



Why Marriage Matters: *A Bible Study*

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Session 1: Knowing What to Say

In March 2013, the Supreme Court of the United States of America heard arguments in two cases regarding same-sex marriage. Decisions in these cases are anticipated in June; and whatever those decisions, the oft-heated debates about marriage and homosexuality will rise to the surface again. Whether or not those court decisions advance the cause of same-sex marriage, it is incumbent upon Christians to articulate clearly what Scripture says. This Bible study is designed to assist with that proclamation.

Goals

The first session of this study is designed to lay a foundation — to make sure we know what God’s Word says. To do this, we want to:

- Clarify what the Bible says about God’s design for marriage.
- Explore what the Bible says about homosexuality and to place it in perspective.
- Contrast marriage with homosexuality on the basis of Scripture.

A Review of Marriage

The Scripture readings for the Order of Holy Matrimony in the *Lutheran Service Book* make for a wonderful survey of what the Bible says about marriage. We will take a look at two of them.

Read Gen. 2:18–24.

1. Throughout the six days of creation, God calls everything “good.” What is the only thing that God calls “not good” before the fall into sin (verse 18)?
2. What does God call Eve in verse 18? What does this mean?

3. The Lord institutes marriage in verse 24. What does this verse say? When in history is marriage instituted?
4. Read Gen. 1:28. What blessing and privilege does God give to the first husband and wife, to be fulfilled within their marriage?
5. Summarize what we've learned of marriage from these verses in Genesis.

Read Eph. 5:22–33.

6. According to verses 22–24, how are wives to act in relation to their husbands? What does this mean?
7. According to verses 25–30, how are husbands to act in relation to their wives? What does this mean?
8. Where have you heard verse 31 before, and why is it important to find it here?
9. Read verse 32. What honor is given to marriage here?
10. Summarize what we learn of marriage from Eph. 5:22–33.

A Review of Homosexuality

Now that we've taken a look at some passages regarding marriage, we turn to a passage that addresses homosexuality. (The leader's guide has additional references.)

Read Rom. 1:18–32.

11. According to verse 18, what does the ungodliness and unrighteousness of people lead them to do?
12. Verse 20 talks about how God's eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived since the creation of the world. How does man's treatment of the doctrine of creation illustrate verse 18? How is this further illustrated according to verse 23? Can you give other examples of how the truth is suppressed?

13. Read verse 19. Verse 20 ends, "So they are without excuse." What does Paul mean? See verse 21.
14. Verses 24–25 connect sexual impurity of all sorts to unbelief. Why might this be the case?
15. Read verses 26–27. What is the sin here that Paul uses as an example of man suppressing the truth and acting contrary to nature? What does "contrary to nature" mean?
16. Read verses 28–31. What other sins does Paul list as examples of a debased mind? Why is this important to our discussion of same-sex marriage? What does verse 32 say about all of these sins?
17. From our study of Romans 1, what can we conclude to help our discussion about same-sex marriage?
18. Given what the Bible says about marriage and homosexuality, what should the Church say about same-sex marriage?
19. Back up to Rom. 1:16. In discussing same-sex marriage, what should be the foundation and end of the Church's proclamation?

Prayer

God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, grant us the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of patience and compassion, that we may rightly speak Your words of judgment and mercy to all who will hear, that by the power of Your Gospel they may repent of their sin, trust in Your pardon, and be reconciled to live in the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Adapted from Collect #713, *Lutheran Service Book*)

STUDY LEADER NOTES

Note to the leader: It is common to refer to the doctrine of marriage as “traditional marriage,” and participants will likely use the term. That’s fine, in that they are probably defining “traditional marriage” as how marriage has been traditionally understood *according to Scripture*. The persnickety author of this study shies away from the term for two reasons: First, traditions change over time, and marriage is being redefined into new tradition that will eventually become old tradition. Second, as Lutherans we do not derive doctrine from tradition, but establish tradition from unchanging doctrine. Thus, unless otherwise specified, what most people call “traditional marriage” will simply be referred to in this study as “marriage.”

