

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every week we gather in this space called St. Paul Lutheran Church. We gather or we assemble to worship as a church. And in this worship, we confess with the words of the Apostle's and the Nicene Creed that we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church...catholic meaning universal church and NOT the Roman Catholic Church. So, what is it that we believe we are saying when we confess this? What is this church we confessionally believe in and what do we need in order to have this confessional church? What I am asking is this, what makes this assembly church?

Some might say that we need a certain type of building with stained-glass windows, a steeple, and an organ. Of course we need pews, a bell is nice too, a cross on the front wall space where the assembly takes place, a burning candle or two or three. Somewhere in this space we are going to need a table to place upon it some bread and a cup of wine. Some might say we need a pulpit and a bowl of some sort for water for washing or Baptizing. Others might say that all you need are folks who believe in Jesus Christ and people who want to be here. And if we are totally honest about our thoughts and vision of church, we want folks who look and think like we do and see "church" the way we do. There are however, a boat load of other things that we could come up with that we would need for church, I'm sure.

In some ways these are all correct, however, these things...even the people, are the material or the concrete make up of Christian worship that have become our custom and popular experience...*our* acceptable norms. Some might even say, these material or concrete matters of Christian worship form, inspire, and undergird our faith.¹ These are the things that we like and we understand about church and faith...these are the things we want others to like and understand as well. But perhaps these are the things that may at times cloud our understanding not only of church, but our very faith as well. And the fallout of this understanding can be heard in comments such as, "I don't need church to be a Christian," or, "I don't want to be associated with all those hypocrites who think they're better than others," "I can walk in the woods and be one with God and talk directly to God."

I am being very general with my thoughts about church, but I think when we are asked a question like, what is church or what is needed to have church our focus is on tangible concrete things that in some way reflect ourselves, our conclusions, our understandings, and our likes and dislikes. What lies at the heart of what I am attempting to establish about our faith and church itself is that we need people and among those people, we need a message and we need conversation about that message with others...we need a message to center each other in order to be the church.

In Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, Concerning the Church, we as Lutherans believe that the church is the *assembly of all believers* among whom the Gospel is purely preached and the Holy Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.² We are even reminded by Jesus Christ himself that we are not a Christian by ourselves when he said:

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Where two or three are gathered the message or the Word is among them.

Some would argue with me about this and at one time in my life, I even thought this, however, we are not Christians by ourselves. The Rev DR Robert Jenson explains this need for each other this way – when we talk to one another or address one another we enter into a common world with each other. And in that conversation, we become a shaping participant of that world or a shaping participant of each other through the words that are shared. A conversation with *ourselves* only involves ourselves and we are the only participant, but through conversation with others we become a shaping participant with *each other* through the words we share with one another.

The Gospel, or the message that is spoken or heard by one person to another or others, is spoken or explained in a conversation and the persons enter into that world of the Gospel or that message...even if they just listen..."Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21) We then become active participants in that message, that Gospel. The Gospel is the Word Jesus Christ who enters into that space or that world of conversation. That Word that is a message shared in that gathering or that assembly is Jesus Christ and that Word that is being shared is the very presence of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is Jesus' Word (*even through it comes out of our mouths in conversation, it is NOT ours*)...it is Jesus' Word because of WHAT that Word promises. And what it promises, only Jesus can rightly promise. The Gospel promises that Jesus will give Himself to us; it promises the total achievement and outcome of His deeds and sufferings are our benefit; the Gospel is the promise of God's love.

If the Gospel-promise is true, its occurrence is Jesus' occurrence as a shaping participant in our world or in our conversation. It is this of the Gospel-promise that is the presence of the promiser, Jesus Christ. If the Gospel is not true, then when we hear it, we only hear each other.³

You may be wondering why I am asking about what makes this assembly church? I do so because the Gospel lesson today gives us a very good example of what the defining elements or characteristics of church are...or what an *assembly of all believers* really consists of. The church an assembly gathered around the Good News of Jesus Christ, in other words, the church is the Gospel shared among an assembly of believers.

Today in our Gospel we hear that crowds assembled around Jesus and he began to teach them. And within the mundane ordinary-every-day habits of the people assembled around the Word incarnate we learn of the abundance of God's goodness and love as seen in the abundance of fish that will nourish and sustain. Jesus is not in some glorious cathedral or synagogue talking to rabbis, Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes or kings or holy people or angles. The people who assemble are more than likely just like each of us here today, common people and the men Jesus calls to follow are just more of the same...a reflection of you and I.

At the center of this assembly in this Gospel lesson is Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, the message or the conversation that by the Holy Spirit has gathered the crowds, and is enlightening them...just as it is right now in this assembly.

