

...NITY XIV

Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee
September 3, 1972

"WHO CARES?"

"Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?
Was no one found to return and give praise to
God except this foreigner? (Luke 17:17-18)

Ten smelly, ulcerated bodies stood fifty
yards from Jesus. They agonized to be healed.
They were human beings. Jesus healed them.
And one returned to say 'thanks.'

But on September 3rd of 1972, WHO CARES whether
one or all ten returned to thank Jesus? Let's
be honest. You don't and neither do I, UNLESS
we also know what it feels like to be TAKEN
FOR GRANTED.

God through his son Jesus had a 10% response
of thanks for His gift of healing. And God
has often had to settle for a 10% response of
thanks -- OR LESS. That's not much of a rating
on either the Harris or the Gallup poles. And
yet God does not drop out of creation. He
continues to feed us both physically and
spiritually.

Imagine yourself in the same position. When
we get only a 10% response of thanks for our
efforts, we often give up. Drop out. Quit.
We say, WHO CARES? and then punch out!

And since we are not gods, it is quite
natural that we want to quit. Because NO ONE,
likes to BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED. Human efforts,
to say nothing of God's efforts, lose their
SIGNIFICANCE and VALUE when taken for granted.

I remember well the story of a hospital
custodian told by a chaplain friend. The man
had worked for forty years as hospital
custodian. He worked from 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.
He was responsible for cleaning and polishing

the main reception area. Due to his "graveyard" shift, few people ever realized how much care he put into those floors. But at 6:30 a.m. for forty years the floors of the reception area dazzled.

And for forty years at 6:45 a.m., the first shift people arrived, trudging over those dazzling floors. In came dust, water, snow and even mud, but NEVER a word of recognition for the custodian.

In his forty-first year at the hospital, the custodian was found in his little apartment with a bullet through his head.

TAKING SOMEONE FOR GRANTED CAN BE SINFULLY DESTRUCTIVE. And yet God continues to love us with only a 10% response of thanks.

This past week, another member and I surveyed Redeemer's membership regarding responses of thanks. We are thankfully above the 10% level. But even at that SOME 175 families who have committed themselves to OUR MINISTRY have NOT worshipped during 1972 (or for several years).

I would like to believe that they are not taking God for granted. I would ALSO like to believe that they are not taking you and me for granted. For we are ALL the Body of Christ, and only as strong as our weakest member -- and NONE of these are shut-in or incapacitated in any way.

God's love for the world can only be hindered if 175 of his families are taking his GIFTS for granted. For that reason our Evangelism Committee is asking Jesus' question: WHERE ARE THE ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-FIVE (families)?

We are grateful today for the willingness of 35 of our members who will help us to answer

that question through their personal calls in the month of September.

But we dare not point fingers at ONLY those not responding to God's gifts through church attendance. We all have taken God and others for granted. We all have received gifts from God, whether healing or feeding or leading or caring gifts -- and we have all TOO OFTEN walked away forgetting to say "thanks." In so doing we have intensified the attitude of WHO CARES?

That attitude might well be the greatest evil of our day.

Look at the family, for instance. Each member is so busy doing HIS thing, that there's virtually little time to be aware of what the other is doing. And so each carries on with little or no appreciation from the others. And parents, couples, and children end up asking the same question: WHO CARES?

Our national structure gives us the same feeling. We really wonder if our tax dollars are appreciated when they are wasted in bureaucratic programs and continued warfare. And so we ask: WHO CARES? And when we are benefited through our government, we too often fail to say thanks. And so, WHO CARES?

Similarly, I'm too often reminded of our WHO CARES world when I do grocery or regular shopping. With the monetary transaction completed, I'm bid farewell with some innocuous slogan as the sales clerk registers the next person's order. And I leave saying: WHO CARES?

But as Christians we can transcend this WHO CARES attitude. For God has called us to a new awareness of him and each other. We know that we can transcend the WHO CARES attitude, because we have witnessed it through Jesus Christ.

We have seen in Jesus a man whose thankfulness to God made him equally thankful of his fellow-men. We know he was thankful for his fellow-men because he was forever AWARE of their needs. He was that man who knew that EVERY OTHER PERSON had to feel wanted and appreciated, regardless of that person's contribution to life.

It was for this reason that Jesus could not by-pass ten lepers. They were human beings who had to feel wanted and appreciated. And they could better gain this feeling through his power to heal and cleanse them. And Jesus healed them, even when he knew he might not be thanked for it.

We have come here also having to feel wanted and appreciated, regardless of our uncleanness in the past. For we have all had our own type of leprosy. It may have been immorality - or impurity - or idolatry - or jealousy -- or strife, anger, selfishness or envy. And it surely has been flavored with its share of ingratitude.

But we have had our time for confession. And now we have an opportunity to give thanks to God and one another at His altar. We need not take his GIFTS for granted -- he has instituted through his Son the Sacrament of Holy Communion. That is our Christian Sacrament of Thanksgiving.

And we in the Lutheran Church in America do practice open communion, because we believe that everyone who believes in the real presence of Christ in this Sacrament SHOULD RECEIVE ITS GIFT OF CLEANSING. We have no right TO BAR anyone from this altar who comes to receive the gift of Jesus Christ.

But we do have one hope for ALL as we leave Christ's table. And that hope is that we will share what we have received.

God does care for each of us.. He makes that known to us through His son and in this Sacrament.

But this Sacrament of Thanksgiving must penetrate our homes, and offices, and industrial plants, and shopping centers. It must be lived beyond the table of the Lord.

Because in that way, ALL PEOPLE will come to know that they are NOT TAKEN FOR GRANTED. They will come to know that GOD CARES through his people. Yes, we will all come to know that we are wanted, needed, and appreciated -- by God and each other.

And when we have come to know this -- we will have come to know THAT OUR FAITH HAS MADE ALL THINGS WELL.

AMEN.

Redeemer Lutheran - Milwaukee
September 23, 1973

"TO BE THANKFUL, OR NOT TO BE--
THAT IS THE QUESTION"

"Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?
Was no one found to return and give praise to
God except this foreigner?" (Luke 17:17-18)

During my intern chaplaincy at Lutheran
Hospital, I had the privilege of working
closely with many nursing students. The senior
class at that time had asked me to serve as
a sort of chaplain advisor. The position
required that I attend class meetings upon
invitation.

The situation afforded me a more personal
relationship with many of the students. This
of course meant that several students more
willingly shared discussion over coffee as well
as worship in chapel.

After a chapel service, one of the students
had expressed her appreciation to me. She was
not one of God's perfect little church-goers.
In fact, she had admitted that she had become
a foreigner to church worship. I don't know
how much these facts influenced my response,
but after her statement of appreciation, I
simply said: "Oh, it wasn't anything."

I'll never forget how she stopped in her
tracks, turned to me looking directly into my
eyes, and said: "Can't you just say, 'thank you,'
or don't you think I was sincere in my expression
of appreciation."

I've tried not to forget that moment. God
was using a somewhat uncommitted child of his ^{to}
REAWAKEN me to a position of gratitude. What
an incredibly down-to-earth God we have. Instead
of playing heroic games, his strategy is so
often ^{to us} the unspectacular. He so often uses the

least of his children to accomplish his greatest purposes.

Isn't that exactly the circumstance of our gospel story for this day. Ten lepers are cleansed. One returns to give thanks. And THAT ONE is NOT a super-believer -- he is NOT a Christian hero -- he is a Samaritan. Very likely, he was a non-believer -- one of the less than holy people of his day.