1. It is not good for the man to be alone.
2. Eve is called a “helper fit for him.” One should note that the word “helper” (עֲזָרָה) does not imply subjection: the same word is used to describe God Himself (cf. Ps. 10:14; 30:10). The word translated as “fit” (רֵאֵת) in the ESV doesn’t translate particularly neatly, but includes the sense of “different and complementary.” Eve is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) to be a complement to Adam. Man and woman are different, with different callings; but they will mutually complete and help each other.
3. Marriage is described as the union of a *man and a woman*. Notably, when the man leaves his father and mother, he is leaving another union of man and woman to be joined to his own wife in marriage. This is God’s will for marriage. One cannot argue that same-sex is permitted but unmentioned in Scripture, because the Lord clearly condemns same-sex sexual relationships in Rom. 1:18–32. It is noteworthy that the institution of marriage takes place before the fall into sin: this is the Lord’s plan for marriage and family in Paradise, not just a band-aid that becomes necessary because of sin.
4. He blesses them with the words, “Be fruitful and multiply.” He thus declares that marriage

is the institution in which children are to be conceived and born. What a high honor! The Lord could have kept making people out of dust and ribs, but instead He entrusts to man and woman the gift of procreation — of bringing more life into the world.

5. So far, we know that marriage is a gift of God. He wills that it be the union of a man and a woman so that they are not alone. Within marriage, husband and wife are to serve one another, and this is the institution to which God gives His blessing for the procreation of children.
6. Wives are to submit to their husbands. While “submission” is interpreted by some to be slavish obedience, verse 24 clarifies by explaining that wives are to submit “as the church submits to Christ.” In praying, “Thy will be done,” we declare to the Lord that we do not seek to control Him, but thankfully serve Him. Likewise in marriage, the wife is not to seek to control her husband, but to serve and love him — a task made difficult by the fall into sin (Gen. 3:16)!
7. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. The word for “love” (ἀγαπάτε) is not some squishy sentiment nor dictatorial power, but a word that describes sacrificial service to others — even when they are being less than lovable. How did Christ love the Church? He died for her, that His people might be cleansed from sin. Husbands are likewise to serve their wives sacrificially, and to do so on an ongoing basis.
8. Paul quotes Genesis 1:24, the institution of marriage. In doing so, he makes clear that the Lord’s original intent for marriage remains in the New Testament and until the end of the age.
9. Marriage also has the honor of illustrating the relationship between Christ and His bride, the Church. This is important: in present times, marriage is seen as an [optional] commitment only between two people, which contributes to the idea that it can be two people of the same sex. Marriage is not so individualized, however. It is also a lifelong commitment of responsibility

by the two to their family, community and the Church: the couple pledges to all that it is within their marriage that their sexual activity, procreation and the raising of their children will take place. Rather than a venue for selfishness, it is a place for service to spouse, children, extended family and in-laws.

Of all the institutions on earth, Ephesians says that it is the union of a man and woman which best serves to illustrate the mystery of Christ and His Church. Man and woman remain distinct and complementary, yet they are one: so also Christ and His Church (John 17:22–23). In preserving the institution of marriage, the Church also preserves a vital illustration of Christ and His Church — and thus the Gospel! The author would offer for discussion that attacks upon the institution of marriage are at least partly an attempt to muddle man's understanding of the Church and her Bridegroom, and thus to obscure the Gospel.

10. Marriage remains an institution between a man and a woman, in which man and woman seek to love and serve one another. In doing so, they have the honor of illustrating the mystery of Christ and His bride, the Church.

11. It leads them to suppress the truth.

12. Although the existence of a powerful Creator is evident from the creation, man has instead opted to promote the model of the “big bang” and evolution. The author would offer that this model is popular not because it is particularly believable nor scientifically verifiable, but because it is a model that denies the existence of God. (It is telling that “intelligent design” theory is normally dismissed from serious discussion because it implies the existence of an intelligent creator.) Verse 23 provides a different tack by sinners: ignoring the obvious existence of an almighty Creator, rather than an atheistic evolution man instead chooses to make gods out of creation!

