son of Man does the basest and filthiest work – not just wearing a beggar's tattered coat or old trousers or washing us like a mother washes a child, but bears our sin, our death, hell, our wretchedness of body and soul. When the devil says, 'You are a sinner,' Christ interrupts, 'I will reverse that, I will be a sinner, you shall go free.'" (Siggins, 136).

With phantom pains in mind, Luther is reminding us there might be something else going on here too. In Revelation 10, the devil is called the great accuser, because that's what he does. He'll latch on to your worst act on your worst day, and will not let you forget it. He'll tell you, "You're no Christian. You're just a phony." Again from Luther: "When the devil comes during the night to plague me, I give him this answer: 'Dear devil, I have heard the record. But I have committed far more sins which do not even stand in your record. Put them down in your little book too!' And again, he says, 'Devil, your argument is with Christ. Go see him about it. He has said I am forgiven. This I believe!'"

That's what it means to cling to God's Word when other forces are trying to pull you away. That's abiding in God's Word. That's what will set you free from slavery to sin. In the face of his accusations you cling tightly to the promises of God's word.

One last thing: God's Word goes out of its way to assure us the sin is utterly gone. There are lots of examples. I'll choose just one: 1 John 1:7, "The blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin." Purify is a strong word, isn't it? I seldom get to use it because nothing I clean is ever purified. And the

word “all” is even stronger. We should probably use that word even less, because there are almost always exceptions to the “all”. But God’s word promises: “The blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin.” He means what he says.

Don’t trust your reason as the ultimate arbitrator of truth. Don’t trust your feelings; they’ll deceive you too. And certainly, don’t even listen to the Accuser. Listen to your Savior who promised, ‘If you abide in my word . . . and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ Thanks be to God. Amen.

