**4th Sunday after Epiphany – Year A – February 2, 2014 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on 1Corinthians 1:26-31 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**The State of the Church Address**

*26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called.* *Not many of you were wise* *by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose* *the foolish* *things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not**--to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him.* *30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus,* *who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness,* *holiness* *and redemption.* *31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."*

Article II, Section 3 of the US constitution requires the president to periodically give the US Congress information on the State of the Union. President Barak Obama fulfilled that requirement last Tuesday with the State of the Union Address. This speech reports on the current condition of the country and lays out the president’s legislative agenda and the nation’s priorities – where we are now and where we want to be in the future as a nation.

What is the state of the union? I think that when we look at it objectively, we have to admit that things are ok.

Most of you are able to hold a job, and with that job provide for yourself and your family food on the table, clothes in the closet and a roof over your head. With that money you make at your job you are able to drive a car on roads paid for and maintained by your taxes, and drive to the grocery store where you can purchase food that you know is safe to eat because you have a Food and Drug Administration. You have a police department, fire department, and military to protect your borders and live in relative safety. Wouldn’t you say that overall, compared to some countries, the state of the union is alright?

What about the state of the Church? How are things going? When I say “the Church” I do not mean Faith Lutheran Church in Radcliff, KY. When we talk about the Church we are talking about all believers all over the world. The Church consists of all people, who by God-given faith, confess Jesus as their Lord and Savior. What is the state of the church, believers?

The Apostle Paul gives us an insight through his first letter to a Christian congregation in the city of Corinth, 55AD. Although this letter was written almost 2,000 years, not much has changed in the state of the Church.

Corinth was a bustling port city in southern Greece, the chief city in Greece, close to 600,000 people. The congregation was gifted, but there were many problems in the congregation. The members were immature spiritually. They fell into the immorality of the city. There were many factions and divisions within the church that threatened to tear it apart. People had the wrong ideas about the Lord’s Supper, the resurrection and roles of men and women in the church and home. The purpose of the letter was to instruct and patiently build them up in a pastoral way. Paul’s letter could be called, “The State of the Church Address.”

The Apostle Paul addressed their issues, but at the beginning of his letter he talked to them about the foundation of the Church – the message of Jesus Christ crucified. The problem for the Christians in Corinth was that the people of the city thought this teaching was backwards. Why would a God would come down out of heaven and sacrifice himself for lowly human beings? Why would any respectable person be crucified? That execution was reserved for the worst criminals. And it was too simple, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” When the Christians talked about a resurrection from the dead… the Greeks and Romans thought this was nonsense. They believed that when you die that’s it!

Then, to top it all off, Paul pointed this out to them, “Think about what you were when God called you: not many were influential, not many were wise according to the standards of the world, not many were of noble birth.” Not many of the Christians would have walked the red carpet in Hollywood. Not many had Justin Timberlake on speed dial. According to the citizens in Corinth, the believers were losers, they were not winners. The citizens of Corinth looked down on the Christians.

Not much has changed, has it? If you watch the Super Bowl today, think about how many of those football players are Christians? I’m sure some of them are. But what are the odds that the media will make a big deal out of it? “Here’s an upstanding fine Christian man!” How many famous movie stars are Christians? How many billionaires are Christians? Not too many.

The same obstacles that the Christians in Corinth faced, we face today. The world laughs at the idea that the world was created in six 24 hour days. The young people here today who sit in the classrooms of our public schools defend that truth and are mocked because of it. When you choose not to do things with your boyfriend or girlfriend that only married people are to do in the bedroom, your are made fun of because of it. When you defend the truth that there is only one God and that there is only one way to heaven you are labeled “Intolerant” and “Conservative” and “Close-minded.” It’s hard being a Christian, isn’t it? Ask the adults here if they experience the same rejection – at the work place, in their neighborhoods and among their own families.

And then, Jesus told us this morning to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5) That’s a difficult thing to do at times. Many times we respond with sarcasm or anger instead of love. Many times we fall into the thinking and behavior of the world. We feel beaten down, depressed and burdened because we are Christians. The state of the Church looks very bleak, doesn’t it?

