

*September 9, 2018
Rally Day*

“Why Go to Church?”

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Church attendance has always been an issue for ministers. Back in 1756 there was a chaplain who traveled with a volunteer militia led by Benjamin Franklin. To defend the Pennsylvania colony against Indian attacks, Franklin led his recruits in the building of a fort in the Blue Mountain region. Once the fort was built, the chaplain, "a zealous Presbyterian" (as Franklin called him in his autobiography) complained that very few of the men were showing up for his worship services. Franklin, the creative genius he was, solved the problem by putting the chaplain in charge of the daily ration of rum for the troops. He told the minister, "It is, perhaps, below the dignity of your profession to act as steward of the rum, but if you were only to distribute it out after prayers, you would have them all about you."

Believe it or not, the chaplain accepted that duty, and Franklin reports that thereafter, "never were prayers more generally and more punctually attended." Well . . . rum after the service is one way to solve the church attendance problem, and there are many other ways that are like it and may even appear to be more noble than rum. Trouble is, while you may pack the pews with warm bodies, their hearts are stone cold. It's much easier to get people to go to church for all the wrong reasons than it is for the right reason. Lest we forget, the Lord looks at the heart.

It was some time ago that Pastor Bill narrowed all of this down into a really hard question (and I am paraphrasing): "if everything was gone, and I mean everything except for the saints gathered around the pure preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments, would you still be here?" Really?! No more nice building, drinks and donuts, air conditioning, heat, padded pews, only people we like, social gatherings, and all the assorted luxuries and conveniences, would you honestly still come to this church? It begs another deeper question: "What really is church and why go?"

In our Gospel lesson for this morning Jesus says (John 10:27-30): "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.*" The words that I would like for you to focus on for the moment are these words: "my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." Notice that the emphasis is on the voice of Jesus Christ, him knowing his sheep, and the sheep then following him. They are with him wherever he is.

Pastor Rolf Preus relates a story that I would like to share with you. Several years ago, a Lutheran pastor from Michigan did his own study of religious tracts that dealt with the theme of my message for this morning: **Why go to church?** He ordered about fifty such tracts from various groups, Reformed and Lutheran. The tracts gave any number of good reasons to go to church including to learn about the Bible, to be spiritually enriched and strengthened, to enjoy Christian fellowship, to offer praise to God, and other reasons - all of them sounding good. The primary reason for going to church, however, was entirely ignored by the Reformed tracts and barely mentioned by the Lutheran ones. I refer, of course, to the forgiveness of sins. We go to church for the forgiveness of sins. We go to church to get saved. We go to church (to the means of grace) where Jesus the Savior is found, and who gives us eternal life.

Martin Luther wrote in the *Smalcald Articles* (III, XII), "Thank God, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd." And what does that voice give us? Let Jesus answer it again from our Gospel lesson: "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. And *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand.*" The means by which Jesus gives eternal life to his sheep is his voice, his word and the visible word of the sacraments.

The *Augsburg Confession* gives us the biblical definition of the Church: "The church is the assembly of saints [the German text uses the word "believers" for "saints"] in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly (AC VII)." Did you notice that there is nothing there about a nice building, drinks and donuts, air conditioning, heat, padded pews, only people we like, social gatherings, and all the assorted luxuries and conveniences?

If you diligently read Luther and the Lutheran Confessions you will note that the church is never defined simply as believers or saints. It is always defined as believers or saints who hear the voice of the Shepherd or among whom the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. There is no church nor are we the church except as God himself has called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified us. Christ, the head of the church, sends the Holy Spirit. He is the Spirit of Christ. Jesus said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." (John 6:63) There is no church without Christ, his Spirit, and his words. Through his word we are born again. Through his word God serves us. This he does in what we call the Divine Service.

That is an amazing concept that we often forget. Worship is God's service to us. **Why go to Church?** Because Jesus is there! It is in the word and sacraments that Christ comes to us and serves us with the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. The forgiveness of sins, justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith is the most important teaching of the Christian religion. It distinguishes Christianity from false religions, all of which teach salvation by works. It gives enduring comfort to the penitent sinner. It gives all glory to God for his grace and mercy in his son, our Lord Jesus Christ. God serves us! Jesus says in Matthew 18:20 "For where two or three are gathered in my name [and the name of Jesus his heard and received in the word and sacraments], there am I among them."

We should think of it in the way in which it is portrayed in John 13. Jesus, the Son of God, does the task of the servant, by washing his disciples' feet. When he comes to Peter, Peter objects. In response to Peter's objection, Jesus says some heavy words that we need to take to heart, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me (John 13:8)." The bottom line of this saying is simple: You must be served by Jesus or you have no part with him. You cannot be his disciple. You cannot be a child of God. You cannot know God. And you cannot truly worship God. Indeed, your worship will be a vain boast or failed bribe or useless discharge of meaningless words unless and until Jesus has served you. In fact, if God serves me, I am saved. If God doesn't serve me, I have no part of him at all.

Why Go to Church? Because Jesus is there serving us, saving us, and making sure that we make it to our heavenly home. Therefore, church is not some sort of burdensome duty that we are required to do.

Rather, we gather together in his name to be with him - that he might remain in us - as we receive the forgiveness of sins, the constant reassurance that he loves us, and with that, life and salvation. Our epistle lesson says (Hebrews 10:19-25):

Therefore, brothers, since 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, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 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.

The Day is drawing near - the day of our departure when real life begins in the forever kingdom of heaven. These words alone should mightily encourage us to take church seriously. Not only Sunday mornings, but Bible classes and every opportunity to grow in the faith. There is an old story about a longtime church member who had always attended church regularly but then stopped going.

After a few weeks of his absence, the minister decided he ought make a visit. He went to the man's house and found him there alone, sitting in front of a blazing fire just enjoying life. After the initial greeting and a few minutes of small talk, the two just sat in front of the fireplace in friendly silence, watching the fire. Then, without saying a word, the pastor took the fire tongs, reached in, and picked up a burning ember. He laid it down on the bricks. Both men watched it burn until eventually the flame began to flicker and died. Within minutes it was nothing more than a cold piece of burnt wood, with no life or burning warmth whatsoever. Then the pastor picked up that piece of wood with the tongs, and placed it back into the middle of the fire. Within seconds, it began to glow, with light and warmth, ignited by the flames around it. The pastor stood to leave, the man said to him, "Thank you for the sermon, Pastor. I'll be back in church next Sunday."

Who knows if that incident ever really happened, but the truth it represents is plain enough: Separated from the fire - from Christ and the forgiveness of sins - we will flicker and die. **Why Go to Church?** He who has promised forgiveness and salvation is faithful! The Day is drawing near!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott