

Fourth Sunday After Lent
March 14, 2021 Sermon

How often do we grumble about circumstances? Like the Israelites being brought out of slavery, we often only look at what is happening right here and now. Have God's promises changed? Are we no longer under the truth that our Lord is with us?

If one looks at what has happened in the past generation, there is a quick corollary to some of the attitudes we may quickly adopt. The boomer generation, by and large, stopped the habit of going to church. Some went to other venues, but many just stopped going. We quickly went, over a couple of decades, from two-thirds of Americans regularly going to church to what now is less than one-quarter going. What happened? As the boomers turned eighteen, they no longer went to church. They didn't have to. That's reality and we can grumble. We can take the path of blame, trying to make amends, or any other path we may choose, but behind this is the more important reality of being the church.

When Jesus said that He was going to build His church, perhaps your mind goes to the place of a building filled with people on a Sunday morning. That is not the church. The original Hebrew word most probably used and the Greek New Testament word do not describe an organization, but something akin to a living organism. The "church" is made up of people from every tribe, tongue, folk, and nation. When the Old Testament uses the word "Zion," it is referring to the church, the people of God. When Jesus says abide in me and me in you, he is referring to the living organism which is, quite literally, His bride, the church. I know this can be difficult, but seek to come to the place where you see that Jesus is, quite literally, in charge of putting this thing we call church, together. Yes, we most certainly have our part, but He is the One who must bring together what He will build.

Hopefully, this answers the angst many feel about the church. We love to have a lively place, filled with people of every age. Amen. But if we jump from where we are to our ideal of what we imagine it ought to be, we're going to quickly get into trouble. We are truly fighting against powers and forces which want to hold us accountable for what belongs to the Lord. In our human frailty, we are often fighting against the desire to make things become what we want them to be.

At all times and especially when we are tempted to wrestle for control with God, as the wandering Israelites of old did, we are reminded to look to Jesus. Sometimes, our minds think along the lines of thinking that our faith evolved as human history unfolded. That is the natural byproduct of modern thinking. But, I remind you that our Lord gave us Scripture through revelation. Before the world was formed, God had His plans laid out.

Our salvation is a gift from God. We did nothing, nor can we do anything to obtain what our Lord gives us freely. This gift of grace has been purchased by Christ from the cross. Jesus did not come to judge the world, for the judgement happened when Adam and Eve left the garden. The law, good as it is, is something we break every day. We may not mean to, and sometimes we are quite intentional in doing so, but the law is just a measure of the way things are supposed to be. What they are and what they are supposed to be are often two very different things. Our Lord knows this. The way He has provided for us comes by looking to Him.

When I say, "Looking," I do not mean a casual glance. Far from it. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness is a reminder that Moses was not just giving a sign. The people were being killed and they cried out to God. When we begin to realize that without Christ our cause is hopeless, when we know that we have a terminal disease, when we recognize that our

situation is dire, often only then do we turn to the Lord and seek help. And the help is there. He does not leave us as orphans. Just as Scripture gave instruction to the Israelites – a prophecy of the reality – so also, Jesus gives us Himself, lifted up on the tree.

If you want healing, true healing, this is where it is found. Through the death of Christ comes the eternal life He promises. We are dead in our trespasses and made alive through the grace of Christ. I'm not just talking about physical restoration, but about something one who does not believe can ever experience. It is that place where those of faith begin to understand what Scripture means when it says, "To live is Christ and to die is gain." It is not that Christians have a death wish, but the reality that we know we are alive in Christ now and forever. It is what we heard today when it says, "For we are what He made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

The church does good works because it is the church. What do we get out of it? If you insist on thinking about these things in this way, you get a smile from the Father because you have done His will. Friends, we are not here to get anything out of anything. We have been created to live in the eternal relationship established in and through Christ. That is why Scripture tells us that apart from Christ we can do nothing. We are everything in Him and apart from Him is nothingness.

There are two things to point out when you hear this. First, we need to stop trying so hard. Stop thinking in terms of what you need to do. Take all of that energy and the rest that you have and pour it into being a child of the heavenly Father. The world has turned from what it thinks is the church. In many ways, they have turned from the institution. Perhaps that is a good thing. When we really behave like the body of Christ, it has its own good infection that is contagious. We've lived with a time that has taught us much about a contagious environment. Have you ever thought that maybe the Lord is teaching us something about being contagious for the cause of Christ?

We stay six feet of distance to not infect others. In the Lord, let us be willing to be close to others so that the cause of Christ might be caught by others. We wear masks to cover our breath. Let us take off the mask of fear and speak the word of truth we have been given by Christ. We have isolated and shut down for safety's sake. Let us now be bold to live in the world connected in and with the body of Christ that others may know the true and saving knowledge of our Lord. I am not talking about the physical realm where, for a while yet, we need to remain cautious for this physical world, but the lessons we can learn are immeasurable to get us back to being the church for whom Christ died. Hear me, I am not making any accusations against any particular fellowship, let alone our community, but I am talking about living out the message of Christ in our own lives such that the hungry and thirsty around us, who are looking in all the wrong ways, to show them what is only fulfilled in Christ, in order that they may know that here in this place is the life they are looking for.

Christ, who died for us all, is often seen by those outside the church as some remote idea of goodness. He is seen as a fairy tale. But the true Christ is the One through whom all things have their being. In Him is, literally, life and light. He is calling for us to be the true light which shines in the darkness of this world. Through all that we do, my prayer is that, together, we will do what is pleasing to the Father, be faithful to Him, the church, and those around us so that they see the light of Christ shining through us. There is no better affirmation than for another to look at you and say, "I don't know what it is you have, but I want it." Lift up the crucified Christ in all you do this week! Amen.