

Sermon 9-23-18
Pastor Ray Lorthioir
Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY

The Leadership of Christ

We're now officially on the path to re-building as a mission congregation of The American Association of Lutheran Churches. We're small because that's how mission congregations start out. In 1926 when the congregation was first founded as a mission congregation, there were a number of families that had migrated from Trinity Lutheran Church in Brooklyn here to West Hempstead and South Hempstead. Therefore, the mother church in Brooklyn saw to it that a pastor was sent to minister to the spiritual needs of these people and organize them into two new congregations. Thus, Trinity was initially founded as a congregation of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America. It started out small.

The task of the early pastors at the start was fairly simple. Identify Lutheran families from Brooklyn Trinity moving into the area and persuade them to attend West Hempstead Trinity; also to persuade any other Lutherans moving into the area.

But the years eventually brought changes in demographics. Lutherans and other Protestants moved off Long Island to be replaced by Roman Catholics. And here in this community we're now surrounded by an ever-increasing orthodox Jewish population. Who could have foreseen all this in 1926?

Thus, our task now is not so simple. Many people in the culture have shed a Christian identification. Others remain Christian in name only. Our nation has gone through a tremendous war of words in the last 100 years. There are many anti-Christians literally hell-bent on restoring ancient paganism to western culture, and they have largely succeeded. We have to cut through all the interference.

Again what is paganism? It takes many different forms, religious and non-religious. But in all its forms paganism absolutely denies that the universe has a Creator. As a fundamental doctrine, paganism instead declares that the universe itself is eternal and self-existing. It contains unknown forces responsible for molding everything that exists. In effect, the universe is god.

In the time of Jesus paganism ruled the world, except for the Jewish people. They alone believed the declaration found in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." In other words, there is an eternal being whose power, mind and wisdom is the source of everything that exists. This eternal being alone is God. The universe is not god, therefore, but a creation of the living God.

We know from prophecy written six hundred years before Jesus that when Messiah appeared the pagan gentile world would be astonished to hear of Him. The gentile world would flock to Jesus. And in the process they would abandon the root of paganism and adopt Genesis 1:1. This is precisely what has happened in the last 2,000 years and continues to happen. Indeed, all of us are Christian because long ago our ancestors gave up their pagan belief and instead believed in Jesus Christ who

with the Father and the Holy Spirit is One God, the eternal Creator of all things, even of human beings.

That ancient prophecy of Isaiah 49 is still in force. Pagans continue to convert to the only true Creator God throughout the world. And the same thing is true here in the U.S. as well. For, this culture has drastically changed since 1926. At that time most of the public school system still taught the basic Christian worldview that Yahweh created the heavens and the earth. The bible was revered as the foundation of society. Most people had a Christian worldview.

No more. The pagan religious worldview has been taught for several generations now and defended as being scientific, while the Christian worldview is despised as only being myth and religion. Most people now have a pagan worldview – even those in the church. This is what makes evangelism a rough go at the present time.

But consider this. When St. Paul began his ministry most of the world had a pagan worldview, and look what eventually happened.

Now, the paganization of the culture has had a definite effect on the church. Instead of standing its ground or fighting back, the church has acquiesced in paganism. For instance, many have tried to fit Genesis into the millions and billions of years. Others in the church have surrendered concerning the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Since pagan Philosophical Naturalism teaches that such things are impossible, they go along with it teaching that there was no virgin birth and that the disciples only had visionary experiences of Jesus after His crucifixion.

And when it comes to good and evil, many people look away from Yahweh's declaration of what is good and what is evil as found in scripture, and decide good and evil for themselves. Thus, even in the church, we have people defending the all-out hedonism of contemporary American paganism and all of its manifestations: homosexuality, abortion, single parent families, living together apart from marriage and much more. Let pagans do their thing. But in the church shouldn't we look to Yahweh for our understandings of good and evil? If we don't it's because we have believed the pagan propaganda machine that has declared God's commandments to be evil at worst and nonsense at best.

So, we are in tumultuous times both in the culture and within the church. However, if we will hold true to the real Jesus Christ, God is still calling pagans out of their paganism and into the Kingdom of God. Writing to formerly pagan gentiles, St. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:18-21, "18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God."

The key is in verse 21. Through faith in Jesus, you gentiles also finally believed in the one true God. You have given up your paganism. You now believe in the God of Genesis 1:1. Your faith and hope are in the God of Genesis 1:1. Considering the power of paganism, this was and remains nothing short of miraculous. It is the work of the Holy Spirit.

So, as we begin the process of being a mission congregation, we need to keep this in mind. God knows whom He's calling into His Kingdom. He knows whom He's calling to a stronger walk with Him. He knows whom He's calling out of paganism and into a true life with Him. He knows who will make a decision to step all the way into the Kingdom of God and give up keeping that one foot in the pagan worldview. Therefore, our task is to proclaim God's Word as accurately as possible into the world so that it will come to the hearts of those God is calling to Himself, and those He has purposed to be gathered around Word and Sacrament in this place.

