

*Sweet and Sour*  
*Sermon delivered by Stephen Godsall-Myers*  
*Castle Church Wittenberg, 8:00 am, 31 October 2007*

Today is special. Special in many ways!

- First, it is always special to be gathered in God's house, as brothers and sisters in Christ, to praise and give thanks to God.
- Second, it is special because we are able in the midst of all the celebrations going on to have a worship service in **English** in the **Castle Church**.
- It is also special because there are not usually this many people visiting the Castle Church at 8:00 in the morning!

And, of course, it is special because today is **Reformation Day** and we are celebrating this Reformation Day

--in the special city of the Reformation -- Wittenberg.

The city where Luther walked and taught, preached and lived.

The city that is alive today with celebration!

Today is also special for many children, in the United States, and, to a growing extent, in Germany. For today is also Halloween.

At home in the US, the children will go from door to door with their question, "Trick or Treat?"; hoping they get the right answer -- that is, candy and other goodies. In Germany, the children have a slightly different question, the German child as they go door -- door will ask: "Suesses or saures/sweet or sour?"

Ah, yes, Halloween is growing in popularity in Germany and there is a growing concern that Halloween is threatening to take away from the real meaning of the holiday -- that being, Reformation Day. The Lutheran Church in Nordelbien (north of Hamburg) has taken action: they have packaged "Luther candies" and have urged their members to give out these candies on Reformation Day when the kids come to their doors and ask: "Suesses or saures?"

While "suesses or saures?/ sweet or sour" will be the Halloween Day question for some tonight, in my mind it is also an important Reformation Day question.

It was an important question of the day, 500 years ago -- "Suesses or saures?" -- What can we expect from God? Something sweet? Or something sour? It's not exactly the way Luther phrased the question in his time -- he might have used words like grace or punishment. But Luther was troubled by this underlying question: *What can we expect from God* -- suesses or saures? Sweet or sour? It was a question that caused Luther, in the words of the old spiritual, to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Luther trembled, because Luther understood that ultimately, women and men were not capable, that he was not capable, of continually offering God the suesses -- the sweet. Luther trembled because Luther understood that left to our

own devices, we human beings turned in on ourselves, acted selfishly and did what is saures, what is sour –to others, to ourselves, to God.

And, in Luther 's early understanding, he could only imagine that given such sour stuff from men and women, God would return the sour to us in judgment. And that God would, indeed, be justified in his judgments against us, that God would be justified in his judgments that made it very clear how sour we were and how much sour we deserved.

The Reformation question –sweet or sauer? *what can we expect from God?* and the answer, that Luther kept getting –sour, very sour! -- drove him to the Scriptures. Finally, in the Scriptures, Luther was led to a new understanding. One way to think of this new understanding, this new insight is this way: is to see that in the question, “sweet or sour?” the important word may just be the middle, the connecting word –oder/or.

Did it have to be either/or? Does the question have to be either/or? Because, if the question has to be phrased this way, if with God it can only be a matter of either/or, either suess or either sauer, then we were in trouble. Sauer fruits only spoil the whole bunch.

If it is either/or, God had, God has no choice but to return sauer to sauer. But, if it is possible for there to be a *“both/and”* with God, if it is possible to have a divine bridge between God 's sweetness and human sourness, then there might be a way for us to embrace the sweet, for us to believe in the sweet despite the reality of the sour.

Luther discovered the overwhelming sweetness of God that *defied* the terms of a judgment that demanded either/or. Luther discovered the sweetness of God 's grace. Or we might say, the sweetness of God 's grace found him and his questioning. This sweetness found him and overwhelmed him –so much so, that he could finally believe in God 's sweetness that would trump the human sourness with which he was so well acquainted

In Scripture, Luther met God 's sweetness, the sweetness that was defined by God 's final Word on the subject, and that final Word was Jesus Christ.

Jesus, the sweetest of all Creation experienced the sourest from God 's creatures –Calvary –the Cross –debasement –abuse –death. It was on Calvary that God spoke the sweet Word of divine grace in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Yes, on Calvary on a Friday afternoon, there was sweet and sour. To the world, it appeared that the sour would win out,

that the sour had won out,

that the awful flavor of sour that hung over Calvary hill that day would linger and last, souring even the sweetness of God.

Yes, that sour would linger, but it would not last. God 's sweetness came to light again on that Easter morning, when Jesus emerged from the sourness of death to the sweetness of a new day

–a new day for God, a new day for Jesus

and a new day for us who have experienced the sour,  
but now have tasted and believe in the sweet Gospel story.

Yes, it is Sweet **and** sour. It is both/and, not either/or. There is sour, we cannot deny this. Lest we forget, we can hear about sour again in the three Scripture lessons for today:

Jeremiah, in announcing the sweetness of God's new covenant reminds us of the sour: *"not like the covenant I made with their ancestors, which they broke, though I was their husband"*

Paul, explaining the sweetness of Jesus' redemption, tells the Romans the sour truth: *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

Jesus, speaking of the sweet truth that sets one free, reminds of the sour truth: *"everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."*

Yes, there is a sour, a sourness that creeps into our lives through our own sour wills, and through the sour wills of others. We have the law to help control the sour in our lives and in our world. The law can and does help us and guide us and direct us to the sweet things –the sweet thoughts, words and deeds. But, if we are not careful, the law can do the sourest of things. For as we follow the law, we can begin to believe that we can do all the sweet things that the law says. And, soon we believe that we are the source of sweetness, that we have earned the sweet treats of life.

We neglect God, we stop seeking God's sweetness,  
we might even wonder why God in Jesus faced down the sour  
of the world for us on the Cross.

So we think we are good (sweet) folks, we live our lives, do our jobs, raise our children and we enjoy the sweetness of the world, the treats that it offers, and we begin to think we are living without need for God's sweetness.

We ignore the signs that are all around us that there is a sour  
– to be seen in the world, in others,  
– and yes, maybe even in ourselves.

Paul calls us back from all this. The law, Paul says, serves a more important purpose than to guide and direct us –it tells us about ourselves, it helps us to see the sour in our thoughts, words and deeds.

Once we see and admit the sourness, we are ready to embrace the sweetness of grace. Indeed, the more clear we are about the sourness of the world and of ourselves, the sweeter is the Gospel of grace in Jesus Christ.

In grace, we embrace the truth of the little word, "and". Sweet **and** sour. Law **and** Gospel. There is both. Saint **and** Sinner. We are both. There is both sweet and sour.

But we live in grace, and we go out confidently, not trembling as we go to knock on God's door with the question, "sueses or saures— sweet or sour? We can boldly admit the sour because we know God's answer, "sweet"—God's answer to us is and was and will ever be the sweet, sweet Word of God given to us, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.