

“Grow Together in the Gospel”

Grace, mercy and peace are yours through faith in Christ Jesus.

What would be the “ideal” church? Stained glass windows, vaulted ceilings, marble floors, solid oak pews, a sound system so crisp and clear you can hear the pastor clear his throat, a grand piano, a pipe organ that will knock your socks off, a pastor who preaches a stand up sermon every Sunday; an organist, choir, and instrumentalists that really rock out the hymns, a VBS that gathers hundreds of children from the community, a pre-school with a waiting list a mile long, a Bible class so large that it has to be moved into the sanctuary to accommodate everyone, a food pantry and clothes closet for the needy, a church transportation service, programs for disabled vets, an active youth group, a gymnasium to host basketball camps, a field to host soccer camps, not talking about programs the programs of the church. Is this the ideal church?

Let’s take a look at the Christian Church in its infant stage, just 50 days after Jesus’ death and resurrection... it is Pentecost, the harvest festival, and the disciples are gathered in a room in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit makes himself present with a sound like a blowing wind and tongues of fire that rest on the heads of the disciples, the Spirit enables the disciples to speak in different languages of the world, a crowd gathers, wondering, what does this mean?

Peter addresses the crowd and explains that the prophet Joel predicted this very event 800 years earlier. Peter turns the focus of his Pentecost Day sermon to Jesus of Nazareth and the miracles he had done. With hard-hitting law he accused the Jews of their part in Jesus’ crucifixion. He also explained that all of this happened according to God’s plan, and that Jesus had been raised from the dead and exalted to God’s right hand. He finishes the sermon with these words, **“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”** Luke tells us that they people were cut to the heart. They repented of their sin and believed Peter’s message, the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God and through the Sacrament of baptism added 3,000 souls to Christ’s Church that day.

The ideal church? You bet! Forget about the marble floors and rocking church band! But there’s more to this church. Consider their actions after Pentecost Sunday.

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (which focused on Christ crucified and risen), **to the fellowship** – their common bond; **to the breaking of bread** (Lord’s Supper) and **to prayer**. Their natural reaction to the gospel, the good news of Jesus, was that they couldn’t get enough of Bible study, they couldn’t get enough of their desire to be with like-minded people, they couldn’t get enough of the Lord’s Supper, they couldn’t get enough of expressing their unity by praying together. Luke continues and says, **“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.”** They couldn’t get enough of gathering together for worship. They couldn’t help it. The gospel caused them to grow in their desire for more gospel. Not only that, but the gospel caused them to grow in their desire to help and support each other.

They had everything in common, selling possessions and goods, they gave to everyone as he had need. They had a great love for each others’ bodily needs as well as spiritual needs.

Finally, Luke mentions their reputation with outsiders – unbelievers noticed all of these things that they were doing...the ideal church? Absolutely!

Is that the church you see at Faith Lutheran in Radcliff? Do the members of Faith have the same devotion to the study of God’s Word, the same excitement for worship? Do the members of Faith Lutheran show the same commitment to Bible study, both at home and at church? Do the members of Faith mark the communion Sundays and make them a special priority? Do the members of Faith make certain that nothing interferes with their time with God and his Word and Sacrament? Are they excited to spend time with each other? Are the members of Faith Lutheran eager to share their possessions with those who need them most? Are they eager

to open their homes and share food, clothing and shelter with those among their church family who are needy? Are the members of our church devoted to prayer? What is the opinion of Faith Lutheran from “outsiders”? Is this a place they would want to come based on what they see and hear from us and how we interact with each other and the high priority we place on Gods’ Word in our lives?

You are the members of this church. You have to search your heart and answer those questions yourself. I can only judge by what I see and hear in my own heart.

I think that when I do there are many times when Faith Lutheran doesn’t resemble the ideal church. Why is that? It’s because we fail to make the gospel our priority. Our time with the body of Christ is not a high priority. We think that our time is just too short to spend that way. We’d rather we entertained to death than spend time with the precious gospel. It’s easier to pick up the remote than our Bibles, it’s so easy to replace our Sunday morning or Wednesday evening with anything else but gathering together for worship and Bible study. It’s so easy to make any kind of excuse why we’re so busy and don’t have time for family devotion, for personal study, for corporate public worship and Bible study.