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This Word, Jesus Christ, this message or this conversation taking place on the shore of Lake Gennesaret and right here at St. Paul Lutheran Church is Jesus Christ sharing his gifts, his promise of mercy, of grace, of salvation...a promise that makes each one who is engaged in it equally holy. It is a message or a conversation that keeps us in the true faith, just as Jesus calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.⁴

And if we see anything at all within this Gospel lesson, may we see that all of this takes place in the mundane reality of our lives and the lives of the fisherman who were going about their chores and Jesus shows up...the folks who assemble on the shores to hear Jesus are common folks who have also joined in on the conversation that Jesus is sharing with them through his teaching.

Within the lessons before us today, we can see that the presence of God or a conversation with God does not require a holy status of any sort. Listen again to the comments from three figures within our lessons today, who are key figures or just plain down holy ones. From Isaiah we hear the prophet say:

"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, (Isa 6:5a)

From St. Paul we hear a similar self-evaluation:

For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Cor 15:9)

And yet again from Simon Peter:

"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8b)

And then, knowing too that we all have shared in similar views, we hear these beautifully soothing words in our appointed psalm today:

⁷ Though the LORD be high, he cares for the lowly; (Psalm 138:7)

In this psalm King David is responding in gratitude for the deliverance from the very sin that drags us all into the depths of despair, but also for the deliverance from ourselves as well. This is NOT to say that one is better than another, it is to say that next to God, we are all lowly and in that we know that God cares for us all and we learn this today through the conversation or the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ that is shared among us in this very assembly.

Today within this assembly, Isaiah's words have gathered us into his heavenly vision that says to us, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." And today, we too say these same words that gather us into God's glorious presence that is the body and blood of Jesus Christ that is lifted up before us in this Holy Meal. When the seraphs fly to Isaiah holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs and touch his mouth with it, we hear: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." We are not given a hot coal but we are given the body and blood that touch our lips and blot out our sins. That bread and wine given for us blots out our sin and we too are also sent to serve the Lord...to be with others in the conversation of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

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What makes this assembly church...The Word that is shared...the Word that invites all who are weary and burdened with sin to come and find rest in His glorious kingdom.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every week we gather in this space called St. Paul Lutheran Church. We gather or we assemble to worship as a church. And in this worship, we confess with the words of the Apostle's and the Nicene Creed that we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church...catholic meaning universal church and NOT the Roman Catholic Church. So, what is it that we believe we are saying when we confess this? What is this church we confessionally believe in and what do we need in order to have this confessional church? What I am asking is this, what makes this assembly church?

Some might say that we need a certain type of building with stained-glass windows, a steeple, and an organ. Of course we need pews, a bell is nice too, a cross on the front wall space where the assembly takes place, a burning candle or two or three. Somewhere in this space we are going to need a table to place upon it some bread and a cup of wine. Some might say we need a pulpit and a bowl of some sort for water for washing or Baptizing. Others might say that all you need are folks who believe in Jesus Christ and people who want to be here. And if we are totally honest about our thoughts and vision of church, we want folks who look and think like we do and see "church" the way we do. There are however, a boat load of other things that we could come up with that we would need for church, I'm sure.

In some ways these are all correct, however, these things...even the people, are the material or the concrete make up of Christian worship that have become our custom and popular experience...*our* acceptable norms. Some might even say, these material or concrete matters of Christian worship form, inspire, and undergird our faith.¹ These are the things that we like and we understand about church and faith...these are the things we want others to like and understand as well. But perhaps these are the things that may at times cloud our understanding not only of church, but our very faith as well. And the fallout of this understanding can be heard in comments such as, "I don't need church to be a Christian," or, "I don't want to be associated with all those hypocrites who think they're better than others," "I can walk in the woods and be one with God and talk directly to God."

I am being very general with my thoughts about church, but I think when we are asked a question like, what is church or what is needed to have church our focus is on tangible concrete things that in some way reflect ourselves, our conclusions, our understandings, and our likes and dislikes. What lies at the heart of what I am attempting to establish about our faith and church itself is that we need people and among those people, we need a message and we need conversation about that message with others...we need a message to center each other in order to be the church.

In Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, Concerning the Church, we as Lutherans believe that the church is the *assembly of all believers* among whom the Gospel is purely preached and the Holy Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.² We are even reminded by Jesus Christ himself that we are not a Christian by ourselves when he said:

²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (Matt 18:20)

¹ The opening questions about church are inspired by the opening of my liturgical professor Rev. Dr. Gordon W. Lathrop's book entitled, *Holy People, A Liturgical Ecclesiology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.

² Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. *The Augsburg Confession – German Text*, page 42, par 1-4. My emphasis in italics, "*assembly of all believers*."

Where two or three are gathered the message or the Word is among them.

Some would argue with me about this and at one time in my life, I even thought this, however, we are not Christians by ourselves. The Rev DR Robert Jenson explains this need for each other this way – when we talk to one another or address one another we enter into a common world with each other. And in that conversation, we become a shaping participant of that world or a shaping participant of each other through the words that are shared. A conversation with *ourselves* only involves ourselves and we are the only participant, but through conversation with others we become a shaping participant with *each other* through the words we share with one another.