It is worth mentioning a few more examples of how man suppresses God's truth in preparation for speaking about homosexuality. These might include:

God creates man to labor (Gen. 2:15), so man desires boredom and sloth, even though sloth leads him unfulfilled and into other temptation. God sacrifices His Son to provide redemption and eternal life, and man accuses God of being narrow-minded because He only provides one Way of salvation. (Imagine you're in a burning building, and someone declares, “I've found a way out!” Who's going to say, “Only one way? That's not fair!” No one. Yet that is how sinners treat the Gospel.)

Sin blinds people to the truth of God, no matter how obvious and reasonable that truth may be.

13. Man cannot rightfully complain that God is unclear or confusing. The problem lies not with God, but with man's sinful, stubborn refusal to accept what God clearly makes known.

14. God is the Author and Creator of life; but rather than create people out of the ground, He gives mankind the honor of bringing forth more life by means of procreation. What an honor that is for human life comes into being no other way! Since the Lord wills that procreation take place within marriage, it only makes sense that the blindness of unbelief would attack this high honor by demeaning marriage and motherhood, encouraging promiscuity and considering children a burden rather than a gift.

15. Paul uses same-sex attraction and resultant sexual activity as an example and predictable outcome of man's rebellion against God. This, with 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10, is very important for the discussion, because it makes clear that homosexuality is a manifestation of sin.

Christians should be careful to clarify what “contrary to nature” means, namely that it runs against God's design for creation. This is important because of occasional articles which purport discoveries of animals engaged in same-sex relations as “proof” that this happens in nature and thus is “natural.”

16. Under the category of “all manner of unrighteousness,” Paul lists “evil, covetousness,

malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” Some of these sins have greater significance for society: murder rightfully earns long imprisonment, while envy isn’t even a crime. However, all of these sins are examples of unrighteousness, as is same-sex attraction; and some of these sins (envy, strife, insolence, etc.) are common among Christians and easily dismissed as “little” sins. It is important to note the entire list, lest Christians fall prey to believing that homosexuality is greater offense to God than their own petty transgressions. (Likewise, when homosexuality is mentioned in 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10, it is included in a long list of sins.) Homosexuality has a greater impact upon society than other sins, but it is important to remember that any violation of God’s will is a very serious matter, and just one sin — no matter what it is — deserves eternal condemnation in hell. According to verse 32, those who practice such things — whether it be the one who engages in same-sex relations or the Christian who boasts that he’s not like the homosexual — deserve to die.

17. Here are some key points to continue the discussion:

Same-sex attraction is a manifestation of man’s rebellion against God.

However, while homosexual sins are very serious, we should not assume a hypocritical attitude and suppose we are above the sins of others. As Paul explains in Romans 2, this ignores the fact that the Law justly has accused and condemned all sinners. All deserve death for their sin, whatever that sin may be.

Because same-sex attraction and relations are part of man’s rejection of God’s truth, a reasonable argument against it has little chance of changing the mind of its proponents. It has even less of a chance of making them into Christians.

18. Same-sex marriage cannot be reconciled with God’s Word. Marriage between a man and a woman is a gift of God given in a sinless world before the fall, while homosexual activity is a manifestation of the fall into sin. This is important: the Church’s opposition to same-sex marriage hinges upon whether or not homosexuality is sinful. Therefore, it hinges upon what the Word of God says.

19. The Church is given to proclaim the Gospel. The Law calls sin a sin, and the Law actually inflames rebellion against it. If the Church is to be faithful to its mission, it will proclaim the grace of “Christ and Him crucified” to *all* sinners.

Session 2: Saying What We Know

In session one, we studied what the Bible says about marriage and homosexuality. Now that we know what to say, it's time to talk about how to say what we know.

Goals

- To review what the Bible says about marriage and homosexuality
- To determine obstacles which obstruct a loving proclamation
- To explore how we ought to speak the truth in love.

Review

Meeting our first goal is relatively easy, since we're just reviewing what we covered last time.

1. What does the Bible say about marriage?
2. What does the Bible say about homosexuality?

Review

Since we've reviewed what Scripture has to say about marriage and same-sex attraction, we know what to say. So what would keep us from saying it?

