

I Believe in the Holy Spirit, Who Gathers a Holy Church

I believe in the Holy Spirit, who gathers a holy church. “Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors, and see all the people.” Throughout this sermon there are two points that I’d like to repeat. First, an observation: the church is people. Second, a question: do you love the church?

I’ll tell you who does love the church. From our first lesson, Ephesians 5 – **“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy.”** This refers to when Jesus died on the cross, gave up his life, gave himself up, to transfer the guilt of the church onto himself, and to transfer his holiness onto the church, so that now the church is holy. **“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.”** This is baptism, when Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to personalize that forgiveness of sins for you. **“And to present her to himself as a radiant church.”** Here, think about a wedding, when a bride presents herself to her husband as a beautiful bride. **“Without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish.”** Now the church is without sin and beautiful in God’s eyes. So in this short passage, there are a lot of ways that show how Christ loves the church. And remember, the church is people. And Christ loves his people – people who live in every corner of world, people who have lived in every century of world. This is church, the Holy Christian Church, which we confess in the Creed when we say, “I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints.” We believe that there’s a community of people out there that believes in Jesus. Our lesson for today puts it this way: **“Together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours.”** You can sense this reality that there are other Christians out there, people you’ve never met, people you may never meet; but they believe in Jesus and love Jesus, just like you. This is the church! And the church is people. Christ loves the church. Do you love the church?

You want to know who else loves the church? The Apostle Paul loves the church. Our lesson for today is basically the beginning of a letter that Paul wrote to a church. **“Paul”** (he’s the author), **“called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes”** (he was with Paul), **“to the church of God”** (there’s that phrase!) **“in Corinth”** (that’s the city where the church was), **“to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people.”** The church is people. Here, the church was in one city, a local congregation in Corinth. Sometimes congregations can be messy. The church in Corinth had a lot of problems. They had legal issues; they had sexual misconduct; they messed up Holy Communion; they didn’t respect their pastor. At the heart of it, they just weren’t very loving to each other. Remember that great “Love Chapter” of the Bible, the one that says, **“Love is patient, love is kind... And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love”** (1 Cor 13)? That was written to the Corinthians, because they just weren’t very loving to each other. And they probably were pretty hard to love. And yet this was the church, and Paul loved church, and Paul knew that the church is people. So Paul loved the Christians in Corinth, despite their flaws and their lovelessness. Paul loved the church. What about you? Do you love the church?

I believe in the Holy Spirit, who gathers a holy church. And today we’re not talking about a building with a steeple and doors. We’re talking about people, Christian people, whether they are spread out all over the world in the Holy Christian Church, or they are together in a local congregation, like ours here at St. John’s. Either way, the Holy Spirit uses the means of grace (remember the pipe from two weeks ago?), the gospel in word and sacrament, to gather that church. And so I ask you, do you love the church? Do you love the Holy Christian Church? So you love the fact that when you sing these hymns and chant this liturgy, when you worship and pray to Jesus, there are people out there right now who are doing same thing you’re doing, worshiping in the same way, praying to the same Savior? They’re in the Holy Christian Church; you will see them someday in heaven! Do you love that church?

If you do, then how can you bring others into this church? How can you share the gospel? For some people, it’s easy to talk to others, to invite them to church, to have a conversation with them about Christ. If that’s you, then

do it! Or maybe for you sharing gospel means leading by example, letting everyone see that you are a Christian by what you say and what you do (or by what you don't say and what you don't do). Or maybe for you sharing the gospel means spending some solid time in prayer for our missionaries. Or maybe it means pitching in to help with some mission project. If that's you, then do it! Do it out of love for Christ and love for the church. The church is people. Do you love the church?

What about the local congregation? Do you love this church? Do you love St. John's? Do you love the people seated around you, the people whose names are written in this St. John's membership directory, the people you pray with and take Holy Communion with? Do you love what we stand for as a congregation, the mission we work to accomplish? Do you love St. John's? Do you love the fact that for over 150 years, the pure, Reformation gospel has been our bedrock, that gospel that for years had been buried under heresy but was rediscovered by our Lutheran forefathers, that message of forgiveness of sins by grace alone, through faith alone, revealed in Scripture alone? And do you love that to this day we still have this goldmine of God's grace? Do you love that? Do you love this church?

If do, then how can you serve others in this church? I know, sometimes congregations can be messy. The church in Corinth had their problems; sometimes we have problems, too. And I think that the problems that arise in congregations, whether in Corinth or Burlington or anywhere, all come from the same root cause – a lack of, or at least a dwindling of, love for the people. And remember, the church is people. So if you love St. John's, if you love the people in this congregation, then how can you serve them in love? Opportunities for service abound. We need more ushers. We need more greeters. We need more Sunday School teachers. We need more lay leadership; right now our congregation has neither a president nor a vice-president, and less than 10% of our voters come to the voters meetings. We need more musicians, more people to sing in the choir, more people to play the bells. We need more helpers in the school, to serve lunches and be classroom parents and help at recess and in the library. We need more volunteerism in general, and not arm-twisted volunteerism, but actions that come from a heart of love, love for Christ and love for the church. Love for the church means volunteering your time in love. It means donating your tithes and giving your offerings in love. It means reaching out in love to the members of our church that don't come to church very often. It means, well, every person here is different, and we all show our love in different ways. But if you love the church, then put that love into action, out of love for Jesus and in love for his people. Remember, the church is people. Do you love the church?

If you don't, or if you do but you sometimes find it hard to love the church, (remember, I said at the beginning that the Corinthians were probably pretty hard to love), then remember this: Christ loves church. And the church is people. The church is you! And sometimes you're pretty hard to love, because of your sin and your lovelessness. And Jesus could have given up on you. But instead Christ loved you enough to die for you to bring you together into his church. He gives you a place in his Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints by working faith in your heart. And he gives you a place in this local congregation where your faith can blossom and flourish. What we have here at St. John's is a community of Christians, who share sin, who share sorrow, and who share a Savior. That's what binds us together as the church, as **“those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord and ours.”**

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1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ²To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: ³Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.