

Where Can You Find the Church?

- I. **Where the Gospel is proclaimed**
- II. **Where the Sacraments are used**

I don't know if you know this, but our summer assistant from the seminary, Troy Schreiner, has been going door-to-door in our neighborhoods, asking folks what they feel are the needs of this community and how a church might meet those needs. One of the questions that comes up is, "Where is your church?"

"Over there on Wilson Rd, behind the BP gas station."

"Oh, I know where that is."

"But ... we're moving to a new facility in two months. You turn by the McDonald's onto East Lincoln Trail, past the shopping center and the golf range. It's on the left hand side. You should drive by sometime."

Last week we answered the question, "What is the Church?" From Scripture the Holy Spirit taught us that the Church is comprised of all believers who trust in Christ as Savior apart from their good works. Scripture also teaches us that only God knows who the members of his Church are. In 1Samuel 16:7 the LORD says, "Man looks at the outward appearance but the LORD looks at the heart." If we know what the Church is, where can we find it, since only God knows who truly has faith in their hearts? How do we know there are believers in this congregation? Today we will answer that question by looking at all three of the lessons that were read today.

First, I would like to turn to the First Lesson from Isaiah 55. In vs10 the prophet says, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." God's desire and purpose when his Word is proclaimed is to have sinners come to faith in his Son Jesus Christ. And so we know that wherever the Word of God is proclaimed, there we know that the Church is present.

But the whole of God's Word is comprised of two main parts: the law and the gospel. Which Word of God must be proclaimed to guarantee that we will find members of God's Church there? Let's first look at the Law. By the Law we mean God's 10Commandments. We see the 10Commandment posted in yards, billboards, and some courthouses, and that's good, right? But what is the purpose of the law? The Apostle Paul in Romans 7:7 wrote, "I would not have known what coveting was unless the law told me, "Do not covet." The Law makes demands. It tells me what to do and what not to do. By the way, coveting is to have an unholy desire, to want something that I cannot have. Well, which laws are we obligated to obey?

James writes, "Whoever keeps the whole law yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." (2:10) So if I keep all the commandments as best as I can, but only break one little law, then I've broken all the rest? That's what God's Word says. The law points out our sins. The law shows us we aren't perfect, that we've stumbled. But where have I stumbled? We only need to look at one of those commandments. Let's look at the 8th commandment. Have I gossiped, grumbled and complained about brothers and sisters in Christ? Have I spoke in love or do I show resentment? Do I build others up or do I instead tear them down? Am I kind and patient, or do I show frustration? Do I freely forgive, or hold a grudge? Clearly, I have sinned!

Lest I think I haven't sinned, then Law says, "All have sinned, and all have fallen short of God's glory." (Romans 3:23) Like a Major League Baseball pitcher looking to throw a no-hitter, where none of the batters gets a hit... or better yet, a perfect game, where no one from the opposing team reaches 1st base. But no matter how well that pitcher throws, if in the bottom of the 9th inning, one batter is walked or gets a hit, it will ruin his perfect game. God's law is clear. No matter how good we think we are, we have ruined our perfect game. For a pitcher, his only loss is failure to have the recognition of throwing a perfect game. For us who have sinned, who have fallen short of God's perfection, we will die.

So... if this part of the Word of God is preached in a congregation, and that is all that is preached, will we find believers there? No. We will find people who are despairing of their sins. We will find people who know that they desperately need a Savior from those sins. But the Law will not convert anyone to faith. The Law will not bring anyone to Jesus. The Law will not save anyone from death. The Law will not motivate anyone to good works. And that's where the Gospel comes in...

Gospel in the Greek language (New Testament) means *good news*. It is that good news that Isaiah describes from our First Lesson. He describes it as rain and snow. We can see God's powerful hand at work through rain and snow. Four months ago the dogwood trees in my backyard were bare, the day lilies and tulips were nowhere to be seen, and the grass was brown. But then God sent the rains and warmer weather. The dogwoods bloomed with their beautiful white flowers, the day lilies and tulips sprang to life, and the grass is green and requires my weekly attention. "So is my Word that goes out from my mouth," God says. Where the law points out your sin and brings death, the Gospel gives life because it points you to Christ.

Although we haven't thrown a perfect game in life, Jesus came in as the relief pitcher and did not miss the strike out zone on any one of God's commandments. Will you hear gossip, grumbling, complaining or hatred or grudges from Jesus? No. Instead, as you read the stories about Jesus you will find him full of love and forgiveness, patience and kindness; perfect willing obedience to all of God's laws. By that life he earned righteousness. He earned that holiness for you.