3. I'll go first. I will say that the primary obstacle to our proclamation is thinking only in terms of the Law, or only in terms of the Gospel. (Just what you'd expect an egghead Lutheran pastor to say, yes?) But give this some discussion: if the Church only proclaims the Law or only proclaims the Gospel with regard to homosexuality, what is the Church communicating to hearers? Depending on the discussion, some helpful texts might be 1 Cor. 5:1-2,13 and Gal. 6:1-2.
4. If I'm right with question No. 3, what is our first response in addressing same-sex attraction and marriage? Discuss what sins are in play.
5. Beyond this, what are some other obstacles that might prevent a Christian from speaking about marriage and same-sex attraction? What help do we receive from John 15:18-21 and John 16:32?

6. Why will the world oppose the Scripture's teachings about homosexuality and marriage, and thus the Church's opposition to same-sex marriage? How should this influence how Christians speak the truth? What is the danger of reasonable arguments? A review of Rom. 1:21-23 will prove helpful here.

The What, Where, Who, Why

7. Summarize: what is the Church's message to the world about same-sex marriage?
8. Where is this truth to be spoken?
9. Should the decisions by the Supreme Court affect the proclamation of the Church (Acts 5:29)?
10. Why should Christians speak at such a time as this? What is the greatest reason to speak?

Prayer

Lord, keep this nation under Your care. Bless the leaders of our land that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to the other nations of the earth. As citizens, grant that we may choose trustworthy leaders, contribute to wise decisions for the general welfare and serve You faithfully in our generation. As Christians, grant that by Your Holy Spirit we may proclaim the Good News of salvation to all who will hear; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

(Adapted from Collects #225 and 104, Lutheran Service Book)

STUDY LEADER NOTES

Note to the leader: where session one was sort of a scramble through Scripture to lay a foundation for discussion, session two is designed more for discussion. While some Scripture texts are referenced, the primary sources for discussion remain those texts from session one.

1. Marriage is an institution between a man and a woman, in which man and woman seek to love and serve one another. In doing so, they have the honor of illustrating the mystery of Christ and His bride, the Church.

2. Same-sex attraction is a manifestation of man's rebellion against God. It is contrary to nature in that it is contrary to God's design; however, it seems reasonable because of the blindness of sin. We also note that, while homosexual sins are very serious, we should not use that as an excuse to think we are above the sins of others. According to the Law, all stand justly accused and condemned before God. All deserve death for their sin, whatever that sin may be. We also rejoice that Christ has died for all sins, that all who repent and trust in Him might be saved.

3. If the Church only proclaims the Law to homosexuals, then the message is, "You're sinful and you deserve death, so go away." Unsurprisingly, this is not an effective message for reaching out to homosexuals. If the Church only proclaims the Gospel, the sinner will see no need for the Savior. This message is more welcoming, but fails to call anyone to repentance.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul is addressing a matter of sexual immorality in the congregation — not homosexuality, but incest. He is adamant that those who are thus sinning should be purged from the congregation. This is clearly a text of God's Law, but why should the immoral be purged? Because they are not *repentant*: they wish to retain their sin with the approval of their fellow Christians. Some will be tempted to use this passage only as a "proof text" to expel those guilty of immorality from a congregation; but it is just as much an indictment of that congregation for its failure to call sinners to repentance.

Gal. 6:1–2 instructs Christians to restore those who have fallen into sin, whatever the sin, and this restoration is by leading them to repentance. Christians who simply ostracize sinners because of their distaste for a particular sin fail to do what God commands. Furthermore, the Church is instructed to bear the burdens of those who repent, helping them to live an ongoing, repentant life so that they do not fall back into sin.

It is the author's opinion that many Christians (Lutherans certainly included) are particularly awful at proper distinctions in dealing with same-sex attraction. First of all, they fail to distinguish between repentant and unrepentant sinners: anyone who admits to same-sex attraction is automatically assumed to be defiant, not repentant. In terms of Law and Gospel, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, *the distinction which matters is repentant vs. unrepentant, not heterosexual vs. homosexual*. Failing to make that distinction, Christians will inevitably fail to apply Law and Gospel properly: having lumped all homosexuals into one solidarity, they then either imply that homosexuality is an unforgiveable sin (a message of Law without Gospel) or isn't a sin at all (a message of Gospel without Law). Neither one is a proper use of God's Word nor loving evangelism toward sinners in need of redemption.

