

"Sharing In Christ"

Matthew 6:25-33

October 11, 2015

20th Sunday After Pentecost

We live in an increasingly individualistic society today. While technology can connect people all over the world, it can also isolate us. You've probably experienced something like this: you are in a room with a group of people but everyone's face is in their phone. You may be physically close to each other, but mentally and emotionally each person is in their own little world. Remember listening to records or a concert together as a group? Now, each person can put on headphones attached to an iPod and listen to their own music privately. People used to entertain and be entertained by getting together and doing things together, but why bother today? Each person can sit in front of their computers and watch read, watch movies, shop, or chat with some disembodied individual in a different location. Thanks to technology, we don't need (or think we don't need) a living breathing person next to us to do most things. Each of us can function by ourselves. This has led sociologists to conclude that, while this generation is the most connected generation ever, it is also the loneliest generation.

This way of thinking and doing is found frequently among Christians today. It is not only a cause of loneliness but a cause for alarm. The Christian faith was never intended to be practiced in isolation. In fact, it can be dangerous to one's salvation when he or she attempts to do that.

Now, it is true that God loves each of us individually. He calls each of us individually. He saves each of us individually. Jesus Christ died for each of us individually and earned forgiveness for each of our sins. Jesus rose from the dead for each of us individually and is preparing a place for us individually in our Father's house. God gave each of us faith individually to receive the gifts of forgiveness and everlasting life when each of us was baptized or heard the Gospel given to us.

These truths lead many people to conclude falsely that faith is just about "me and Jesus." I've had people say to me, "I don't need to attend church. I can read the Bible and pray at home...on the golf course...in the mountains...at the campground." Can you do those things? Of course, you *can*

do that sort of thing. The question becomes is it wise to do such a thing? Is it helpful or harmful to your faith to do such a thing?

Our text for today issues a very stern warning to Christians of all ages about this: “Take care (literally “Watch”), brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” You may think, “That would never apply to me. I’m pretty good. I behave myself for the most part and don’t do anything really bad. And I have faith. I may not be very religious but I am very spiritual.”

How does one going from being basically good with faith to live with God to evil and without faith that leads one away from the living God? The answer is really quite simple. The author says it comes about by being “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Sin is deceitful. It fools us into thinking that it is not wrong. Or, if it is wrong, it’s not all that bad. Or, if it is bad, we can handle it and keep it under control. “After all, I’m a member in good standing in this church. I self-identify as a Christian of the Lutheran persuasion. I was confirmed here. I went to Sunday School and church all the time...when there was nothing else going on and I didn’t have something better to do.” Sin becomes altogether too common and familiar in our lives. It no longer causes fear or guilt, much less moves us to repentance. We feel safe in our sin.

The writer to the Hebrews screams the contrary alert: Sin kills! Look at the Israelites who had come out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. They were God’s chosen people. They had heard the Word of God and had seen the concrete actions of God on their behalf. Yet they gave in to the lure of sin, evil, and unbelief. They refused to repent, choosing to believe God would never do anything bad to them because they were His people. How did that work out for them? Corpses and bleached bones in the wilderness show the score.

Sin is never what it seems. No sinner ever has his or her sin under control. Like arteries that slowly and imperceptibly harden until the danger is suddenly revealed in a dead body via heart attack or stroke, so sin works the same hardening effect on faith. Slowly and imperceptibly, believers change until the spiritual danger is revealed in a dead faith. What a Christian “used to do” is

irrelevant. What matters is what is done today. Yesterday's faith does not save a person today. No one is immune from the deceit and danger of sin.

If we try to fight this as individuals, we are sunk before we start. Sin is too dangerous. Satan is too strong. He will pick us off one by one until we are all dead like the Israelites were. Despite our individualistic society and each of our individualistic tendencies in many of our habits, when it comes to our relationship with God, we need each other.

The author of Hebrews says this very thing: "But exhort one another every day." Other translations say, "Encourage one another." The word literally means to call someone to your side for help or assistance. This means more than calling someone to help you change a tire or clean your house. This means to encourage one another spiritually so that none are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

This encouragement is a strong defense against sin and falling away from faith. To do this requires a community of faith. That's what the church is: a community of faith where believers meet to share the Gospel and to encourage each other in the faith. The author of Hebrews stresses the importance of being together to do this later on in the epistle, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Heb. 10:24-25)

This may seem odd to some. Many people think that we share the Gospel with unbelievers, but, not with believers. Once a person comes to faith, he no longer needs the Gospel, it is thought. He needs only instruction about how to live the Gospel and follow the will of God. Also many people think that we come to church only to be encouraged, rather than to encourage. We come for what we can get out of church, rather than what we put into church.

How do you encourage one another in our community of faith called Peace Lutheran Church? The first and easiest way to encourage one another is by being here. There is nothing more discouraging than empty pews. Think of how encouraging it is to be here on Easter Sunday when so

many people come to worship. Every Sunday is to be a “mini-Easter”. How encouraging it would be to have Easter attendance every Sunday.

The second way to encourage one another is by speaking the Word of God to one another. I’m not talking about everyone preaching or everyone reading the Scriptures. You speak the Word of God when you speak the confession of sins loudly and clearly. How encouraging it is to know that none of us is the lone sinner here. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (Rom 3:23). Each person – pastor, parishioner, visitor, member – is guilty. We are guilty together.

You speak the Word of God when you say the “amen” in faith to the Absolution, when you confess the creed confidently, when you sing the hymns and liturgy joyfully. How encouraging it is to know that each of us is forgiven, restored to a right relationship with God, and at peace with Him through Jesus’ perfect life in our place and His sacrificial death on our behalf. Each of us has a new life to live now and a new life to live eternally in heaven through Jesus’ resurrection from death to life. How comforting it is to be reminded of this by brothers and sisters in Christ.

The third way to encourage one another is by teaching one another the way of the Lord. This means learning the Word of God well yourself and by bravely sharing that Word with each other to prevent sin or to stop sin before anyone is “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” If we don’t speak the truth in love to one another together in order to help each other to avoid sin, the world will do all it can to deceive us and convince us to do sin. So, correct, guide, and encourage one another’s behavior out of love and concern for a brother and sister Christ and their eternal salvation.

Our culture says, “Be an individual. Do your own thing. Look out for #1.” We make a mistake if we do the same in Church. Our text says, “For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” We are joined to Christ and, therefore, joined to one another. “Let us not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another” through our presence, our participation, and our personal care and guidance that we might hold our original confidence to the end. Amen