How often God places ^{the} least likely candidate into his redemptive spotlight. In last week's gospel, God again revealed his mercy through a Samaritan. The priest and the Levite--the devout representatives of the religious community--pass by an obvious human need. Again, it was through a simple Samaritan woman that Jesus won many followers (as evidenced in the Gospel of John).

The UNLIKELY--

Yes, God uses ^{the} lame, the diseased, those who ~~seem~~ hopelessly strangled in sin -- he takes these persons, heals and changes them, and thereby reveals his infinite love for us. And so it is-- A Samaritan leper, NOT THE JEWISH LEPERS, is the one who returns to give thanks.

It should be obvious which group we are identified with. And if you're like me, I don't like being categorized with the other nine. How can God possibly compare us to the ungrateful ones? Doesn't our presence here indicate our desire to give him thanks and praise?

Yes, our presence here surely indicates our desire to be thankful. But God realizes, and so do we, that thankfulness is MORE than a one hour response. And God knows, and so do we, that we are not vaccinated against human weakness -- esp. the human weakness of ingratitude. And God knows, and so do we, that *we* ^{following}

are INCAPABLE of perfect gratitude. Yes, God knows, and so do we, that we need to be CONTINUALLY reminded TO BE THANKFUL for his abundant graciousness.

So to make that reminder graphically clear, God contrasts a Samaritan's thankfulness to several believers' LACK OF THANKFULNESS. God uses the UNLIKELY to portray what he HOPES FOR from the most likely.

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We are God's people. It is God's hope then THAT WE WOULD BE THE MOST LIKELY to personify a spirit of thankfulness for life and in life. How do we measure up to his expectations?

As a congregation, we surely respond thankfully in our giving to the work of his church. Although we are showing a small deficit now, our leadership believes we can overcome it. Our history is one which confirms this fact.

As a congregation, we similarly respond thankfully in our volunteer service to the work of the church. More than 30% of our active members regularly volunteer time and talent beyond physical presence in worship. We pray that such giving and serving will continue to characterize Redeemer's ministry.

But we must also assess our spirit of thankfulness in our personal lives beyond this worshipping community. For instance, God's grace is present for us in the gift of nature.

How are we responding to this gift of God's grace these days? I think God is telling us something in regard to his gracious gift of energy. Is he telling us that there may be a shortage? Let us just assume that this is his message for the coming winter.

How will we exhibit our spirit of thankfulness?

Is there a need for a different spirit in our energy gratitude? As God's people, he hopes that we will give serious attention to this question -- because it is a question which relates to our thankfulness toward the grace of his creation.

And then there's God's grace in the family. ^{we have challenges}
What is our spirit of thankfulness to his gift here? The secular order is telling us today that families are crumbling under competitive pressures. Few of us have to be told this. For many of us have experienced the claims upon our lives that tear at the roots of our relationships.

And, ^{yet} amidst it all, we continue to hear God's voice. ^{the claim of} And he says, "My child, my gracious presence CAN still be experienced in the love of a family. Let my example in Christ be the source and the inspiration for your relationships."

How can we exhibit our spirit of thankfulness to God's gracious family gift? Is there a need for a different spirit in our family gratitude? In our gratitude for parents? In our gratitude for children? In our gratitude for each other? We are God's people. God places his hope in us - because he hopes that we would be most likely to give serious attention TO HIS GRACIOUS GIFTS.

SUFFICE it to say that all that we have is a gracious gift from God. He does not withhold any of ^{his} gifts because of our lack of gratitude. In fact, he gave us his greatest gift because of our inability to appreciate his grace - that gift being his son.

When it would have been LIKELY for God to condemn us -- he offered us the unlikely, his forgiving love. When it would have been LIKELY FOR him to withdraw himself from us, he gave us the unlikely -- he became a man, not a great heroic man, just a simple carpenter.

And when it would have been LIKELY for this man to condemn, he did the UNLIKELY - he ~~condemned~~ ~~why?~~ ~~because~~ ~~this~~ ~~is~~ ~~the~~ ~~gracious~~ ~~example~~ of a God whose graciousness ~~is~~ not contingent upon man's thankfulness.

Does that mean then that God gives us license to be a thankless people? BY NO MEANS! But it does mean that God CAN and WILL forgive our ingratitude. He does this because he knows of our human weaknesses.

And ~~since~~ ~~we~~ ~~have~~ ~~experienced~~ ~~his~~ ~~forgiving~~ ~~grace~~, ~~as~~ ~~a~~ ~~result~~ of our human weakness, WE CAN do the same for each other. Even though we might be more likely ~~for~~ ~~us~~ ~~to~~ ~~condemn~~ another's human weakness, we know through Christ we can do the UNLIKELY - we can ~~be~~ ~~so~~ ~~graciously~~ ~~forgive~~.

But God's graciousness even means more! Because he forgives our ingratitude, we are free to change. That is, he has enabled us to grow in gratefulness.

Just ~~think~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~relationship~~ between a parent and child, and growth in gratefulness becomes evident. A parent's love is not ultimately based upon the child's gratitude. A truly loving parent will forgive and love a child even when the child forgets to say thankyou.

And because of the parent's gracious example, the child soon learns to grow in graciousness. The child soon learns to love and forgive even under the conditions of ingratitude.

To be thankful, or not to be--that is the question. But we know the answer. Because God has even used ~~the~~ UNLIKELY to remind us. He shows us the thankfulness of a foreigner to his grace.

None of us is a foreigner to his grace. But we all need to be continually reminded of the

response that he hopes for from each of us.

And that response is
to offer thanks to him for his graciousness--
and to offer the same to each other for
the love he enables us to share -- this is
our response to his gifts that will enable us
to rise and go our way - KNOWING THAT OUR
FAITH HAS MADE US COMPLETELY WELL.

AMEN.

PRAYER - Trinity XIV

Heavenly Father, your hand has touched our
dust and given us life.

You gave the sense of sight to see flowers
and friends -
 to see the sunlight of this day.
You gave the sense of sound to hear whispers
and wind -
 to hear your Word of this day.
You gave the sense of touch to feel hot and cold
to feel the embrace of another.
You gave the senses of taste and smell -
 the common senses of sympathy and
 compassion;
 the emotional sense of being loved
 and loving.

Awaken us, O Lord,
to the wonders of the world around us,
to the sights and sounds of nature,
to the presence of those who surround us,
to the mysteries of life that we cannot
 comprehend,
to the simple joys that we can experience.

Then, O Lord, we can become thankful
that we are alive,
that we can see,
that we can hear,
that we can experience,
that we can think,
that we can remember,
that we can be loved,
that we can love,
that we can wonder,
that we can explore,
that we can praise.

We remember with thanksgiving those who have
gone before us, O Lord,
May we who yet live be blessed with your peace
and eternal direction as we continue
to proclaim your way.

PENTECOST XIV

Church of the Master - Troy
September 8, 1974 (Troy Daze Parade)

"JOIN THE 'IN CROWD'"

"Someone asked Jesus, 'Sir, are only a few saved?' His answer was: 'Struggle to get in through the narrow door; for I tell you that many will try to enter and not be able.'" *LK 13:23*

From birth to death WE STRUGGLE to join the "IN CROWD." We struggle to get through doors that will lead to bigger and better things. Doors of prestige - doors of status - doors of success-- doors that will announce to the rest of the world - "WE'VE NOW MADE IT - WE'VE ARRIVED." We're now a part of the in-crowd.