If ever there was a sinful plight that requires extreme sensitivity, it is this one, because one's sexuality is such an intimate part of his being. Assuming that you are heterosexual, imagine waking up into a world where you are constantly told, "It is wrong to be attracted to people of the opposite sex. It's unnatural. It's shameful — so shameful that we don't even want to talk about it. You shouldn't be that way." That would be a difficult, surreal message to accept, because it doesn't just say that you *do* wrong, but that you are wrong in your very being. The proclamation of Law to homosexuals will be a difficult and surreal truth, and thus should be spoken most carefully.

The objection to this illustration might well be, "But because of original sin, people are wrong in their very being." This is true, and true of all: the heterosexual man who sinfully lusts after women

demonstrates by his lust that he doesn't just "do" sin, but he is sinful by nature. However, Scripture says such a man has the choice to marry and engage in sexual activity with his wife: in other words, his sexual orientation can lead to good in marriage, where he benefits from sexual activity and companionship. For the homosexual, there is no "good" exercise of his attraction: to accept what the Bible says is to accept a life of loneliness without intimacy, and it is not good for man to be alone. How will the Church respond to this?

After some internal wrestling, the author elected not to include the following as a question in the student guide. The topic can be inflammatory enough that some participants might not be ready, so the leader is advised to use discretion. However, this might be helpful for the discussion:

"Imagine that an individual well-known by her own actions to be a lesbian repents and begins attending services at your church. How would *you* welcome this *repentant* sinner?"

Answers will vary, and some might be quite emotionally charged. Ideally, any repentant sinner is welcomed into a congregation. (There are *exceedingly rare* exceptions, where one's particular temptations make his presence a danger to public safety, and thus is dealt with separately. That is not the situation we are addressing here.) Hopefully, single individuals (regardless of sexual orientation) who attend church by themselves are joined by others in the pew and even receive the occasional invitation to lunch. It is hardly a loving reception if a repentant sinner, including a repentant homosexual, is ignored and isolated by a congregation.

4. Our first response ought to be repentance, most of all for that improper distinction that misuses God's Word and misrepresents the Lord. Approval of immorality is, of course, a violation of the Sixth Commandment (Rom. 1:32); to reject a repentant sinner because of the nature of his sin is also sinful, and many Christians struggle with an unChristian prejudice toward homosexuals. A proclamation of only the Law, or only the Gospel, does enough damage in that it either leaves a penitent with no hope or

an impenitent with no need to repent. This also includes offense toward the Lord as we thus misuse His Word and Name.

5. Answers will vary, but will include fear of saying the wrong thing, nervousness about the topic and fear of opposition or even reprisal. It is quite certain that those who speak against same-sex marriage are not likely to win popularity contests anytime soon; but John 15:18–21 tells us this should come as no surprise because of the world's opposition to God's truth. In fact, it should be expected. Here, however, Christians must be sure they are opposed for the right reasons. The author has encountered Christians who believe they are being persecuted for their Christian witness, when in truth they are being avoided for their rude manner in speaking the truth. We are to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), even when it is difficult truth to say or hear.

At any rate, opposition to the truth about same-sex marriage is to be expected from the world. However, after Jesus warns of such opposition, He comforts His disciples in John 16:33 with the words, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." Christians who are cowed by the world are in need of both Law and Gospel. Regarding the Law, the author often recalls a quote in which Martin Luther envisioned himself standing before God's throne and hearing the Lord say, "Why were you more afraid of them than of Me?" Indeed, Christians who are afraid to speak may have made the world into a god of fear; so once again, we find ample reason to repent. The Gospel, however, is enormously comforting: Jesus has overcome the world for us by His life, death and resurrection. No matter what the world says of you, Jesus has overcome the world and speaks well of you. For now, He says, "I forgive you all of your sins;" which means on the Last Day, He will say to you, "My kingdom is yours forever."

6. Christians must keep in mind that opposition to the truth stems from the blindness caused by sin. The remedy for this blindness is repentance and forgiveness. The cure is "Christ and Him crucified."

