

Summer sermon series: Apostles' Creed – July 15, 2012 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

Based on 2Thessalonians 2:13-17 written by Pastor Paul Horn

“Stand firm! Hold on to the truth!”

Let's recite our mission statement together: It is our mission to seek the unchurched, strive for spiritual growth and to strengthen one another through the Word of God and His Sacraments.

How can you tell if a congregation is carrying out their mission? Are we “seeking the unchurched”? We could look at our monthly reports and examine the number of visits made by our vicar and pastor and members. We could look at number of adult confirmations. Are we “striving for spiritual growth”? Again we can look at the reports and examine the percentage of adults and children in Sunday morning Bible study and Sunday school. Are we “strengthening one another”? We can look at the number of visits made by pastor and elders to our members. Are we carrying out our mission?

If we look at the numbers one could make the argument that we are. Compared to five years ago we only had 3 adult confirmands for the entire year. In the past six months we've had 21 confirmation and 2 baptisms! Five years the average number of people in worship was 65. This year we've been averaging 107 each Sunday!

What are we really thankful for – for these numbers? Or are we thankful for these souls, for the people, whom God the Holy Spirit called through the Word of God, and brought to faith? Yes, today we do not boast about ourselves and what we have done as a congregation. For none of this would be possible without the Lord's help. Today we are thankful for God the Holy Spirit. He is the one working among us through his Word!

When we look at our mission statement, “Seeking the unchurched, striving for spiritual growth, strengthening one another... “ these are actions that encourage growth. How could we make this church grow? First of all we have to ask, “Does God want his church to grow?” Yes! He tells us in Paul's letter to Pastor Timothy, “**God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.**” Jesus told us to “...**make disciples of all nations.**” In our lesson this morning from 2Thessalonians we know that God wants us to use the gospel – the good message of Jesus – to grow his church. We know from Scripture that God wants us to teach people all of the truths of Scripture as we grow in his church.

Sometimes that message offends people, doesn't it? Jesus says that he is the only way, the truth and life. That means that no one can be saved unless they believe in Jesus, right? Why can't we just agree to say that other religions are just teaching another way to heaven? That would bring more people in to church, right? What about the churches that focus on the meeting the needs of the community? Why can't we do more things that? Wouldn't people see that we care and that would grow our church? What about the church body that recently allowed the ordination of transgendered priests? Or the church body that allows women and gays and lesbians to be pastors? What if we did that, wouldn't we get more people in the doors? What if didn't preach that part in the Bible that says sex before marriage is a sin, so many people live together before their married these days anyway. If we didn't teach that we would be seen as open and more modern, right? What about close communion, what if we allowed anyone to come up to the Lord's Supper, wouldn't we offend less people? What if we didn't talk so much about sins and death and hell and God's wrath and

focused more on feeling God's love and how God just wants us to love everyone? Wouldn't that message be more acceptable?

What tempts us to abandon the truths of Scripture? Fear of persecution, of offending others, losing members and money for the church, losing friendships, families – but my friends, fear is lack of trust that God the Holy Spirit will actually do what he promised he would do when we preach and teach all of his Word in its truth.

Jesus told story, and he said, **“Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”** (Matthew 7:26) Have we been that man? Have we heard God's Word and ignored it, and abandoned the truth of his Word for the sake of not offending, for the sake of growth, for the sake of doing what's more convenient for us? If we have, then we are in danger of losing the gospel and with it our very souls.

How many of you like the hymn “Amazing Grace?” Why? When you sing that hymn have you thought about the truth of Scripture contained in that first stanza, “I once was lost, but now am found?” At one time, and maybe for some of us, more than once, we were lost, completely, because of our unbelief, stubborn sinful ways, unable to find God, to make him our God, he had to find us and bring us back to him.

My friends, lift up your hearts and listen to the words your Lord wishes to share with you today. Vs13 **“From the beginning God chose you to be saved...”** God did not make his decision to choose you or me because we were likeable or that we had some redeeming quality. By nature we were sinful, depraved in our unbelief, dead in sin. But by his grace, Paul says, God chose you. This truth, the doctrine of election, that Paul teaches here, assures you that your salvation rests in God's wisdom and power, from start to finish, rather than in our feeble hands. God's choosing of you from before the creation of the world, had one goal in mind – that you be saved. And that's what he did...

