

“Not Neglecting To Meet Together”

Hebrews 10:19-25

November 18, 2012

25th Sunday After Pentecost

Our text for today encourages us, “not to neglect meeting together as is the habit of some.” So, the original title of this sermon was to be, “Why You Shouldn’t Skip Church”. I changed it at the last minute because I was afraid that, after reading the title in the bulletin, many of you would not be listening to the sermon, but would be spending your time quietly thinking of how to refute that title, despite the provisions of the 3rd Commandment. (Having just revealed my thinking on that, maybe some of you still will do that.)

It’s interesting how we all agree that some of the Ten Commandments apply to all people in all situations. For instance, we agree that everyone should always refrain from murder, adultery, and stealing as Commandments 5-7 tell us. However, when we look at the 3rd Commandment – “Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy” – we act as if this commandment to corporate worship was a matter of personal choice. We will gather for public worship if we want to, if we feel like it, or if we have nothing else on our schedule. Or, we will neglect gathering together for worship when we don’t want to, don’t feel like it, or have some other activity which is more enjoyable or more important in our list of priorities. Granted, the requirement to worship on the Sabbath day (Saturday) has been abolished. We are free not to worship on Saturday, but we are not free not to worship.

Why do we have such feelings? Like many things in our individualistic society, we view ourselves as spiritual “free agents”. Worship is a personal choice which affects only me. The Church is nothing more than an institution which provides religious services to individuals who have made the personal choice to avail themselves of such services. On the other hand, if individuals choose not to avail themselves of such religious services or choose to do something else instead, it can be done without affecting anyone else.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Although we like to think of ourselves strictly as individuals in a society which caters to personal choice and individual need (as evidenced by the proliferation of cell phones, iPods, iPads, and other forms of technology which all cater to our personal choices and individual needs), we are actually all in this together.

First, we are all in sin together. Sin is not an isolated action which affects only the doer. Sin affects those around us, too. Think of Adam and Eve. Their choice to disobey God and sin was not an isolated incident that affected only them. That sin affected every human being who has lived since that time. Paul writes about this in Romans, “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.... one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people.” (Rom 5:12,18)

The good news is that redemption and salvation are for all, too. God did not send His Son, Jesus Christ, into this world to save the good and deserving people. We were all equally sinners who deserved nothing but death and damnation. Jesus came to pay the price for all. Jesus came to save all from sin, death, and hell.

Our epistle reading for today reiterates the same theme from last Sunday, namely, that Christ died once for all. Last week, the emphasis was primarily that Christ died once as the sacrifice for sin and that we do not have to repeat a sacrifice for sin on a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly basis. Today, the emphasis is that this single sacrifice is for all sinners. The epistle from Hebrews says, “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God....For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”

As we share in the curse of sin as a group and not merely as individuals, so also we share in the blessings of redemption as a group and not merely as individuals. Paul says in Romans, “Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” (Rom. 5:18-19)

We receive and live out this redemption as a group as well. The Scriptures are full of illustrations of the corporate nature of God's people. The Church is called the body of Christ with many parts, each carrying out an important function in service to the body. The Church is compared to a building composed of individual stones which support and are supported by other stones. When someone opts out of worship, it's like a body missing a part or a building missing a stone. Not only does that person miss out, but the Church suffers as well.

Together, there is strength but it's not strength in terms of the individuals involved or the number of individuals. There is strength as we receive the gifts of God together and as we use the gifts of God together. The author to the Hebrews writes, "Therefore, brothers,...we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh." We have supreme confidence, not in ourselves, but in the blood of Jesus, that we will enter the holy place – heaven – through the way He has inaugurated for us.

That affects how we live now in relationship to God and one another. The author gives three exhortations that describe this relationship. The first is, "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith." We draw near to God and near to each other, not in order to be saved, but to receive the fruits of Jesus' saving work – forgiveness, faith, and new life. If worship was just a religious meeting or religious entertainment, I could see why some people would never come and many people would choose not to come. After all, who needs another meeting? And there is far better entertainment in the secular world than what happens here. But worship is much more than meeting or entertainment. You and I are all terminally ill because of sin. Here, we are reminded of the healing power of baptism where "our hearts [were] sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." Here, God gives us the ongoing treatment of Absolution in which our sins are removed and we are restored to spiritual health. Here, God gives us the Lord's Supper which one early church father called, "the medicine of immortality."

Why would anyone want to miss out on this? Imagine someone who had cancer or some other disease which was thought to be terminal. Would anyone in that position say, "I think I'll forego

my treatment because I have something better to do,” or “I think I’ll stop taking my meds because they don’t taste good”? When life and death are involved, we cling to such medicines and treatments. We are involved in a matter of life and death. Christ has made the one time sacrifice for sin for all of us that we might be healed. Here is where He gives us the medicine for that sickness and administers the treatment that will save us.

Secondly, the author to the Hebrews exhorts us, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.” As fire cannot help but have heat and light, so faith cannot help but have confession. Yet we are tempted to deny our faith or pressured to be silent regarding our confession in the public square. Our confession is that there is hope, in spite of the wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, and intense persecution of which our Lord speaks about the end times in our Gospel reading. There is the sure and certain hope of everlasting life in the peace and joy of heaven through faith in Jesus Christ. By coming together here, we confess that hope through our actions. By speaking the Creeds in Divine Service, we confess that hope through our words.

We can hold fast to that confession together to the end without compromise and refrain from wavering or fear, not because of the strength of our confession, but because of the strength of the One whom we confess. He is faithful. He who gave us the content of our faith will give us the ability, desire, and power to confess that faith faithfully. The Word of God promises, we are “confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)

Finally, the writer to the Hebrews says, “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” As faith shows forth in confession, it also shows forth in action. We are not isolated individuals, each looking out for himself or herself, but together we look out for the needs of others by serving them in love and with good works. So we gather together and help one another out here in our Church family. We gather food together in our Thanksgiving Day service to help people at the Great Falls Rescue Mission. We gathered money together at our Circuit Reformation Service to help with those suffering from malaria half way across the world. Our LWML prepares to raise funds to

help people suffering from Superstorm Sandy on the other side of our country. We do together what none of us could do individually.

That's why the writer to the Hebrews says, "Do not neglect meeting together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." We meet together, not just to obey some command, but to receive what we need from God. The Word of God, read and preached, along with the Holy Sacraments give us forgiveness, life, and salvation. They keep our faith strong, our confession strong, and our love and good works strong. They give us encouragement and hope and allow us to encourage each other in that hope as we see the Last Day coming when faith becomes sight and hope becomes reality.

When I was a kid and fun was not connected to an electronic device, we used to play outside all day. Finally, around 6:00 PM, my mom would yell out the back window, "Time to come in now!" Even though we moaned and groaned and didn't want to come in, we did. There, waiting for us, was a hot supper, a safe home, and a warm bed for the evening. Even though Mom's words had the form of a command, they were really a gracious invitation to give us something good.

The 3rd Commandment is like that. When God commands us to come in to His House and gather together for worship, it is in the form of a command, but it is really a gracious invitation to give us something good: His mercy and grace to sustain our faith; His faithfulness to keep our confession faithful; and His love and goodness that we might show love and goodness to our neighbor. While job or illness might force you to miss out on this, why would you ever want to?" Amen.