

"Prevailing Against Hell"

Matthew 16:13-20

August 21, 2011

10th Sunday After Pentecost

The men's AA group, which meets at Peace Lutheran Church, has, as of last week, dissolved. When the leader of the group came into the church office to turn in his key to the church, we chatted for a bit. He said that attendance at the meetings had dwindled down to himself and one other man. Knowing that alcoholism had not suddenly gone away, I asked him why he thought so few people were attending the meetings. He said he believed that many alcoholics, especially the younger ones, were going into treatment now instead of attending AA meetings. He said they think they are cured and don't need AA meetings instead of seeing alcoholism as an ongoing problem and AA meetings having the help and support needed to deal with these problems. The guy then laughed and said, "It's probably just like church." The more I thought about that statement, the more I thought: he is right.

Many people worry about the state of the church today with low attendance and financial problems. People here at Peace, especially the leadership, talk about this quite a bit. But it's not just a problem here. It's a problem in many churches. The reason for this problem, I believe, is similar to the problem which the AA group experienced.

Many people have stopped coming to church because they believe they are "cured" of sin. Many probably think they never had the disease and never needed a cure. Some think they have overcome the disease by being basically good people who live decent lives. Faithful members who have stopped attending may not take this disease seriously, figuring they have it under control by virtue of the fact that they were confirmed many years ago and still have their name on the membership roster of a congregation.

Since they are “cured” or never really had the disease in the first place (or so they think), people (even life long Christians) fail to see why the church is so important. Here, God gives the gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation through the Word of God and His Holy Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Here, the people of God can gather to support and encourage each other and be supported and encouraged by each other. Many people see this as unnecessary in our independent and self-reliant society.

As long as people see themselves as cured and fail to see the presence of sin in their lives and fail to recognize its severity (sin means death and hell), there will be trouble. As long as people see the church as a religious social organization which is optional or unnecessary and fail to recognize the church as a vital and necessary dispenser of eternity-altering help through the Word, the Sacraments, and the saints, there will be problems. Churches like Peace Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, or any other congregation or denomination will dwindle and dissolve just like the men’s AA group which formerly met here.

I asked the leader of the AA group what he thought would happen to the alcoholics who thought they were cured and didn’t need AA any more. He said, “They’ll find out they’re not cured and they’ll fall.” While he seemed resigned to the reality of his organization’s dissolution, he also seemed a bit worried.

Many people today, (myself included), worry about the church. Some worry about an institution or organization like ours surviving – paying the light bill, making the mission commitment, keeping the doors open. I worry, like the AA leader worried, about what happens when those who have left will fall as they most certainly will, if not in this life, then at their death. What’s going to happen to our children and our grandchildren?

Sin is a terminal disease which we cannot overcome. It means death 100% of the time for 100% of the population. The gifts given and the mutual support provided in the church are the only

hope and must not be neglected. Can you imagine a terminal cancer patient neglecting treatment because they are too busy? Can you imagine a football player trying to face the Green Bay Packers by himself?

What will happen? Are we resigned to the church dying around us and having our children and grandchildren doomed to die eternally? Not at all. In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus gives three promises that guarantee this will not be the case.

First, we do not have to worry about building and maintaining the church. Jesus promises us that it is He, not we, who establishes and builds His Church. Jesus established His Church by dying on a cross with the weight of the world's sin on His back and rising from the grave with the power of death clinging to Him. By His death, He overcame sin and its power to punish us. By His resurrection, He overcame death and its power to hurt us.

To Peter, Jesus said, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." What was this rock? It wasn't Peter. The church is never built on the authority of a human being, but on the ministry of the confession which Peter had just made. When the disciples were asked, "But who do you say that I am?", Peter, representing the Twelve, answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." The entire Church throughout the world is built on the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of the living God and what He has done to rescue humanity from sin and its consequences and bring people to everlasting life. Through the proclamation of this reality and continued confession of the Christ, the Son of the living God, people would be saved, gathered into His Church, and receive His gifts.

Secondly, we do not have to worry about the church falling. Jesus promises "the gates of hell shall not prevail against" His Church. The real problem in church today is not attendance, money, worship styles, and so on. Those are only the symptoms. There is a greater spiritual problem involved. The problem is as Paul describes in Ephesians, "For our struggle is not against flesh and

blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Eph. 6:12) And often times, it seems as if the powers of darkness are winning and will win.

Yet, no matter how bad things get and no matter how hopeless it may seem, “the forces of evil will not finally win the day over his assembly that is founded on the rock.” (Gibson, p.821). Christ will simply not allow Satan and his supporters to gain the upper hand and destroy the Church. “This promise does not, of course, guarantee that any particular congregation or denomination or historical manifestation of visible Christian fellowship or confession will never pass away.” (Gibbs, p.822) In other words, there may not always be a Peace Lutheran Church or even the Lutheran Church as a denomination. Human beings, through sin and neglect, can cause the destruction of humanly devised organizations. However, there will always be “the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints” which we confess in the Creed and is of divine origin.

Thirdly, we don't have to worry about finding some clever and new way to get people into the Church. Jesus promises to give to His Church on earth the keys to the kingdom of heaven. The means to bring people into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the Church will always be around. There will always be the Word of God. There will always be the Sacraments. There will always be the Means of Grace to save and support people. Whether or not there is a strong visible organization present with beautiful facilities and paid staff and clergy, Christ will continue to work through His Church. Men called by God will continue to proclaim the Gospel and absolve people of their sins. People will continue to enter the Kingdom of God by being born again in Holy Baptism. People will continue to receive the Lord's body and blood in Holy Communion for the forgiveness of their sins and strengthening of their faith.

There are not many things that are sure in life. There are not many things which do not change in life. These facts can cause us great uncertainty and fear. Most of the time, it's not all that

important if an organization like the A.A. has one less group that meets. Organizations can change, merge, and even shut down without it affecting us. However, in the one “life and death” situation where it matters to all of us, be assured that the Church, built on the rock of Jesus Christ and the proclamation of that name remains sure. It will not change. It will always be there, in whatever form, to proclaim and deliver forgiveness of sin, new life, and eternal salvation. Despite the evil of the world and the failure of humanly designed organizations, the Church will not shut down. It will not be overcome. Anything and everything – even the gates of hell – will not prevail against it. Amen.