

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 8th, 2024
FAITH IN ACTION

Prayer

Lord, help us to better recognize your hand in both giving and maintaining the faith that we have in the person and work of your Son, Jesus.

AMEN

Gathered with Prejudice

While not a perfect parallel with today's reading, let me tell you about the first parish I joined in Chicago back in the 80's. Mt. Calvary was a small, English District congregation of 50 to 80 people. Several years before I became a member, they had let an ethnic Lutheran congregation use their parish hall for a dinner function. Almost everyone complained for years afterward about the strange smell the group had created, not fully comprehending that what one person considers good another may find terrible. They displayed prejudice against those whose who were not like them. That congregation closed in January of 1995.

Gathered with Diversity

Redeemer is different – much more welcoming. If you look around, you'll recognize there is diversity across multiple dimensions. We often

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identify with our jobs, so let's begin there. Some, like college professors and teachers, work with people; others, like operating engineers and contractors work with their hands; still others like analysts and accountants work with numbers. By mere observation, you can see that we have a rich mixture of ages, ethnicities, and even dress – from formal to casual. Outside of church, our hobbies and pursuits are equally varied. So, what holds us together? I was listening to a *Thinking Fellows* podcast on the nature of the church and why the church is different from any other social group or organization, such as AA, scouts, sports teams, sewing circles or a Rotary group. They identified the essential distinction.

The church - ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia) – is an assembly or gathering. We are gathered here together, not through our own actions, but through God's call on our lives to be His children, members of the body of His Son, Jesus. Outside of this connection, our paths may never have crossed. We value our differences and see them as complimentary, just as all the bones, muscles, organs, nerves, et. al. of our physical bodies are both unique and necessary for proper functioning.

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We are, however, not perfect. As the reading highlights in verse 10:

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

Therefore, we stand condemned, because our Holy God asks – even demands – nothing less than perfect obedience. The Pharisees thought the way to please God was through obedience to the Law, but they had so watered down and misunderstood the Law that they thought they were keeping it and pleasing God. Nothing could have been further from the truth – neither they nor we can add anything good to the work of Christ on our behalf; we can only contribute evil – all of the sins that we have committed in thought, word, and deed over our lifetimes.

Faith in Action

Tuning to the second topic, from which the sermon gets its title, this is the second time in the past week when I've had the opportunity to focus on faith in action.

We had a half-day staff retreat with the church and preschool staff and some of the church's leadership on Wednesday, so I apologize in advance to those who may have heard some of this recently.

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The theme verse for the preschool for the year is Matthew 5:16:

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

You've most likely heard some of the analogies used to differentiate and explain good and evil. Darkness is nothing in and of itself, it is merely the absence of light. Similarly, we can't measure cold, we measure the presence or absence of heat. In the same way, evil can be described as nothing in and of itself, it is simply the absence of good. Thomas Aquinas put it this way:

*'Good can exist without evil,
whereas evil cannot exist without good'*

Our shining lights have a purpose – to provide illumination where there was none before – to dispel evil.

God, who created the world out of nothing just by speaking, doesn't need our frail and imperfect actions that we call good works, but those whom He has placed around us are in great need of them.

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Think of our good works as bringing God to our neighbor – while this can be done consciously, it happens whether we are aware of it or not – our light is self-evident.

Circling back to diversity, our everyday lights (electric lights) as well as the lights of yesterday (flames) have a whole range of hues and shapes, just as the members of the body of Christ have a variety of gifts, talents, abilities, and functions.

There is one key difference between these lights and our light, however. Both bulbs and flames require a power source, they turn energy into light directly. Our light is more indirect, more reflective. We don't have power of our own, but merely reflect the power and light of Jesus; not unlike how the Moon creates no light of its own, but merely reflect the light of the Sun.

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Dead Faith

The closing verses warn against having a dead faith. Switching analogies – have any of you ever received a bouquet of flowers? Were they living or dead? I'd argue that they were essentially dead, since they had been cut off from the source of life, even while they looked to be alive.

Like the flowers on the altar behind me, they may look nice and smell wonderful, but they soon wither and reflect the fact that they are indeed dead, before being tossed into the garbage since they no longer serve their purpose.

Flowers, like all living plants and animals, need water and nutrients to continue to live and flourish. We too need to be connected to the source of life, Jesus, for our faith to continue to be alive and active. And how is that done?

We gather, as the church, the body of Christ, not only on Sundays but at various times throughout the week for the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren, be it in a board meeting, a bible study, or husband and wife talking over dinner.

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We hear the Word read and preached, knowing that faith comes by hearing. Again, this happens not only on Sunday mornings, but other times throughout the week as we sing bedtime songs to our children, listen to a 1517 podcast while driving home from work, or have a Christian radio station playing in the background at home.

We hear the Words of absolution from the Pastor on Sunday morning proclaiming that your sins are forgiven and we should hear those same words of forgiveness the rest of the week from those whom we have wronged after confessing to them what we have done.

We hear the Words of institution at the Lord's Table and join with all believers of all time and space in the foretaste of the feast to come at the wedding feast of the lamb in Heaven.

As always, I pray that all of us would continue to receive God's grace through the means that He has provided and thereby strengthen our faith until life everlasting.

AMEN