This process is life-long. The baby that sleeps through the night her second week of life or who never is fussy soon is described as the dream child. Her healthy, wholesome, and always cheerful disposition soon makes her an "in-crowd" baby. Her parents will never have trouble finding a baby sitter.

In childhood - he who has more toys than anyone else on the block -- or he who uses big words at six and reads at the fourth grade level -- or he who plays on the little league team -- these standards among others give this little tiger in-crowd status.

And then there's ^{AGONIZING} ~~tremendous~~ adolescence -- that's the acid test of in-crowd struggle. The self-perpetuating standards almost reach the savior level. He/she must be liked by everyone -- must be able to charm the opposite sex without being obnoxious -- must be a near perfect physical knock-out -- must absolutely conform to the latest in grooming & styles -- and then to top this, he/she must stay on the top of the academic heap but not turn into a square. Talk about the 10 Commandments being tough to fulfill -- teen-age in-crowd criteria are some of the toughest.

And then those great years -- sometimes described as the 3M phase of life.... middle years, middle class, and middle bulge. The struggle here turns to security -- or what T.V. has called: Dialing for Dollars. Here our standards are somewhat like a ~~shopping list~~ - *good recipe*.

1 - split level
2 - autos, one large & one small
1 - averaged sized lake home
1- camper/ or substitute boat
 $\frac{1}{2}$ doz. insurance policies
a few bikes
several savings accounts
a few large degrees
a dash or two of vocational mobility
and a sizable sprinkling of status in the community.

So goes a possible recipe for being in the middle in-crowd.

And finally - death. Even death has its door for the "in crowd." Its requirements may include a tedious battle to keep a good front, which translated means - don't let anybody know that you're hurting. Other standards may include an expensive casket which is soon buried never to be viewed again. Yes, even in death we must do the culturally acceptable thing so that we can remain a part of the in-crowd.

(Pause)

How should we feel about this everyday struggle of ours to stay in the graces of the in-crowd? By and large, I think we must affirm this struggle as a necessary ingredient of social existence. In other words, there is nothing wrong with the personal rewards that come with the fruits of our labor. We all need to feel that our efforts in life have proved to be of some merit in the eyes of our peers.

That does not mean that we wildly condone extravagance. We all know that some "in-crowd" standards force us to conform to senseless waste

and pollution . . . both emotional and physical pollution. Our throw-away mentality, from diapers to death beds (that is, caskets) may yet teach us a painful lesson regarding the ~~abundance~~ ^{limits} of God's creation.

^{necessary} But the White Protestant In-Crowd Ethic -- beyond its extravagant side -- does offer each of us a threshold of temporary security while we're still afloat in life. But for all the needed psychological value of this "in-crowd" struggle, is Jesus talking about "making it" through this door when he says: "Struggle to get through the narrow door. . ." Is Jesus referring to the same social struggle we daily encounter? Obviously not!

As great and commendable as our social "in-crowd" efforts may be -- none of them offers a ticket into the eternal tent. That is not to say that our striving in society is of no value! It has its place. But a higher order concern is in the question: What do you possess of eternal value? What do you have that will out-live the trinkets and trusts of society's in-crowd?

Jesus is asking: How much of an investment have you made in God's kingdom? How much have you struggled to join the incrowd through that door? He says the door is narrow because it need not be wide. It need not be wide because when sharing God's kingdom we don't bring all the world's junk along with us -- it won't fit through the door. The door is narrow so that we will not be tempted to lug along anything but our commitment to the grace of God.

Jesus says, that much we must bring to life and through life -- a commitment to God's lifestyle of love. He says - just sitting at the teacher's feet is not enough -- our response to God must be seen in the way we live.

The door to God's kingdom -- his arena of love-- still stands wide open. It is ours to share now and to possess in the future. God beckons us

At the same time

to commit ourselves to his in-crowd. ~~The~~ world demands that we conform to the standards of its in-crowd.

What shall we do? Which doorway will we enter? Let's be honest - you and I as we sit here have responded to the "in-crowd" of society. We've said "yes" -- we've joined this group. But does that mean that we MUST exclude ourselves from the door to his kingdom? By no means!

In fact, we are called to apply the lifestyle of his kingdom to the "in=crowds" of society. So we must be a part of them - ~~in~~ order that we can share God's dimension of love with them.

When we do this - then the "in-crowds" of society will be worth our time -- because we will be manifesting our discipleship to them. That doesn't mean that we'll be infiltrating cocktail parties talking about Jesus -- it means that we'll be sharing the forgiving love of Christ with even narrow-minded bigots at those cocktail parties.

It means that we will be penetrating those prejudicial and slandering "in-crowds" of society with a purpose -- with God's purpose: Namely, as Paul says: Not to conform to them, but to transform them by the power of God's love.

In so doing - we can live in this world -- we can even be a part of society's in-crowds - and yet still reveal our living discipleship to God's open door. Such a lifestyle can only lead others to the same door. And with such a commitment - we need never fear that the door of God's love will be closed in our face.

"Sir, are only a few to be saved? My friend, don't worry about numbers - just keep struggling to enter the narrow door!

Amen

QUINTECOST XIV
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
Sept. 12, 1976

"LOVE AND MARRIAGE ... A TWO-WAY PROPOSITION"

"Submit yourselves to one another, because of your reverence for Christ." Eph. 5:21

If there is any text that might kindle different fires amidst different people, this section of Ephesians will do it.

The hard-line fundamentalist Christian pounces upon this text as living proof that the whole women's lib thing is a work of the devil. On the other side, some are like Luther with Eph. 5. Luther felt James should be torn out of the Bible. Some today feel that Ephesians 5 should be torn out of this Christian letter.

I don't agree with either of these extremes -- yet I must admit, my initial reaction to the text is "I wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole." But we can't avoid sticky texts just because they present interpretive problems.

Unfortunately, too much energy has been given to Ephesians 5:22-23 with almost everyone skimming over the topic sentence of this whole section - namely, Eph. 5:21. Here is the main thought for the faithful Christian: SUBMIT YOURSELVES TO ONE ANOTHER, because of your reverence for Christ."

That's the message of submission in this text -- and Jesus himself confirms that in his discourse to his disciples. When they were arguing over who was going to be the boss, Jesus said in regard to UN-BELIEVERS: "They love to lord it over one another, but among you it shall not be so."

The message is crystal clear: faithful disciples do not lord it over one another. Faithful husbands and wives DO NOT lord it over one another.

Instead as Paul states -- if we have reverence

for Christ, we will not insist on our own way. If we have reverence for Christ, we will swallow our pride, we will choke our egotism --- yes, we will submit... we will surrender ... we will yield to the other IN REVERENCE FOR CHRIST.

Yes Paul goes on, wives, submit yourselves to your husbands. Is he already contradicting his topic sentence - his main point? Is he saying that the wife is expected to kiss her husband's feet and bow down to his every need and request?? Is Paul saying the wife is the husband's sexual vassal, punching bag, -- his hired girl?? Obviously - the answer is "NO" to all of these.

But ~~Paul~~ ^{did say} ~~that the husband was the head of the household -- and for his Jewish contemporaries, the husband was the head of the family.~~ Now, ~~what~~ specifically did this mean for the wife?? It meant taking his name, and it meant leaving her house and joining his. BUT MUCH MORE IMPORTANTLY, it meant that he- the husband - was to be prized above anything and anyone else.

Because to be prized above anything and anyone else IS TO SHOW REVERENCE FOR CHRIST AND HIS LOVE. Obviously, this does not make the husband a God. He is not to be the ultimate authority. To make the husband the ultimate authority IS TO DISOBEY GOD -- that is a flagrant violation of the 1st Commandment. Both husband and wife are SUBJECT TO THE AUTHORITY OF GOD -- and thereby to submit to one another accordingly.