In speaking of a matter that is both doctrinal and social, Christians shy away from the proclamation of Law and Gospel because it's foolishness to the world (1 Cor. 1:18a), and we'd rather not sound like fools. However, the Gospel is the power of salvation (1 Cor. 1:18b; Rom. 1:16): nothing else will rescue a sinner from captivity to sin and the darkened reason that it brings.

Instead, Christians are tempted to opt for reasonable arguments — in this case, why same-sex marriage “doesn't make sense.” Reasonable arguments have their place, but have two big failings. The first is that they do not offer salvation because they don't proclaim the unreasonable “folly” of the Gospel. The second is that reason can serve both sides of an argument well; and in the discussion of same-sex marriage, the best that Christians can *reasonably* hope for is a stalemate.

For instance, imagine that a Christian debates a proponent of same-sex marriage. He begins with the argument, “It isn't natural,” to which his opponent declares that homosexual behavior is found in nature among penguins and other animals, and so is quite natural. The Christian argues that God designed marriage between a man and a woman, and his opponent reasonably asserts that first the Christian has to reasonably prove the existence of God. The Christian asserts that marriage is for the procreation of children, to which his opponent asks why the Church doesn't call for infertile couples to separate. The Christian argues that most homosexual relationships are not life-long, and his opponent points out divorce rates among church-goers. The Christian argues that children of homosexual couples are less likely to flourish socially and economically, and his opponent responds that this is due to the stigma placed upon them by current society. And so on.

In this debate, reason serves both sides. More to the point, reason serves the religious beliefs of *both* individuals. All the more reason for the Christian to proclaim the center of his religious beliefs — namely, Christ and Him crucified.

7. The message is to be what God says, both Law and Gospel: same-sex marriage is contrary

to the Word of God, who desires all to repent of their sin, be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4).

8. This message must be spoken in the public square because the people of God are called to give a public witness to the truth of God's Word. This is a precarious proclamation: public sentiment and the kneejerk proclamation of many Christians have already given hearers ample reason to put the worst construction on whatever is said, and truth rarely adequately fits into a sound bite or on a bumper sticker. In other words, while the truth must be spoken here, it will probably generate more anger than acceptance. As it is normally leaders of the Church who have opportunity to give this witness, Christians should keep pastors and church officials (and maybe Bible study writers ...) in their prayers — that they may speak clearly, wisely and compassionately, always rightly dividing the Word of truth.

It is far more likely that this message will bear a much better harvest as it is spoken to individuals — to friends, neighbors and family members. Where one can speak generally to masses, one can specifically apply Law and Gospel to an individual's personal situation. The privilege of speaking is given to all Christians, who will often encounter and befriend lost souls who would never think of darkening a church door on their own.

9. No. Whatever the decisions of the Supreme Court, the Lord's Word remains the same and we retain the God-given privilege of speaking His light in a dark world. Should the decisions further promote and legalize same-sex marriage, Christians will want to respond wisely and prudently, but not in a way that would compromise the truth of God's Word.

10. Answers will vary here and many (like “it's the right thing to do”) are not wrong. The best reason is that God desires that all be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. He does this by means of His Word and He gives to us the extraordinary honor of speaking that Word to others, to bring light to darkness and sight to the blind.

In other words, our foremost reason is that those who are darkened in their understanding, whatever their sexual orientation, might hear the Gospel, repent of their sin and be saved. This is important to note: in the author's experience, many Christians believe that they must speak up about same-sex marriage because "we must save society so that we are a Christian nation." While we desire a society that conforms to God's Word and rejoices in His blessings as much as possible, we recognize that this does not come from Law and legislation. After all, Jesus was crucified by societal leaders considered by many to have an admirable sense of morality and law and who would clearly oppose same-sex marriage.

Christians are not made by Law and legislation, but by the Gospel. It is not the task of the Church to save society or the world. It is the privilege of Christians to declare that Jesus has already saved the world from sin by His death and resurrection, that whoever believes in Him may not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16–17).

God grant to us always repentant hearts so that, acknowledging Christ's great sacrifice for our sins, we always rejoice to proclaim that salvation to all, for all.