

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost • August 13, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Romans 10:5-17

“The Church: Congregation of Saints (Augsburg Confession VII, VIII, XV)”

Imagine you're on a boat. What does it look like? How big is it? Are there any other people on the boat with you? Now suppose that you've got someplace to go in that boat. If it's going to be a long way off, would that change anything about the kind of boat you're in, or who you'd want in it with you?

Jesus had sent his disciples off to their boat, heading back over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while he sent home the 5,000-plus people that he had just miraculously fed. The disciples' boat would have been decently sized, enough to carry a dozen-plus men across miles of open water. Even so, they didn't always have easy going. Jesus came to his disciples on the boat. (See Matthew 14:22-33.) He does the same for us today.

People across the centuries have used the image of a boat (or ship) when considering the nature of the Church. Many church sanctuaries were built with that in mind. When you're in one that's got a peaked roof, especially with ceiling that's made from wooden planks, you can look up and imagine you're looking down at the inside of a boat's hull. Maybe it goes back to all that time that the disciples spent with Jesus in and around boats.

The Church – we'll get to just what “Church” means in a moment – is a lot like a boat. The most important thing about any boat is that it's able to get you where you need to go. It's a ship that will see its passengers through their journey. The Church is here to see you through the journey of life, and Jesus is her captain. Following Jesus, the people of the Church will ultimately reach their destination.

But what is the Church? You'll hear that word “church” used in many ways. We refer to the building where we worship as church. We talk about going to church. The church might be the local congregation, like St. John's, or a larger denomination such as The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. In the Creeds, we speak of the holy catholic (meaning “universal”), apostolic Christian Church. That can call get pretty confusing pretty quickly, especially since different Christians might mean something else when they talk about “church.”

Back in 1530, Lutheran Christians needed to articulate just what they meant by “the Church,” especially to show that they weren't looking to start a new thing. Articles VII, VIII, and XV of the Augsburg Confession recognize that the Church (with a capital “C”) is the community or congregation of saints that the Holy Spirit brings together under Christ Jesus. Depending on the time and the place, the Church will not always look the same. Music, liturgy, attire – these can differ between services in a single congregation in our country today, to say nothing about how those compare to the gathering of the Church on another continent, or in another century. But despite differences in such externals, **the essential marks of the one holy Church – that by which it can be identified – are the faithful proclamation of the Gospel and the right administration of God's means of grace.**

The Church is centered in Jesus. It's evangelical. Strip off all the stuff that has been added to that word, and you can understand why. The evangel is the Gospel, the Good News of who Jesus is and what he has done *for you*. This is exactly what St. Paul is writing about in our reading today from Romans 10. The Church bears the ultimate message of good news for a broken and dying world filled with broken and dying people. We saw that brokenness at work again this weekend in Charlottesville. Racism is evil; it's sin, sin that's based in fear and hatred. All people have value in God's eyes, so much so that He gives Himself for all people. You and I are sent as proclaimers, especially to everyone who has not heard the good news that gives real hope: Jesus is the risen, living Savior for you and for all, period.

But perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself here. If you read that the title of this sermon was “The Church: Congregation of Saints,” you might be wondering what that's all about. You might not think yourself worthy of being called a “saint.” Or maybe you do. Either way, it's a problem. If a saint is a holy person, then every one of us falls short. You're not perfect; I'm not, either. We're sinners standing before a holy God. None of us could look to Him and honestly say, “I have never done anything to offend You or my neighbor.” You and I need rescue. That's why Jesus comes to us all through this boat that is his Church.

The Holy Spirit brings us aboard and makes us saints – holy people – not because of how great we are but because of the greatness of God's love. Each of us is, as the reformers said, simultaneously sinner and saint, broken and redeemed. None of us is perfect, yet God has declared you and me perfect in His sight be

rendering judgment of Jesus, the captain of our ship. It's been said that the Church is not a museum of saints but a hospital for sinners – and some would even say it's a morgue – but ultimately, the Church is the place for resurrection and new life. As Paul reminds us, Easter underlies our understanding of Jesus' death for us as *good* news. (Romans 10:9) We get a new beginning through God's love in Jesus and the gifts of grace that He gives.

That's the second part of what the Augsburg Confession points us to in seeing where the Church is at work: look for the Sacraments to be rightly administered as Jesus gives them. Baptism brings us into the family of faith that is the Church because it is God's work, not ours. Only God can give life to the dead. And in the same way, our risen Lord Jesus is present with his body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine to bring renewed life to all people under his care. Those gifts are not dependent on the character of the person administering them; the faith that God gives enables us to receive what He promises, regardless.

As the community, or congregation, of saints, the Church both connects and nurtures. Think again of the Church as a boat or a ship. We're moving together through a world that is continually caught up in storms of chaos and evil. People are drowning, and Jesus, our captain, is leading his Church on a rescue mission. Jesus comes near to people through his Church – through you! We've got an unlimited supply of life preservers to throw out to the drowning: the proclamation of the gospel that goes out to connect people to Jesus. The Church isn't a massive membership drive, though. Once rescued and brought aboard, people like you and me are nurtured by the Holy Spirit in the Church. He builds us up and discipulates us, making us more and more like Jesus, our captain.

Scripture also speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ. As a community, we're connected to Jesus: there's no such thing as an "independent Christian." Do not neglect the fellowship that is part of being a congregation. Come regularly to the services of the Lord's house to hear the gospel proclaimed for you and receive the Sacraments given for you. Do not disregard your community of faith, either. Look around at the people the God has made part of the body of Christ in this time and place – they're not supposed to be people you just see once a week for an hour or two when you sit in the pews together. Learn their names and their stories. Care for each other. In an era where "likes" and "favorites" are the currency of value, share with each other the value that you have in Christ.

As the congregation of saints, you are the body of Christ in the world. In the life of the Church, we pastors get the opportunity to go and visit people in the hospital at times of childbirth or illness, seeing people who are homebound or in distress, or even just meeting with them just to catch up. But those opportunities aren't restricted to pastors. They're there for you, too, as opportunities to be the Church for each other. Looking back to what Paul writes in verse 15, how beautiful are your feet when you bring the good news of God's grace! Going forward, consider how you should think about your relationship to fellow Christians who live under the Gospel and receive God's gifts in the Sacraments. Live out that response in thanksgiving for the community of which God has made you a part.

Even as you depart this church service and this church building, you are the Church. You are the congregation of saints. Hearing the Good News, share it with everyone in need. Tell of Jesus, who he is and what he has done, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (v13)

Amen.