

Rev. Dan Welch Pentecost 11 8-25-19 Text- Isaiah 66:18-23

This is it! Can you believe it? A brand new school year is about to begin! Today we'll have the blessing of the backpacks. Next weekend is Labor Day and then just like that summer will be over. If the old saying is true: "Time flies when you're having fun", then I must really have had a blast this summer, because time has just zoomed by at the speed of light! From getting to take part in the National Youth Gathering, Vacation Bible School, Lutheran Night at the Twins game, plus lot more both at church & with family, I was kept very busy this summer!

All year long, Sunday after Sunday, whether time is flying by or just crawling along, God calls us to gather right here as a family of believers so that we can worship Him and receive His great blessings of forgiveness and life through Word and Sacraments. At First Lutheran we are a family, a congregation that has a place in **this** neighborhood, in **our** town. And we're also a part of something bigger, much bigger than what we experience on the local level. We are part of a 2 million member church body called the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod which is made up of over 6,000 congregations like ours and has over 800 Elementary Christian Day Schools like ours. Together we share a common confession of faith in which we believe that we are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, as revealed to us in Scripture alone.

And of course we are also part of God's **entire** Christian Church on Earth currently made up of over 2.3 billion people all around the globe. What's even more amazing to think of is that we're also connected with **all** the believers throughout history who have gone before us and are at rest with the Lord in paradise!

It's easy for us to forget about these things sometimes. Just like it's easy in the midst of our day-to-day routine to become complacent, maybe even bored, taking for granted the power and purpose of being God's people gathered around His Word. But the prophet, Isaiah opens our eyes to how remarkable and awesome God's work through the church truly is. This morning, through His Word, we see that as God gathers His people, He transforms them into an instrument, His means, of declaring His glory to all nations.

At the end of our Gospel lesson Jesus says that "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God" (v. 29). What a wonderful sight that will be on the last day! And yet **this** very day God has drawn us to the feast of His life-giving Word

right here in this Sanctuary, from the east, from the west, from the north, and from the south.

Some of us arrive here from the East or West traveling on Highway 212 or from the Northwest on County Road 22. Some of us come in from the North via County Road 2 or Falcon Avenue. Coming from the South maybe you take County Road 2. But if you are coming anywhere from the South you always hope you don't get blocked by the train! Some of us live right here in Glencoe so we don't have to drive quite so far. Still, from whatever direction and from what distance, God gathers us as His people from all over town and the greater area.

And if we have come from all these locations, just picture all the places around the **world** from which God gathers people to Himself; all the different countries with all the diverse languages and cultural backgrounds. Yes, God gathers people who are very different from one another. And this is actually much more amazing than us arriving here from different locations. In His Christian church on Earth, God gathers people of all ages, walks of life, and ethnicities. In this Christian Church there are blue collar workers and white collar workers, farm workers and town workers, retired workers and just plain tired workers; people with different gifts, talents, and abilities, different family situations and life experiences. Best of all, though, God gathers to Himself even, and **especially**, sinners. Yes, even more remarkable than God's ability to bring together those who are different, is His willingness to bring together those who hold something in common: sin.

Sin is something that's in everyone's nature. In Psalm 51:5, David confesses on behalf of all of us, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." And in Romans chapter 5 (v. 12), St. Paul reminds us that sin first entered the world through one man, Adam, and in this way death came to all people because **all** have sinned.

Our experience bears this out. God's commandments are broken every day by the things that we think, say, and do that against God's holy Law. Take the 8th commandment for example: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." What does this mean? According to the Small Catechism it means this: "We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way." In other words we need to ask ourselves, are we always speaking the truth about others, including our fellow Christians whom God has gathered here? Are we doing

whatever it takes to defend their reputation rather than saying something that will make them look bad?

Or how about the 1st commandment: “You shall have no other gods.” Do we truly “fear, love, and trust in God above all things” as the Catechism instructs us? So often, instead, we place our trust in our own abilities rather than in God who promises to provide us with what we need and to always work things out for our good. That too is part of our nature as sinful people. And eventually, we all know how true those words are: “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 3:23).

But that doesn't have to be the end of the story. Because when we allow, and do not resist Him, God transforms us by His Word. He changes us. He brings us to truly repent of our sin and renews us with His forgiveness! So through faith in His Son, Jesus, we sinners stand in God's presence even **now** clothed in the forgiveness, righteousness, holiness, and purity that He gives to us. Through faith in Jesus, one day you will see God face-to-face in heaven.

Jesus secured all this for you on the cross, the place where God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). By grace through faith in Christ alone you are forgiven of all of your sins! You are free! Free from sin and free to share this great Good News with others who so desperately need to hear it.

Through the Means of Grace, the Lord's Supper, Holy Baptism, and through God's powerful Word we receive the forgiveness of sin Jesus died and rose again to win for us. God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight (Eph. 1:4). In the means of grace God is at work now **making** us holy and **keeping** us holy and blameless in His sight as the righteousness of Christ continues to cover over our sins and impurities

In 1 Corinthians 12, St. Paul talks about how God is at work through the Body of Christ, the Church, as the Church is gathered together. Every member of Christ's Church has an important part to contribute. God has given us each unique gifts and abilities that He wants us to use for the benefit of others, to serve others.

And this happens in so many ways here at First. Through board, council, committee members, and staff who conduct the business that needs to be done. Through teachers in our Christian Day School, for whom we are particularly grateful as we begin a new school year. Also, our Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, Catechism classes and Bible studies who share the Good News of Jesus with all who will hear. Through Youth Group, LWML, Altar Guild, Choir, Hand-bells, and through so many who volunteer their time, talents, and treasures, in

so many different and meaningful ways, God is at work building up and expanding His kingdom!

There's so many opportunities we have to work together to share the Good News of Jesus, and yet ultimately it is God's Holy Spirit working through His Word that does the most important work- that of creating faith in people's hearts. We are members of His body that He works through to do that very work.

This Good News of Jesus and all the work we do is not just for us. By no means! God sends us out of this place of worship into the world with His Word to bring people His comfort and invite those who have no church home or have wandered away from their church home to come and receive the great blessings that God offers to everyone through His Word. As God said in verse 18 of our text from Isaiah, His plan is to gather to Himself a people from *all* nations and tongues, from every corner of the earth to come and see His glory. You and I are part of that mission!

The Church is God's instrument, set in the world and sent out into the world to declare His glory to all nations so that everyone will come to know the Good News of God's love in Jesus and to find forgiveness of sin and eternal life in Him alone. On a global scale, the Church *is* taking the Gospel to every tribe and tongue. It's done through the work of missionaries and through Bible translators who put the Bible into a language that people can understand.

Here at First Lutheran, we can participate in God's mission too, in several ways: For starters, on our offering envelopes each week we can designate a portion of our giving to go toward missions at the District level or to the Angel Seeds Group for that particular Quarter, or we can bring in donations to the Community Food Shelf and more. Not to be understated also, is the power of our prayers on behalf of others.

And then each week after we have received God's Word and worshiped Him with our prayers and offerings, as we go our way back into our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and homes whether it be to the North, South, East, or West, we go out as forgiven and Spirit-filled children of God. We've been gathered to His Word and now we go with His Word to the world. The Lord has set us free from sin to declare His glory and to give us peace of mind knowing that one day, by His grace, we will join with countless other believers from all times and places in worshipping Him face-to-face and enjoying the everlasting paradise of heaven. Amen!