Does God expect the impossible? Does God expect our congregation to look like the ideal church? You bet he does! He wants us to grow in the gospel just like the early Christian Church. So what’s our solution? It’s simple: spend time with the gospel!

Be devoted to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. What the gospel gives us and makes us is more than what our televisions can do for us. Our televisions make us greedy, materialistic, lazy, depressed, and give poor examples of how husbands and wives and children and parents ought to be. But the gospel... is good news; good news of Christ Jesus.

Who cares who got voted out or who did or did not receive a rose from the bachelor, or who won the best award for the worst dressed on the red carpet? Isn’t it the greatest news to read in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) about how Jesus made the study of God’s Word his highest priority, even when he was a 12 year-old boy? How many 12 year-old boys do you know make the gospel their top priority? But Jesus did it for us! Isn’t it the greatest news to hear how Jesus spent time with other believers in the Word of God and that by his actions and perfect attitude he fulfilled what God demands of each and everyone of you and me?

In the grand scheme of things, does it really affect your salvation if your football team wins today? You’ll be happy. But how much happier and more occasion to rejoice to hear that Christ Jesus took the field and met Satan and hell head on and won the victory for you and me! What great news that Jesus took the punishment for our sins by his death and made satisfaction for our sins and redirected God’s anger toward himself!

What great news that Jesus provided this beautiful means of pouring his love on you: holy baptism. Through baptism he has given you the gift of faith. In baptism, through faith, Jesus has washed you with water and his Word. He has washed away your selfishness, your laziness, your apathetic attitude toward his Word, your misplaced priorities. By washing you with water and his Word Jesus has washed you with his blood and made you holy in his sight forever.

How exciting it is to step up the altar every 1st and 3rd Sunday of the month to hear Jesus’ words to me again and again, “This is given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.” What joy to know that Jesus paid this high price for me, his body and blood, and that he would give me this assurance in this holy meal that I am his child and will be in heaven in perfect fellowship with him and all the saints.

Having been reminded that we are God’s children as individuals, we will seek to be with others like us. Just like coals on a grill are piled together to generate heat off of one another, so too, we will gather around the Word together and we will grow in our faith together. Our fellowship with believers in our family, in our congregation, and in our Wisconsin Synod, is something to cherish.

As we grow together in the gospel, we will also grow together in fellowship with each other. We will grow in the mission and ministry of this congregation. The more we will naturally step out in faith and take pride in our church. We will take ownership in the mission and ministry of the church.

Though the ideal church will only truly exist in heaven, God still does amazing things in his Church on earth. I don't recall any Sundays when we've had 3,000 baptisms, but do you remember that one Sunday last year when we had a Sunday with 5 baptisms? That was amazing. I don't recall any annual reports going out that claimed 3,000 converts in one year, but last year we gained 19 souls to this congregation through the gospel. We haven't had 3,000 for worship, but we did have 115 in worship and 50 in Bible study. Why do these things happen? Because you're growing in the gospel!

Not only does the gospel motivate you to seek each other out and gather around the Word and Sacraments but the gospel motivates you to show that love to your sisters and brothers in Christ. On Christmas Day an elderly gentleman was sitting all by himself. Another member got up and sat next to him. No one told him to do that. Two weeks ago I was scheduled to clean the church. Another member emailed me and said, "Pastor, I'll take your place. You work on your sermon and Bible class preparation." I hear stories about members who are not on the outreach committee, and yet they always carry a handful of the church business cards or newsletter and they're always handing them out in the grocery store, at their work, at the gas station, in restaurants, to their neighbors and friends, inviting them to hear the gospel at Faith Lutheran Church. I've heard stories about members who are not on the elders committee reaching out to our inactive members by sending them cards saying, "We missed you," and they call and visit our inactive members. During holiday seasons, I hear about members who invite other members to their homes who have no family in the area. Our Women of Faith raise funds to send our children to camp, to ship care packages to our Soldiers, to bring gift baskets to our home bound friends.

Why do you do all these things? It's because the gospel has touched your heart and you can't help but go and show the love Christ has showered on you with your brothers and sisters in Christ. I pray that you will continue to grow in the gospel until the day we join the Church in the glories of heaven forever and ever. Amen!