Yet I must admit, in all honesty to Paul - when he talked about the husband as the head of the household he did give the husband an administrative edge -- the husband was to be the chief administrator. That was no problem in Paul's day -- husbands were around their homes the majority of the time. Today, however, with most husbands gone at least 10 hrs per day -- and often several days in a row -- the chief administrator role has in the majority of homes shifted to the wife. And womens lib had nothing to do with it.

^{major} But - all this is ^{still} secondary to Paul -- his concern is that husbands and wives submit to one another in reverence for Christ.

So I've already established that the wife is to prize her husband above all else. Is that the extent of the Christian model for mature love and marriage?? By no means! Paul goes on -- Now husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it.

Could there be anything MORE SUBMISSIVE than giving up your life for someone else -- for your partner?? How is it that interpreters have always overlooked the words of this verse - "husbands, give up your life for the sake of your wife."

What Paul is stating here goes far beyond a simple sexual love - as necessary and as normal as that is. Paul is directing his male counterparts to GENUINE LOVE - a love that insists that the other person be esteemed, respected, and prized as a person, not an object.

Genunine love, says Paul, operates in precisely the same manner that Christ did when, in loving the church, he gave his life for it. So very clearly Paul admonishes husbands to love with a submissive love.

The model throughout this whole Ephesian text is NOT one of superiority verses inferiority -- rather it is a model of mutual submission TO CHRIST and his way in our human relationships. Paul is using the terms of "submit" and "love" interchangably for husbands and wives.

Consequently, if a marriage is to reverence Christ -- it goes beyond one-way submission or one-way love. From the Christtian perspective, submission and love are the two-way propositions of a "love and marraige that goes together like a horse and carriage."

In other words, in every Christian marriage, one plus one equals three. There is "you." There is "Me." And there is "Us" in Christ. The identity of you and me is obvious. But the identity of "us" is far more subtle.

"Us in Christ" is always the result of

compromise. "Us" is not what you want. "Us" is not what I want. "Us" is what Christ wants for us -- and what WE want for ourselves. "Us" is neither an absolute insistence on having things my way, nor a complete surrender to having things your way. It is, insofar as possible, in everything, having things our way.

For ~~that kind of~~ ^{Christ} love and marriage is built upon a foundation of compromise -- a foundation which sees man and woman for what they really are-- equally sinful, equally imperfect, equally distant from the pure wisdom of God.

Yes - as Paul makes so clear -- in a love and marriage which shows reverence for Christ, there is submission to one another. There is not lording it over one another -- for there is only one Lord who commands that ^{kind of} obedience and respect.

And thanks to his love, we can have near perfect marriages IF WE BUT SUBMIT TO HIM -- and then to each other with his example of love.

Thanks be to Jesus Christ, who was not a husband or wife, but a darn good lover to follow.

AMEN

PENTECOST i4
Lutheran Church of the Master, Troy
September 4, 1977 (Labor Day Weekend)

A NAME TO LIVE UP TO

And Jesus said, 'Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.'
Luke 13:24

When Yogi Berra was a young catcher with the New York Yankees - in one game he hit the ball safely to the corner of right field. And he just shuffled down to first base - although he could have easily dug out a two-bagger. The next batter forced Yogi at second base. Then came a fly ball; followed by a third out. No runs were scored in the inning.

One of his teammates asked Yogi if he were feeling all right. Yogi answered, "Yea, I feel fine." The teammate retorted, "Then why didn't you run out your hit to second base? You could have moved to third on the next play, and then scored on the long fly. IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE A YANKEE, YOU MUST PLAY LIKE ONE.

I'm told that Yogi never forgot that reprimand. As a Yankee - HE HAD A NAME TO LIVE UP TO. That was just a natural part of being on the team - you had a Name to live up to.

I don't know if that spirit exists with the Yankees of any ball club anymore today. But I do know that as a young adult growing up in Wisconsin, that was the way everybody felt about the Packers in the 60's. Under Vince Lombardi, the Packers had made a name for themselves -- and as a Packer or Packer-Backer, you had a name to live up to.

In sports, and all other areas of life, such names don't just happen by chance. The Yankees were great because they worked hard to be great; the same, I'm sure, was true for the Packers, or Vikings, or Lions (when they were in their hay-day).

Obviously, I don't want to get into a sports debate. What I do want to point out is that GREAT NAMES are most often great because people have labored for the cause of that name.

Whether Ford, General Motors, Chrysler, Christ Church Cranbrook, or the U.S. of A., these names have become great names BECAUSE MANY PEOPLE LABORED AND SACRIFICED to make them great. Oh sure, there was probably some luck - some good circumstances involved -- but there was also countless hours of hard labor given.

Likewise, the name Jesus Christ and Christian. This name has not remained A GREAT NAME because of Sunday morning worshippers. It is a great name because of the LABORS AND SACRIFICES OF JESUS CHRIST -- and the labors and sacrifices of Christ-like Christians.

There's more in a Great Name than a Name -- there is always a tradition of hard labor and sacrifice. And its for that reason that Jesus points out in today's text that just claiming the name Christian or eating with Christians MEANS VERY LITTLE IN GOD'S EYES. That's NOT living up to the name CHRISTIAN. That's not faith -- that's fakery. And as our text so clearly points out, the door of the kingdom IS NOT OPEN for people who are conning Christ. There's no room for Christian fakes.

Oh - oh -- somebody at this point is going to say -- Gee, Pastor, it sounds like your preaching that we're saved by our LABORS and SACRIFICES. I thought we believed in salvation by FAITH ALONE - SOLA GRATIA - faith alone.

By all means - we surely do believe that Faith Alone assures us of eternal life. But as hypocritical Lutherans, ~~this~~ means we've ~~often~~ built this big valley between faith and works -- acting as if the two are totally divorced.

Jesus never had any such game plan -- he never viewed his followers as the people in the grandstands -- sitting like sluggish spectators. He said: "You will know them by their fruits" In other words, he was saying - You will know them by the way they play the game.

No doubt about it - I am justified by my faith in Jesus -- but faith in him IS LIFE IN HIM -- and works are the living stuff of that faith. Faith and works CANNOT BE SEPARATED. They are part of the same whole. Once you have faith - you naturally SHOW IT through works.

In the back of the parsonage there's a large cluster of berry vines (at least they produce small berries). The branches and the vines are hardly distinguishable.

So it is with life in Christ. Jesus did not say he was the trunk of the tree. A trunk stands all alone. He called himself the vine. And the vine is completely intertwined with the branches -- you cannot tell where one stops and the other begins.

So it is with faith and works. In faith, we get all mixed up with Jesus. Not detached by ourselves, but interwoven with Him and his people. And because of this participation of the vine and the branches -- the branches naturally BEAR FRUIT. And the vine is their source of life.

To live up to the name of that vine -- we must bear fruit that resembles the vine. Without bearing fruit, we are saying that the vine means NOTHING -- we are saying that IT IS NOTHING TO BE A CHRISTIAN.

Public education is alive and well when it is living up to the three R's -- reading, 'riting, & rithmetic. Christian faith is alive and well when it is living up to the three P's - participation, practice, and production.

Participation in the gospel of Christ -- that's hearing and sharing the Word of God. Practicing the presence of Christ in our relationships. And producing his deeds of love and mercy in the world.

Granted - these labors alone will not save me. But they are surely signs of the faith that God has given me.