God invites us to come and listen to his State of the Church Address. He invites us to the House Chamber. We look around and see that there are not many who are of noble birth, not many influential and wise according to the world. We see people who look like they’re wearing clothes that are tattered and torn, beaten and bruised people, dejected and depressed. The Speaker of the House stands up and with a big smile on his face shouts, “Ladies and Gentlemen, I have the high privilege and distinct honor of presenting to you the King of kings and Lord of lords! The God from all eternity!” You stand and turn toward the back door, and see a stately man standing in the doorway. He walks into the room, and his face is shining like the sun. His robes as white a freshly fallen snow. He takes his place behind the podium. There are no teleprompters. He wants to look you in the face. And he says, “Dear citizens of my state, my kingdom. I know that you see yourselves this way, as a beaten and broken Church. But I see you differently. Notice, that I did not choose the winners, those holding Vince Lombardi trophies in their hands, those walking the red carpet in Hollywood, those wearing the title of Nobel Prize winner. I chose you, not because of what you have done or accomplished life. I chose you because I love you, and I see you differently than the world sees you. I see you through my Son.

I sent my Son to live in human flesh, to be born of a virgin, not in a palace, but in a feeding trough for animals. As he walked through life he was beaten and badgered, too. People rejected him when he told them he was the Son of God. He was rejected when he told them there is only one way to heaven and that through him. But the difference between you and him, he endured willingly. He endured patiently and always kept hope in my promises. He endured perfectly. He always responded to those who accused him and attacked him with love and patience. And I tell you this not to shame you or embarrass you. But to show you what my Son has done for you. That’s how I see you, through his patient, loving life. That’s the state of the Church.

What’s more, is that my Son took the burden of your guilt on himself and went to the cross to be punished for you – the guilt you have for the times you responded to someone in hate or anger, when you lost hope and despaired, when you fell to the ways of this world – Jesus was punished for you. He rose again to prove that this is completed and finished, you are forgiven. This is the state of the Church. As my Apostle Paul wrote to you, **“It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."**

It is because of Jesus that the state of the Church is righteous, holy and redeemed. You are righteous in my sight. That means you are in a right relationship with me. Even though relationships in this world will be lost because of your relationship with me, the relationship that matters most, the one with me, the one that gets you to heaven, is good, it’s perfect. That’s the state of the Church: you are righteous.

You are holy in my sight. That means you are saints, not because you have lived saintly lives and have gone over and above what God asks of you. You are saints, you are holy people, because the holiness of my Son Jesus has been blanketed over you through baptism. That’s the state of the Church: you are holy.

Finally, you are redeemed because my Son is your redemption. He paid the price of his lifeblood to set you free from your guilt, from your grave, from hell itself, and set you free to live in heaven forever. That’s the state of the Church: redeemed.

So… I say to you that the state of the Church is excellent, it is perfect. The world will not see you that way. They will continue to look down at you because you are not wise according to them, you are not influential, you are not of noble birth. They will persecute you. They will mock you and consider you weak and close-minded and nothing in this world. When that happens, take comfort in what my Son said to you this morning, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.” (Matthew 5:11) You are blessed. You still belong to me. You still have strength through my Word and my Son’ Lord’s Supper. That is the state of the Church.

And as for the future of the Church… most likely, you will not be raising a Vince Lombardi trophy in your hand tonight, but you will be waving palm branches in heaven as a sign of victory (Revelation 7:9). You may not be traipsing down the red carpet in a Louis Vuitton, Armani or Prada, but you will be wearing the white robe of Jesus’ righteousness (Isaiah 61:10). You may not be wearing the title of Nobel prize winner, but you will be wearing the crown of life (Revelation 2:10). That’s the future state of the Church. That’s where you will be.”

When the president gives the State of the Union Address, does he really know where the country stands now, and where it is going in the future? No, and neither do we. But God knows, and our future as a nation is in his hands, and that’s good enough for me. More importantly, we know where we are as a Church, and we know where we are going. My dear friends, write these truths on your heart, so that you may always know where you are as the Church and where you will be. God will be with you. Amen.