That's great news.... for a pitcher in baseball to throw a perfect game! The last pitcher to accomplish this feat was Roy Halladay of the Philadelphia Phillies on May 29, 2010. This was only the 20th perfect game in Major League Baseball history. By my friends, there is only one perfect life and one perfect sacrifice. That is Christ Jesus. If that weren't enough, Jesus stepped in as our substitute and took the full responsibility for the death that our sins deserved. Jesus went willingly to the cross and died in your place. He made the payment for sins.

This is the gospel. As I was telling you what the gospel is, did you hear any demands? Did you hear anywhere that you have to earn this or somehow become worthy enough to have it? No. Because the gospel is good news. It only makes promises. It only gives. The gospel is "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16) He who believes will live... the one who believes in Christ as Savior has righteousness. He who believes has Christ's death and resurrection as their own.

Because the Gospel is like rain and snow. It makes things grow. The Gospel plants the seed of faith and grows faith. It is through the Gospel that God called you and created faith in your heart. Faith receives Jesus' righteousness, his death, his resurrection as your own. Wherever you have people gathered around the Gospel in the Word of God, to grow in it and to go out into their community with it, there you have the Church. As Jesus said in our Gospel this morning from Matthew 18, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

This is how we know there are believers here, because the Gospel is proclaimed. What is the focus of our liturgy? The Gospel. What is the main point of every children's sermon and every sermon preached from this pulpit? The Gospel. What is the main point of every Bible study and devotion? The Gospel. Why do we have an outreach committee? Why did we spend the money and time and effort to hire a seminary student to be with us this summer? Why are we building a new church? So we can reach more people, provide a place for more people to hear the Gospel. Because we know that where the Gospel is, there is God's Church.

But the Gospel is not just found in the spoken and written Word. It is also found where the Sacraments are used. St. Augustine, an early Christian Church father, died in 430 A.D. He defined a Sacrament as a holy act instituted by Christ himself, who used something physical or tangible, and attached blessings and promises to it. Based on that definition we find two sacraments in Scripture: One is Holy Baptism and the other is the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. Let's look at the Second Lesson from this morning, Ephesians 5:25b-27, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing²⁷ her by the washing with water through the word, " and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

What is Paul talking about there? Holy Baptism. He gives the formula for a valid baptism: the application of water on an individual, whether that be sprinkling, pouring or immersing, and attaching to it, the Word of God. That Word of God is Christ's words of commissioning to his disciples before he ascended into heaven, "Go and make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28: 19) The Gospel is found in baptism, because baptism only makes promises. Your Baptism was not a promise you made to God, but a promise God made to you. He promised that in baptism your faith was created. Through faith, in baptism, you received the forgiveness of all your sins; past, present and future. In baptism you were clothed with the righteousness of Christ, like a plush, white robe, covering over all your sins. In baptism God made you his child, and an heir of heaven. Through baptism you have a new life here on earth; a new life that is eager to live for Christ and desires to follow his Law, even the one we spoke about earlier. We will be patient, speak well of others, build each other up, encourage and forgive each other, just as Christ did for you. Where you have folks gathered together around baptism for the forgiveness of sins, there is the Church.

The other Sacrament, which we will celebrate in a few minutes, is the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is all pure Gospel because it only makes promises. Jesus gave his disciples this holy meal on the night he was betrayed and said to them, "Eat this bread and drink this wine, and whenever you do to remember me, there my body and blood will truly be present. You won't be able to see it know when it's there, but it's there, for the forgiveness of your sins. My body and blood will be present to reassure you that you are mine and that you have been saved from death and hell, and you will know that you have eternal life in heaven. Where people are gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper for the forgiveness of sins, there is the Church.

Why is it so important to know this as we move into our new building? The Church is not a building. It is the people, people of God gathering around the Gospel in Word and Sacrament to grow in the Word and to go out into the world with the Word. This is our mission, is it not? Our mission statement says, "It is our mission to seek the unchurch..." with 100s of programs to wow the community? No. By going out with the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. "It is our mission... to strive for spiritual growth." By holding hands and singing *Kumbaya*? No. By gathering together around the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. "It is our mission... to strengthen one another." By giving hugs and pats on the back? No. By going out to the inactive members, and those here, with the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. This is our message. This is our mission... both here and in the new church. Brothers and sisters in Christ, I pray that you never lose sight of this mission, and that the Holy Spirit will make you bold sharers of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Amen.