Remember. It's all about words. It was all about words with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It remains all about words to this day. Either the words of some form of paganism will enthrall you, or Jesus Christ, the Word of God, will enthrall you. The reason Christianity has existed for 2,000 years is that God Himself faithfully calls those whom He desires through the Word of Jesus Christ. This is the Word that we are called to faithfully preach and teach.

And in the war of words, the Word of God has the greater power. If this were not so, then the Word of God would be ignored. Instead, wherever it has gone, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has brought forth tremendous fear and loathing from pagans. This is why Rome fed Christians to the lions. It's why Christianity is vilified by the pagans in our society and viciously persecuted in many other places. Indeed, the Communist party in China has again judged the church to be a threat to its pre-eminence. Word is coming out that children are being forbidden to attend church. And just like in Russia during communist days, the leadership of the church is being replaced with communist party hacks. All who resist are being persecuted.

Why is the Gospel a threat? Because it is more powerful than atheism. It is more powerful than secularism. It makes better sense. It persuades the hearts of people more readily. After all, it's origin is in our Creator God. Therefore, the only way atheism and secularism can maintain their grip is by mocking the Word of God and suppressing it. For, the Word of God cannot be ignored. The enemies of true Christianity prove that.

So let us take heart in this work we're undertaking. No doubt, we'll get some pushback from those enslaved to various forms of paganism. But we will also set prisoners free to serve Jesus Christ. Those whom God is calling will know that they have come home to the One who has loved them from the beginning. As it says in Hebrews 12:22-24, "22 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, 23 to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

Now, one of the ways we can be faithful to the Lord in mission is to believe what we talked about last week. We saw from Ephesians 1:22-23 and Colossians 1:18 that Jesus has been made Head of all things in the creation for the sake of His Church. He is King. He is Head of all things. He is also Head of His Church. And in those verses the church is called His body.

Have you ever noticed that when your head wants to go somewhere, you make your body get in gear and get your head to where it wants to go? Do you think the

same relationship might exist between Jesus the Head of all things for the church and His body, the church?

Well, if this is so, where exactly does Jesus, the Head, want to lead His church? We just heard about the destination. It's that Mount Zion, the city of the living God. And Jesus wants to lead us to God Himself so that we may be remade in the Image of God.

But there's much more. For example, we're going to dig into a metaphor Paul used to describe the relationship between Christ and His Church. It's found in a passage that was our second lesson several weeks ago.

Here's the first part, Ephesians 5:23-24, "23 ... the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything." Let's look at the husband and wife metaphor as Paul intended. It's Christ and His church. Now, just as wives have trouble submitting to their husbands, so the church has trouble submitting to Jesus Christ. But that's not the natural order of things that God intended either in marriage or in the relationship between Christ and His church.

Therefore, here's the other part of the metaphor. Ephesians 5:25-31, "25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – 30 for we are members of his body."

Loving your wife as yourself is not only excellent advice for husbands; it's the natural order of things God intended for men. Such love enables a wife to submit in the natural order of things. But both loving and submitting are difficult in the natural order because of the sinful nature.

Nevertheless, notice! The perfect man, Jesus of Nazareth was able to give Himself up for His bride – only His bride is the church. In giving Himself up, Jesus gave His bride that which she could not have on her own – holiness, radiance, blamelessness, perfection. He does this, if you notice, by the washing with water (baptism) through the Word. (He does it. This verse again proves that baptism is God's thing, not ours.)

Now is the church holy, radiant, blameless and perfect? Not to our eyes. We know better. But in God's eyes the Word says we are justified in Christ. That means that God counts us holy, radiant, blameless and perfect for the sake of the sacrifice His Son made on the cross. That's how much Jesus loves His church.

It also means that when Jesus returns His church will finally be revealed as His truly holy, radiant, blameless and perfect creation. In God's eyes we are that now for the sake of Christ. But when Christ returns we ourselves and all of creation will be able to see openly the marvelous thing Christ has done in perfecting repentant sinners for all eternity.

In conclusion, then, Jesus, the head, is leading His body, the church, to the holy city. He is leading the church down the path to eternal holiness, radiance, blamelessness and perfection for His own Name sake. He has done this by His

sacrifice on the cross and the eternal benefits His sacrifice brings into the present. In Christ, we have the eternal benefits of forgiveness for confessed sins. We have spiritual cleansing through washing with water (baptism) through the Word (Scripture). Through the forgiveness of sins we have genuine intimacy with Father, Son and Holy Spirit, our Creator God.

And all this is through Holy Spirit's gift of faith. By faith we hear what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. By faith we confess it as truth back to God. By faith we internalize what God has done as our own. We possess it by the gift of faith.

God's great purpose for us is to bring those that He is calling into His great plan for them in Jesus Christ. He has promised to feed and care for us. Therefore, let us submit to His plan. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.