For 35 years I have been given MORE THAN A NAME. For 35 years I have come to this altar (or one like it), and I have been given the grace of God -- forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. For 35 years, I have basked in the love and mercy of God.

And tomorrow, or maybe next year, or if I'm lucky, maybe 35 or more years from now -- I will be standing at the door of the kingdom. And as I stand there imperfect and soiled by a lifetime of sins -- I pray

that God will say -- "My son, even in all your sin and imperfection, you have forever sought to live up to the name of your Savior, Jesus Christ. Yours has been a life of labor and sacrifice for his kingdom on earth. Come in - enter in - and enjoy the fruits of the kingdom prepared for you."

AMEN

PENTECOST XIV

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

September 16, 1984

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"GET A PIECE OF THE ROCK!"

"I am the Lord and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God." Exodus 6:6-7

"Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.'... Jesus replied, 'I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'" Matthew 16:16,18-19

On January 9, 1984, a universal figure appeared on the cover of Time magazine. This figure has become somewhat a controversial advocate among his own followers. But his appearance on Time's cover transcended the sentiments of both supporters and antagonists.

Pope John Paul II surfaced on Time's cover in January - but not merely as a popular pope. Because like Peter in today's gospel, he was offering one of his greatest moments -- he was responding to the reality of Jesus Christ in a way which touched the human hunger for God: HE WAS MEETING IN A BLEAK, ROMAN CELL WITH THE MAN WHO HAD ATTEMPTED TO MURDER HIM. He wasn't offering that murderer any papal bull, but instead was giving him the rock of Christ's forgiving grace.

As the Washington Post's columnist, Coleman McCoffey, put it: "Of all of Pope John Paul's many global journeys, the one of a few miles to a Roman prison may be the most remembered -- for it was a journey of forgiveness."

In contrast to what so often happens in Christian circles, in the Pope's visit to that Roman prison there wasn't just another "doctrine" about forgiveness ... or another sermon or bible study or encyclical on forgiveness. Rather, there was a deed -- an action that went beyond mere words ... mere church talk.

The pope simply embraced his enemy, and forgave him. That is the rock of faith, the essence of Jesus Christ. That is the piece of the rock that Jesus Christ calls upon us to claim. That is the rock of faith that we struggle to share in our lives.

Peter confessed that faith in Jesus Christ! "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus commended him for his faithfulness. But just one paragraph later in this same gospel - Jesus is heard rebuking Peter for denying the fact that Christ would suffer and die. Peter truly reflects the typical life of discipleship. At one moment, so faithful ... so "right on," so heroic and devout. But the next moment, so chicken-hearted, so flawed, so compromising. Peter truly reflects our struggle between the success and failure of claiming the ROCK OF FAITH. What a never-ending struggle that can be!

In a former parish, I was making a visit to one of our oldest shut-in members just before Christmas one year. And we had the pleasure during that visit of rejoicing over the most beautiful and special Christmas gift -- one that she would both give and receive.

Her daughter and husband had tragically died many years before. And even more tragic, since her husband's death she had carried on a never-ending feud with her only other child, her son. It was all over a minor grievance of the inheritance (oh, how our greed for money can become the stumbling block of our true foundation of security!). The bitterness, the hurt, the anger that had gone on between mother and son had been absolutely devastating. Over a decade had passed without one word between mother and son ... or son and mother.

But suddenly, the day before I made my pastoral visit, her son had called. And he pled for her forgiveness. And she pled for his in return. And she said to me as she greeted me with tears at the door: "Pastor, this will be the first Christmas that I have really celebrated in many, many years!" A mother and son had finally claimed a piece of the rock.

Jesus said to Peter: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom -- whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven ... whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Those keys are not merely given to the pope, or priests, or pastors. Those keys are yours and mine -- they are the keys to the forgiving grace of God. God entrusts that foundation of his love to us ... that rock of faith!

When we forgive, then we loose the pains and evil of this world; when we don't forgive, then we bind the pains and evil of this world -- we keep the hurtful, the harmful and the hateful LOCKED UP! God has called us to be the servants of his Word and Sacraments. We dare NOT lock up his Word or Sacraments. We dare not deny anyone access to Christ's means of grace! We dare not block anyone from access to the one we confess as Lord and Savior.

As many of you already know, these past two weeks have hardly been without tension for the Martyns. Sue's mother, while traveling on a 12-day tour in Europe, suffered a severe set-back from her emphysema. On Wednesday, 2-1/2 weeks ago, she caught a slight cold. By Thursday evening while traveling from Venice to Florence, Italy by train, an ambulance was needed at the Florence depot to rush her to intensive care. She was comatose and immediately put on a ventilator.

For nearly two weeks she survived on the ventilator amidst a medical clientele that spoke no English. That was just the beginning of a complicated and challenging situation. On the American side, numerous phone calls to embassies, senators, and specialists of all kinds have continued to be made. Sue's sister flew to Florence a week ago. The lines have continued to be hot between Florence and Toledo. But finally last Wednesday, Sue's mother went into "intensive care psychosis." Her pulmonary specialist in St. Paul urged that she be transported to America immediately -- if we hoped to save her life. That meant a private air ambulance -- and thanks to a very generous relative, that was achieved. Finally Friday - it was off to St. Paul for Susan to rendezvous with the air ambulance.

The bottom line for everyone has been frustration, anger and anxiety galore. That even became more real when we learned that her mother had violated essential medical taboos. Under those circumstances -- there were times that we all asked - "Is it all worth it?? Does she really want to be rescued? Can we continue to forgive and forget?" And it's at that moment that the ROCK OF FAITH ANSWERS UNEQUIVOCALLY: "I have given you the keys of the kingdom ... forgive, as you have been forgiven!"

Whether it's a mother, a friend, or a neighbor -- it's under the circumstances of life's failures and frustrations that the gospel is most needed! Those are the moments that the reassuring forgiveness of Christ is most essential. Like never before, Sue's mother needs desperately to see her daughters face to face -- and to know vividly that she is forgiven by her God, by her doctors, and by her family. Like never before, this is the moment that she desperately needs A PIECE OF THE ROCK!

Friends in Christ, that is the sole reason that I have accepted the Call to the ministry of Jesus Christ -- TO GET A PIECE OF THE ROCK ... AND TO SHARE THAT SAME PIECE WITH YOU. Because like St. Peter, one moment I too reflect the faithfulness of a devout disciple ... and the very next moment show the cowardice of one who "denies the Lord." There can be little doubt about my discipleship -- I often live in the middle ground ... between the success and failure of faithfulness. But beyond those successes and

failures -- one thing remains constant -- my trust that Jesus Christ will never deny me ... that he will always be my rock ... the forgiving foundation of my life even when I do fail.

I sincerely hope that you are a part of the church for the very same reason ... TO GET A PIECE OF THE ROCK ... AND TO SHARE THAT PIECE AS WELL. There's little doubt, that like me, you too fall short many times of true faithfulness. I see those who continue to deny the lordship of Christ by denying or eliminating his Sacraments. I see those who deny the lordship of Christ by merely giving him the crumbs of their time and treasure. I see those who think so little of their Lord that they will only give him praise a few times a year. I see those who claim Jesus Christ as Lord but have not cracked the Bible for decades. Time and time and time again - I am reminded that like me, like Peter, and like many other disciples -- many of us are often hovering over middle ground -- NEVER TOTALLY DENYING CHRIST, BUT AT THE SAME TIME NEVER TOTALLY CONFESSING HIM EITHER!