Vs13 **“Through the work of the Holy Spirit.”** God the Father sent the Holy Spirit to do his work on you. Not by whispering in your ear, or through some elevated emotional religious experience, but... **“He called you through the gospel.”** The Holy Spirit works through the good news of Jesus. That good news is found in the waters of baptism. Your baptism was not your commitment to Christ, but Christ's promise to you. For some of you the Holy Spirit called you when your parents brought you to the font when you were a little baby. There Jesus found you in the waters of baptism and saved you through its waters. There he planted in your heart the seed of faith. There he washed away your sins.

Maybe for some of you the Holy Spirit called you through the gospel in the Word later on in your life. Perhaps you had a friend or a spouse who wouldn't stop inviting you to come to church with them. And you finally gave in and there at church you heard the story about the father's love for his son – a son who disowned his father and asked for his inheritance. Then he went away to a distant country and squandered his inheritance on wild living. But when he came back home, the father loved him anyway and forgave him. And the Holy Spirit convinced you, “That's me! That's my Heavenly Father's love for me... in spite of who I am, he sent his Son to save me.”

Paul continues... **“The Holy Spirit called you through the gospel so that you might share in glory of Jesus.”** Can you imagine if Natalie Coughlin or Michael Phelps - American Olympic swimmers - after an event, won the gold medal. And the individual who took fourth place forced their way to the winners’ podium, jumped up to the gold medalist’s spot and pushed them off? First of all, classless... and secondly, they didn’t deserve it! Paul says that the reason the Holy Spirit called us to faith is that we might share in Jesus’ glory! Jesus accomplished much more than Olympic glory, he won for us eternal glory. He lived a life with no fear of persecution. He always shared the full truth of God’s Word even when it offended people, even when some of his disciples walked away never to return, even when his family told him, “You’re crazy!” Jesus won a righteous life. He pulls up onto the podium with him and adorns us not with a gold medal, but puts the robe of his righteousness over us.

By his victory Jesus promises us a share in his glory. On the last day we will be found by his angels. They will take us out of our graves and bring us to eternal life in heaven, where I will be found with all of you and with Christ my Savior, who found us and saved us.

These are the truths we stand on. These are the teachings we hold on to. For they are life and salvation!

“So then, brothers and sisters,” Paul says, **“stand firm and hold on to the teachings we passed on to you – the truth of God’s Word.”** There is no other message, no other truth that saves for eternity, there are no other means the Holy Spirit uses to strengthen our grip on God’s promises. There is no other way that the Holy Spirit builds a foundation to stand upon, than the good news of Jesus.

When we are tempted to abandon it, when folks are offended by its message, when we are persecuted because of it, when the church doesn’t seem to be growing, we will still stand firm on his promises, we will hold on to these teachings, these promises are... as Paul says... **“the eternal encouragement and good hope.”** Encouragement... good advice that lasts until my dead body hits the grave, yes, I will listen! He gives me hope for eternity! These teachings **strengthen**... this message from Holy Spirit strengthens me when I feel tempted to abandon the truths of Scripture, yes! I will listen!

I will be faithful with my Bible reading at home, with my worship attendance, for myself first, then, I will encourage my brothers and sisters to do so. Then, I will actively seek the unchurched, and tell them, “See what God has done for you!”

And then what will happen to the Church when we stand firm on the truths of Scripture? What will happen to the church when we allow the Holy Spirit to do his work through faithful preaching and teaching of the gospel? Does Jesus promise, “All of Radcliff and Ft Knox will be waiting outside to get into this church!” No, he doesn’t promise that. He does say, “The Holy Spirit will do what he pleases. He will bless when and where he sees fit. But he will always be present and always be working on people’s hearts whenever and wherever the good news of Jesus is taught.” Jesus does promise, “The Church will always stand. There will always be believers on this earth. And the Word of God will never fall. It will endure forever.” Therefore, stand firm. Hold on to the Word of God. Amen.