The Gospel, or the message that is spoken or heard by one person to another or others, is spoken or explained in a conversation and the persons enter into that world of the Gospel or that message...even if they just listen..."Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21) We then become active participants in that message, that Gospel. The Gospel is the Word Jesus Christ who enters into that space or that world of conversation. That Word that is a message shared in that gathering or that assembly is Jesus Christ and that Word that is being shared is the very presence of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is Jesus' Word (*even through it comes out of our mouths in conversation, it is NOT ours*)...it is Jesus' Word because of WHAT that Word promises. And what it promises, only Jesus can rightly promise. The Gospel promises that Jesus will give Himself to us; it promises the total achievement and outcome of His deeds and sufferings are our benefit; the Gospel is the promise of God's love.

If the Gospel-promise is true, its occurrence is Jesus' occurrence as a shaping participant in our world or in our conversation. It is this of the Gospel-promise that is the presence of the promiser, Jesus Christ. If the Gospel is not true, then when we hear it, we only hear each other.³

You may be wondering why I am asking about what makes this assembly church? I do so because the Gospel lesson today gives us a very good example of what the defining elements or characteristics of church are...or what an *assembly of all believers* really consists of. The church an assembly gathered around the Good News of Jesus Christ, in other words, the church is the Gospel shared among an assembly of believers.

Today in our Gospel we hear that crowds assembled around Jesus and he began to teach them. And within the mundane ordinary-every-day habits of the people assembled around the Word incarnate we learn of the abundance of God's goodness and love as seen in the abundance of fish that will nourish and sustain. Jesus is not in some glorious cathedral or synagogue talking to rabbis, Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes or kings or holy people or angles. The people who assemble are more than likely just like each of us here today, common people and the men Jesus calls to follow are just more of the same...a reflection of you and I.

At the center of this assembly in this Gospel lesson is Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, the message or the conversation that by the Holy Spirit has gathered the crowds, and is enlightening them...just as it is right now in this assembly.

³ Jenson, Robert W. *Story and Promise, A Brief Theology of the Gospel About Jesus*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973, Chapter 10, The Presence of the Promiser, page 160.

This Word, Jesus Christ, this message or this conversation taking place on the shore of Lake Gennesaret and right here at St. Paul Lutheran Church is Jesus Christ sharing his gifts, his promise of mercy, of grace, of salvation...a promise that makes each one who is engaged in it equally holy. It is a message or a conversation that keeps us in the true faith, just as Jesus calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.⁴

And if we see anything at all within this Gospel lesson, may we see that all of this takes place in the mundane reality of our lives and the lives of the fisherman who were going about their chores and Jesus shows up...the folks who assemble on the shores to hear Jesus are common folks who have also joined in on the conversation that Jesus is sharing with them through his teaching.

Within the lessons before us today, we can see that the presence of God or a conversation with God does not require a holy status of any sort. Listen again to the comments from three figures within our lessons today, who are key figures or just plain down holy ones. From Isaiah we hear the prophet say:

"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, (Isa 6:5a)

From St. Paul we hear a similar self-evaluation:

For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Cor 15:9)

And yet again from Simon Peter:

"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8b)

And then, knowing too that we all have shared in similar views, we hear these beautifully soothing words in our appointed psalm today:

⁷ Though the LORD be high, he cares for the lowly; (Psalm 138:7)

In this psalm King David is responding in gratitude for the deliverance from the very sin that drags us all into the depths of despair, but also for the deliverance from ourselves as well. This is NOT to say that one is better than another, it is to say that next to God, we are all lowly and in that we know that God cares for us all and we learn this today through the conversation or the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ that is shared among us in this very assembly.

Today within this assembly, Isaiah's words have gathered us into his heavenly vision that says to us, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." And today, we too say these same words that gather us into God's glorious presence that is the body and blood of Jesus Christ that is lifted up before us in this Holy Meal. When the seraphs fly to Isaiah holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs and touch his mouth with it, we hear: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." We are not given a hot coal but we are given the body and blood that touch our lips and blot out our sins. That bread and wine given for us blots out our sin and we too are also sent to serve the Lord...to be with others in the conversation of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Kolb, Robert; Wengert, Timothy J.; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. Small Catechism, The Creed, The Third Article: On Being Made Holy (*literally holy ones*), page 355.

Today, once again, God enters into the mundane reality of our lives as we assemble here in this place. Yes, like the fisherman that were sent to fish the same waters again, each one of us will once again hear the Good News and taste the grace and joy of faith in the Holy Eucharist here in this place. And we gather again...knowing full well that we like Paul, like Peter, and like Isaiah are unworthy-broken-sinners...nonetheless, the Lord will make good his purpose for each of us to be in conversation with others in word and deed despite fury of this world and this culture.

What makes this assembly church...The Word that is shared...the Word that invites all who are weary and burdened with sin to come and find rest in His glorious kingdom.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.