How desparately we need to be reminded that the keys of the kingdom are not out there someplace. The keys are not merely in the hands of popes or priests or pastors. The keys are in your hands and mine. And Jesus is saying to each of us: "WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM??" He is asking that we each make a personal claim upon the rock ... that we personally affirm his forgiveness ... and personally share and give thanks for it. We don't make that claim without some real blood, sweat and tears.

Why blood sweat, and tears? Because our faith may take us, like Pope John Paul, into a jail cell to forgive the one who wanted to murder us. That's real faith ... faith which stimulates sacrifice ... faith which inspires us not to merely "play it safe" with Jesus ... faith which is built upon the rock of Christ ... faith which has the courage to love and forgive even those we find unlovable ... faith which is not afraid to give with gusto! That's the only road to peace and security in a world obsessed with hatred and hurtfulness.

That's what the rock, Jesus Christ, is all about. He's hardly a "Pet Rock" -- a lifeless God to be admired on the fireplace mantle or a neckless or on a sanctuary table. He's the one and only living God who offers us the very foundation of our faith -- the gracious, forgiving love of God. That's why we pray -- "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

There's no way that a piece of the Prudential Rock can compare with the rock of Christ. Oh - there are some

definite temporary benefits from insurance policies -- momentary security from cash value, long-term dividends, and death payoffs. There's no doubt that we need the security of insurance these days to make it from day to day.

But the ultimate peace ... the ultimate security ... the ultimate relationship ... the ultimate hope is not from the Prudential rock or any other company. Only faith in Jesus Christ can assure us of never-ending forgiveness ... of eternal acceptance and self-worth ... of everlasting life in the kingdom of God. And that's worth more than any insurance policy. GET A PIECE OF THE ROCK ... THE ROCK OF CHRIST and you and I will always have the greatest security that life can offer!

AMEN

PENTECOST XIV

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

August 29 and Sept. 1, 1985 (Labor Day Weekend)

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?"

"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 'You do not want to leave too, do you?' Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'"

John 6:66-69

"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." Have you heard that verse before? I must admit -- it's one I have often read over without much reflection. It's hardly one of our favorite passages from Scripture. That verse says that Jesus was not always successful -- many of his disciples didn't like what he was saying. When he said in verse 59 of this chapter, "Eat my flesh and drink my blood" -- many turned away from him and no longer followed him. Some people just didn't want to be challenged to an intimate faithfulness with Jesus.

Amazing -- that I should have received the same reaction from some members last week. Some said, "Golly, pastor, those were some pretty strong words about Holy Communion." We have moved some 19 centuries ahead, but we still resist the challenging words of Jesus.

There's a cute story of a little girl who became fascinated with a clown who was regularly seen in the city park. One day she asked him, "Mr. Clown, how do you decide each day which way you will go?" With a twinkle in his eye and grin on his face, he replied: "I always travel with the wind to my back, honey."

That's often the way it is with many of us fools for Christ. As long as Jesus' sayings are popular/comforting, we can go along with him. Throughout the fifties and early sixties, there were legions moving along with the church. Those were the days of smooth sailing -- the wind was at the church's back. But with the challenges of the late 60's and 70's and 80's -- with racial unrest, with Viet Nam, with women's liberation, with abortion, with 3rd World demands, with escalating inflation/unemployment, with nuclear stockpiling, etc -- then many began to "turn back and no longer follow him." Let the water get rough, let the pastor speak the challenging words of Jesus, and soon the revolving door syndrome sets in. We all know here at Hope the many who ran to the suburban churches in the late 60's and early 70's. They wanted only their version of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But those are the crucial times of life, aren't they -- when the wind is bucking in our faces? When the sailing

is smooth, we are rarely seeking any answers ... we are rarely looking for someone to really trust. But when the going gets rough ... when life gets a little turbulent, that's when we ask: "TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?" When the going gets tough, that's when we wonder: WHO CAN I TRUST? WHO CAN I CONFIDE IN? WHO CAN I TALK TO? WHO WILL UNDERSTAND? WHO WILL ACCEPT ME AND NOT JUDGE ME? WHO WILL REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN MY LIFE NOW THAT THINGS ARE NO LONGER PERFECT?

I was recently talking with a person involved in therapy. This person was no longer feeling the wind at his back. The tough questions, the tough decisions, the tough answers were looming on the horizon. The question was -- WHAT IF I MAKE THOSE TOUGH DECISIONS? Who will be around to still love me? I'm afraid I'll be rejected ... I'm afraid my neighbors, my friends, my family, even fellow church members will not understand. I'm afraid everyone will condemn! Another member of that person's group said, "Have all those people been standing with you now?? The ones who are standing with you NOW will continue to stand with you regardless of your decision. Who's standing with you NOW? Those are the faithful and loving ones. Be concerned about them!"

TO WHOM SHALL WE GO? To whom can we go? Who will understand us when our backs are up against the wall? Who will help us when the tide turns -- when the winds are turbulently knocking us down? Who will empathize rather than condemn? Who will really listen rather than self-righteously judge? Who will hear us out and still accept us? The answer is the same today as it was in the first century: THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN FAITHFUL AND LOVING AND CHRISTLIKE ALL ALONG!!

My dear Christian friends -- each of us will have his or her own day when the wind is no longer at our backs. And on that day we will be yearning for someone to trust ... someone who will listen ... someone who will understand and accept us, even in our failure or futility. In those times when the winds are uncovering our fears and failures and human weaknesses, then we yearn for understanding and trust: TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?

Isn't it pathetically sad -- that in those times, the ones that we are most reluctant to trust with our fears and hurts are the members of the church of Jesus Christ? In the moments of our greatest guilt and pain, many times we will not confide in our fellow Christians ... not even pastors. TO WHOM SHALL WE GO? Most definitely not to another member of the church -- because that person will take our pain and guilt and share it as gossip with 50 other people!!

Why is it that church folk cannot be trusted? Why is it that church folk are often the hardest and most condemning of one another? Why is it that church folk seem to relish self-righteous judgment rather than self-giving love? Why is it that we are so cruel to each other?

Maybe it's because we just don't understand what's being asked of us by someone in deep pain. Maybe we don't understand because we've never been there. Maybe it's because we have made the goal of faith "morality" rather than "salvation." Maybe it's because we're afraid to be honest with each other. Maybe our moralistic ancestry has just made us feel too embarrassed about our weaknesses. Maybe we think Christians dare not tell it like it really is ... dare not call a spade a spade.

So often church folk are like the prim and proper Christian lady who wanted to attend a Lutheran camp in Wisconsin but didn't know what kind of accommodations Lutherans offered. This Christian lady -- a strict Baptist -- had been trained to be extremely prim and proper. So she was totally afraid to ask the Lutheran camp director about toilet facilities. She just could not bring herself to writing "toilet" in her letter. So she finally came up with the terms "bathroom commode." But being so prim and proper -- even this was too much. So she finally settled on merely referring to the bathroom commode as the "BC."

Her letter ended, "Finally, dear sir, does your campground have its own BC on the premises?"

The Lutheran camp director, attempting to be very sensitive to a prim and proper Baptist lady, came to the conclusion that she was obviously referring to the local Baptist Church (BC). So he wrote the following:

Dear madam. I take pleasure in informing you that a BC is located just nine miles north of our Lutheran campground, and it has a seating capacity of 250 people at one time. I admit it is quite a distance if you are in the habit of going regularly, but no doubt you will be pleased to know that a number of our people regularly pack a picnic lunch and make a day of it. The last time my wife and I went was six weeks ago, and it was so crowded we had to stand up the whole time we were there. They're planning to raise money for more seats. If you decide to come to our campground, perhaps I could go with you the first time and introduce you to the other folks. Sincerely

I hope you can all laugh at this humorous story (of course some of you might be condemning me already for this story). It illustrates so perfectly what often goes on in our religious lives. We just won't confess our real needs ... or our real hurts. We cover them up with social

gestures and polite words like BC -- when what we really need is simply a toilet. Who are we trying to impress with all our social etiquette when our lives are literally falling apart and the pain is next to unbearable??

