

## **“The Son and the City”**

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of St. Augustine of Hippo, Pastor and Theologian (August 28), could also be adapted to be used for St. Monica on August 27

Primary Text: Psalm 48:1-8

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The text for today, the Commemoration of St. Augustine of Hippo, is Psalm 48 as well as other Scripture references. The title of the sermon is “The Son and the City.”

I want to tell you story about a woman and her sons. The woman’s name is Monica. She was married to a government official and lived a comfortable upper middle class life. Monica was a devout Christian lady who devoted herself to following Jesus. She was a woman of prayer. Monica regularly prayed for her children, that they would follow the Lord Jesus and be used mightily by Him. She regularly took them to church to teach them the way of faith.

One of her sons showed great intellectual ability and curiosity from a young age. He always wanted to learn and ask questions-and always seemed to be into something! Due to his intelligence, she made sure that he received the finest education available. The son had ambition. He wanted to get out his small hometown and experience the world. As he grew, his ambitions would take him to some of the leading cities of the world. He secured a teaching job at a major university.

But alas, this son would not follow in the footsteps of faith his mother had hoped for. He was interested in religion and philosophy but would not commit to following the true path. Perhaps he thought of himself as “too educated” and “too

cosmopolitan” for what seemed like the simple devotion of his mother. He liked to question things and “stir the pot” a good bit. Monica thought at times that maybe he was “too smart for his own good.”

He experimented with some of the popular philosophies the world had to offer. For a time, he devoted himself to reason, what could be logically proved. The stories of the Bible seemed illogical and primitive to him. He knew better, he thought. Along with his commitment to reason came an ascetic lifestyle of simplicity and philosophical reflection. But he didn’t really find fulfillment in this so as he was apt to do, he changed course and became to believe that life was all about seeking pleasure and happiness. He was quite the ladies’ man and could drink and party with the best of them. “If it feels good, do it” seemed to have become his motto. He even carried on a relationship with a woman for years that he refused to marry, but who would bear a child from the relationship. His definition of love fit what the world held up as good, but not the type of selfless love of God. He would assure his mother that he was doing fine and enjoying life, but she grieved that he had embraced such a different path from the one she had prayed for. But Monica would not give up praying for her wayward son.

Another son of Monica was very different indeed. In some ways he was similar to other son in that he was also highly intelligent and had advanced up the academic ladder, and had secured a prominent position. But this son was humble, giving to others, and devout in his faith in Christ. He saw his intellectual gifts as not being a source of pride and to be used simply for his own advantage. His lifestyle bore the “fruits of the Spirit” that Galatians speaks of.

In fact, he had dedicated his life to the church in pastoring, teaching, and defending the faith. He advanced to a supervisory role and became a “go to guy”

for theology and its application. He wrote books, sermons, and essays that spoke of the loving and sovereign God of the universe. He helped explain what the Bible really taught about issues and worked against those who distort the message of the Gospel. In fact, two of his books became Christian classics that would influence generations of kings, theologians and common people alike. Despite his prominence he was seen a humble servant reflecting what Jesus said in St. Matthew 23:11-12, *“But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”*

Both of these sons had left their small hometown and “made it big” in the city, but with very different worldviews. You may have figured out that the second son, the devout and pious one, is whom we know as St. Augustine of Hippo today. One of his great works is titled *“Confessions”* and I have a confession to make as well. Both of these sons are actually one in the same person! Both of them described Monica’s son Augustine-but one was pre and the other post-conversion. But it is not far off-base to describe them as two different people. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, *“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things have passed away; behold, all things are become new.”* When one is converted to Jesus Christ, he or she becomes new and their lives will be totally different. There are many people throughout history whose pre-Christian lives bear little resemblance to their Christian lives.

So what happened in Augustine’s life to transform him from partier to pious? From skeptic to saint? Quite simply, God got a hold of him and transformed him through the power of the Gospel. Monica never gave up praying for her wandering and confused child and God never gave up on him either. God called Augustine to faith in Him and used his gifts and abilities in a mighty way for

His Church. Some have argued that St. Augustine is the most influential figure in Church History other than St. Paul the Apostle-and a good argument can be made for that. In fact, the Roman Church named him the patron saint of theologians (and beer brewers-no wonder Luther like him!).