Yes - when the waters get rough, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO? Amidst the fire and conflict of life, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO? When we're hanging onto the end of our ropes, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?

Is there any doubt about that answer? Who is it that will totally understand our pain no matter how guilty we may feel? Who is it that will offer compassion when even neighbors would quickly give rejection? Who is it that has forgiven us and will remember our sin no more? Who is it that gave us more than advice by innocently offering his life as a ransom for all sins? Who is it that loved us so much that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life?

TO WHOM SHALL WE GO? We go to none other than Jesus Christ! Because Christ alone is the only one with the words of eternal life! And what are those words? They are WORDS OF UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTANCE regardless of the conditions of sinfulness. They are WORDS OF LOVE AND FORGIVENESS regardless of the degree of guilt. They are WORDS OF RENEWAL AND REFORMATION regardless of the faults and failures of yesterday.

Christ's words of eternal life have been poured into our hearts in Holy Baptism. Christ's words of eternal life have been grafted to our minds through Sunday School teachers and armies of preachers. Christ's words of eternal life have been cemeted to our souls through the eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood. Jesus Christ is one with us and we are one with him. There is no separation from Christ for his faithful. We are the incarnation of his Spirit in this world.

And that's the challenge of Jesus' words today for you and me -- "eat my flesh and drink my blood." He desires his disciples to get back to the basics of his Spirit ... back to the basics of Word and Sacraments. To love one another as he has loved us. To forgive one another as he has forgiven us. To reach out understand one another as he has understood us. There is no hypocritical, self-righteous condemnation from our Lord or his faithful people.

TO WHOM SHALL WE GO? To Jesus Christ AND WHERE WILL WE FIND HIM? Wherever people gather to hear his Word and receive his presence through bread and wine. AND WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR SHARING HIS SPIRIT IN THE WORLD? Those who have a deep intimacy, a living trust, a daily

communion with him.

Florence Chadwick was one of the first swimmers to cross the English Channel. On one of her earliest tries, she encountered dense fog and could not find the way. She was exhausted by the cold and wind -- she was literally up against it all. Finally she had to quit. As she was pulled into the rescue boat, she said: "If only I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."

Only when we can see the shore, the goal, the one to whom we can really trust -- only then can we make it. That is the difference between living and real life, between life and death. Thanks be to God that in Jesus Christ we have seen the shore, the goal, the one TO WHOM WE CAN GO ... THE ONE WHOM WE CAN TRUST. His word is life, forgiveness, acceptance, understanding and peace.

In Christ, life has fulfillment and meaning and hope. In Christ, life has the assurance that it will not end in condemnation - but the eternal love of God. As God's people, we are challenged by Christ to offer that assurance in this world!! TO WHOM SHALL WE GO? To one another with the assurance that we are loved and forgiven.

AMEN.

PENTECOST XIV
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
August 25 and 28, 1988
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"OUT OF REVERENCE FOR . . ."

And Joshua said, "...choose this day whom you will serve,
... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Joshua 24:15

After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer
went with him. Jesus said to the twelve, "do you also wish to
go away?" Simon Peter answered, "Lord to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and
have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

John 6:66-69

My good friend, Pastor Paul Hegele from Holy Trinity,
Toledo, has been the major source of inspiration for today's
sermon. In a sermon example for the former Ohio Synod, Paul
wrote:

Go into any restaurant in our town,
Read any local paper,
Visit any area mall,
And soon you will see his picture -
The wavy black hair, barely under control,
The wide, crooked smile more gentle than silly,
The huge, beaked nose, as indelibly etched into
your memory as on his face ...

Have you guessed to whom Pastor Hegele is referring?
Well one more hint for those who still don't have it. Imagine
a grown man sitting atop groceries in a shopping cart under the
womanpower of his loving aunt. You got it -- none other than
Jamie Farr from Toledo, Ohio.

Paul Hegele sees Toledo as the "Jamie Farr Connection."
From my perspective - I even go a step further ... Jamie Farr
is connected "out of reverence for Toledo." And when I use the
word "reverence" -- I mean the real, old fashion stuff -- honor
and respect, profound loyalty and love, high esteem, that which
is viewed as sacred and holy.

There are certainly many other hollywood personalities
that have been connected to Toledo. From a large billboard,
E. G. Marshall looked down upon T-town and said: "Toledo, you
can bank on us." And Hal Holbrook strolled the hallowed halls
of the Toledo Museum of Art saying: "Toledo's my kind of town,
and Toledo Trust is my kind of bank."

But from Holbrook and Marshall - there's not a "real
reverence for Toledo." Oh, they may actually believe what they
are saying about those Toledo banks; but their words have been
motivated by a cash contract. In short, they have been paid
off to say good things about Toledo and its banking interests.

Not so for Jamie Farr. This local-boy-made-good is proud to be a Toledoan. He really likes it here ... and he likes to tell others about it. He speaks from warmth and loyalty ... from respect and pride ... from love and awe ... "out of reverence for Toledo." As Klinger in MASH - he often ad-libbed about his real longing to go home to Toledo for a Tony Packo's hot dog. Likewise with the LPGA - it was "out of reverence for Toledo." not a penny of pay off that he gets involved in this event each year. When Farr recently came to a Rotary Club meeting to boost the Jamie Farr Classic -- it wasn't to make a buck for himself, but to bolster Toledo. There's a real love affair between Toledo and Jamie Farr.

In a world where the motto has become, "There's no such thing as a free lunch," it's nigh impossible to find very many Jamie Farr Connections. Most people, and esp. the hollywood and entertainment-types, will only give big if they get big first. That has become the macho marketing motto of our age -- "You only go round once in life, so get all you can get with gusto." But once in a while, a Jesus Christ figure like Jamie Farr cuts through the money and media maze of marketing; "out of reverence for Toledo," Jamie gives, and gives, and gives!

And that reverence ... that high esteem for Toledo ... that profound respect and loving awe ... that sacred honor shown by Farr -- that same truth is the basis for today's O.T. and gospel texts.

Just after leading Israel into the promised land, Joshua says to them, "Choose this day whom you will serve ... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Likewise, after nearly all 5000 disciples fed by Jesus had abandoned him, Peter is given the same permission to leave as well. But he replies: "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

God promised no new gimmicks to either Joshua or Peter. No promises were made of special lifetime contracts, no lottery jackpots would be forthcoming, no great gains of any kind would be awarded for faithfulness. No promises of getting anything were given. In fact, the politically expedient thing for Joshua would have been to serve the Amorite gods if he really wanted material gains. And for Peter - sticking with the controversial Jesus would certainly guarantee a lot more headaches and heartaches down the road.

So why did they both stay with the Lord? For Joshua, was it only because the Lord God brought Israel out of bondage into the promised land? Certainly that was a factor -- but not the whole thing. For Peter, was it only because the Lord was the Holy One, God Himself? Certainly that was a factor, but not the whole thing. For Joshua and Peter - there was a deeper motivation. They recognized that God had been devoted to them

and they wanted their lives to be an imitation of God's own devotion! They wanted to reflect a Lord-Like Connection; or from the New Testament perspective - a Jesus Christ Connection.