Augustine was an African, born in what is today the nation of Algeria in 354 AD. As we have heard he was a brilliant student and advanced academically and professionally. He would travel to the most prominent city in the world, in his time, Rome. In 384 he secured a plum job as an imperial rhetorician (essentially a college professor) in Milan, Italy. It was in Milan that God began to awaken the faith that his mother had taught him as a child. Another great saint of the Church, Ambrose, was the bishop in Milan. Listening to the sermons of Ambrose and striking up a friendship with him, Augustine began to reflect more seriously on the teachings of Scripture-giving them another look we could say. He was impressed that this highly intellectual, learned man Ambrose could also be a person of great faith.

The year 387 proved to be the turning point. He was sitting in a garden in Milan among the plants and the birds when he heard what sounded like a child's voice saying, "*Take it and read, take it and read.*" So he began reading in Romans and we know this is how God works, doesn't He? The Holy Spirit speaks through the Word of God and creates faith. Augustine read Romans 13:13-14, "*Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*" It was at this moment that St. Augustine writes in his autobiography, *Confessions*, that he says the light of faith came upon him. This passage described how he was living and it was wrong. Augustine admitted that he prayed as a younger man,

*“Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.”* But he knew that time was now. His only hope was to put on the Lord Jesus, crucifying the lusts of the flesh, and he would follow God in devotion to Him, His Word, and His people. Augustine would be baptized in 388 at the age of 34, with none other than his friend Ambrose administering the Sacrament. Over 1400 years later, a monk in the Augustinian order would also be reading Romans and know that God’s forgiveness was for him by grace, through faith. That monk was none other than Martin Luther.

St. Augustine would be named bishop of Hippo in his native North Africa in 395 and serve until his death in 430 AD. He would preach and write extensively. In fact we have over 5 MILLION words that he wrote! In addition to *Confessions*, his best-known work is *The City of God*. It was written at a time when Rome was falling to the barbarians and some people blamed Christianity for this and claimed that God was weak. But Augustine knew better. As our Psalm said, *“Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God!”* and *“As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of God, which God will establish forever.”* Augustine wrote that there is a city of God and a city of man, which will always be at odds until Christ returns. Even though the Roman Empire was collapsing, God would preserve His City, the Church, for all eternity. And He has and He will.

St. Augustine also spoke strongly and effectively with his scholarly, yet accessible, style against the prominent heresies of the day including Donatism which taught that the effectiveness of the Sacraments depended on the character of the minister, and against Pelagianism which denied original sin and teaches that people can choose God with their own wills.

This sermon focuses on the conversion of St. Augustine as many more sermons can be preached on the Biblical doctrines that this great champion of faith expounded upon. As I said earlier, Martin Luther was a monk in the Augustinian order. He read and studied St. Augustine extensively and sought to bring back many of the right teachings that he taught to the Church. So Augustine has had a profound effect on both the Church as a whole and us Lutheran specifically. You may have picked up on some of that already when he spoke about God being the one working through the Sacraments despite the character of the one administering them, his defense of the doctrine of original sin, and his bringing forth of the Biblical doctrine that we do not choose to become Christians, but that God chooses us. He also wrote about the importance of the Old Testament to understanding the New, the universality of the Church and its preservation until Jesus returns, and the Trinity—all things that we regularly hear taught. And much more!

So Monica, that praying and devout mother is a picture of faithfulness and she in fact is remembered as a Saint of the Church on August 27, the day before her son Augustine. Her Son went to the big time in the big city. But the son that would return to North Africa would not be the same, but changed. Transformed by the power of the Gospel into a new, forgiven man of God. And so are we as we have put off the old sinful person and become new in Christ. If there is someone you have been praying for a long time, keep praying. God's not finished yet! Thanks be to God for the love shown to us in the sacrifice of His Son on the cross for sinners like Augustine and sinners like us.

Amen.