As we all know, from the earliest books of the Bible, God shows a covenant between himself and his people. But many of these early covenants or agreements were what has become known as "tit-for-tat arrangements." Much like the many political endorsements now going on in both parties -- we only endorse a candidate if he promises to deliver something to satisfy our own self-interests. Obviously, such arrangements are not inherently bad -- but without a doubt THERE IS RARELY MUCH REAL REVERENCE IN THEM. Let me illustrate from the Bible itself.

To Adam, God offered the Garden of Eden. In return, Adam had to agree to be the gardener and give each in God's creation a name while not eating from that certain tree.

To Noah, God offered a rainbow representing peace after destroying the evil people of the world. In return, Noah had to agree not to become like those evil people.

To Abraham, God offered descendants without number who would honor Abe as the nation's founder. In return, Abraham had to agree to set out into the unknown, uncivilized land of Canaan to find his inheritance.

To Moses, God offered the Promised Land. In return, Moses and the people of Israel had to obey the Ten Commandments.

Is there anything inherently wrong with any of these covenants?? Absolutely not! They are all very fair and just; they are all motivated by love and justice. But likewise, they are all very mechanical ... very legalistic ... very cut and dried. It's like the father who comes home after a 12-hour day at the office and says mechanically at the supper table: "Now, tonite son, because your father has earned the bread today ... you will mow the lawn, water the flowers, and take out the trash." There is nothing unfair in the father's request -- but it feels like just another business transaction rather than a relationship motivated by love and mutual respect. YOU GIVE BACK TO ME EXACTLY AS MUCH AS I HAVE GIVEN YOU - OR ELSE!! This father's discipline is motivated by anger, not by an example of love. Under such circumstances, no longer is there any spontaniety ... any exuberant joy ... any self-motivated love ... any "reverence out of mutual admiration and respect."

But this was the Old Covenant ... from the Old Testament. It was true and it was just, but it was not Jesus Christ. Under the old agreement, "if you trade in your golden calf, you will get a pair of stone tablets with new, improved commandments. But you will not be given new life!!

But Jesus Christ entered the scene to offer God's New Covenant not only as a verbal agreement, but as the very embodiment of God's new life! That's why Jesus sums up this whole new order of God's love by saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." It is no longer a mere verbal directive, God has now grafted his love into our lives thru the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ as we partake of his presence.

Jesus and Moses both believed that if you obey God, God will love you. But Jesus Christ takes God's obedience beyond the limits of human achievement and perfection. He says, "There is no way that you can possibly love God perfectly, but I will still love you perfectly." "There is no way that you can possibly fulfill all the commandments of love, but I will fulfill all the commandments to love you." The New Covenant of God through Jesus Christ finally gets beyond the conditional covenants of humanity -- the tit-for-tat agreements that we often pass off as our perfect platform of love in this world. In Jesus Christ, God loves us unconditionally -- even when we fail to mow the lawn perfectly, even when we forget to water the flowers, even when we fail to take out the trash, even when we leave crumbs on the counter, even when we vote for the wrong party, even when we serve in the Nat'l Guard rather than the U.S. Marines.

In the Garden of Eden, above the Rainbow, on Mt. Sinai - God made his demands for perfect obedience very clear to his people. But before Pilate, on the cross, at the tomb, Jesus Christ asked for nothing, no demands without first giving us everything!! OUT OF REVERENCE FOR US, HIS BELOVED CHILDREN ... GOD TOOK A GREAT GAMBLE -- HE GAVE US HIS WHOLE LIFE!! No longer does he ask us to love him because he tells us so; that kind of love is always half-hearted. Now he offers us true reverence -- he gives us the real example of his love by giving us himself. And now God is waiting to see if we have taken the hint about the real meaning of REVERENCE.

And you know something -- God actually believes that you and I will take the hint. He says: "You can't possibly look into the face of Jesus Christ without eventually showing your reverence through your own loyalty and sacrifices. You can't possibly receive the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ without being moved to some greater expression of reverence yourself.

It's just like Jamie Farr with Toledo. He can't possibly look at Toledo, Ohio without giving his loyalty and service to this city. It would be an outrage for Jamie to ask for payment from Toledo when this same city has made him everything that he is. Out of reverence for Toledo, Jamie Farr continues to give himself to his community. Likewise, it would be an outrage for you or me to ask Jesus Christ to make further payment for us when he has already given us his ultimate reverence: HIS FLESH AND BLOOD. so, OUT OF REVERENCE FOR CHRIST we give ourselves in marriage, in mission and in every ministry that seeks to magnify the GLORY OF HIS NAME! OUT OF REVERENCE TO CHRIST, we respond positively to the call to teach others of his love. OUT OF REVERENCE FOR CHRIST, we serve on committees and Councils which seek to magnify the glory of his mission. OUT OF REVERENCE FOR

CHRIST, we even share the mundane tasks of nursery care and altar guild and ushering and counting collections! BECAUSE ALL THESE TASKS REFLECT OUR GRATITUDE FOR THE FORGIVING LOVE CHRIST HAS GIVEN UNTO US THROUGH HIS BRIDE, THE CHURCH.

/OUT OF REVERENCE FOR CHRIST, we are here tonite to again hear his HOLY, AWESOME WORD FOR US: THE BODY AND BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST STRENGTHEN YOU AND KEEP YOU IN HIS GRACE, NOW AND FOREVERMORE. AMEN. DEPART IN PEACE!_/_

SUNDAY MORNING - 8/28/88

OUT OF REVERENCE FOR CHRIST, we are here again this morning to hear his HOLY, AWESOME WORD FOR US: THE PEACE OF GOD WHICH PASSES ALL HUMAN UNDERSTANDING KEEP YOUR HEARTS AND MINDS IN THE REVERENCE OF CHRIST. AMEN.

PENTECOST XIV
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
August 17 and 20, 1989
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

W I D E O P E N , Y E T V E R Y N A R R O W

Jesus went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. And some one said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and not be able." Lk 13:22-23

Our era might be called the AGE OF ACCESSIBILITY. To live in the late 1900's is to be very aware of openness, accessibility, and advocacy for all. A major focus behind our entire renovation project was that the church offices, whether new or remodeled space, must be accessible to persons regardless of age or handicap. Likewise, we are spending \$5,000 to renovate one bathroom so that it will be TRULY ACCESSIBLE TO ALL. Yes, to live in this era you must be committed to openness or you will be out of business. The last quarter of this century will go down in history as the era of open housing, open markets, global-open competition, openness between Russia and the USA, a new openness to democracy around the world, sexual, relational, psychological, and spiritual openness, and yes, even the age of the open closet.

Certainly, employers today must be market sensitive to being OPEN to all ages and sexes. Whether the job is in construction, law, or parish ministry, male domination is no longer tolerated. Even as we flew back from Green Bay last Saturday evening, we noted the age of the stewardess ... no longer limited to anorexic youthfulness. What an exciting age of possibility this has become for everyone. What a privilege to have lived in the last quarter of the 20th century!!

But "openness" has not meant "easiness" for anyone. In fact, a story about Woody Hayes comically summarizes how openness often requires much struggle. From a tower window one day, Woody was being observed coming to work by his assistant coaches. There was only one parking space left in the lot barely wide enough for his car. And Woody was easing his car ever so gently into the space. Well, he squeezed the car in, but couldn't open the doors to get out. A moment passed, and then he backed the car out. In disbelief, the assistants watched as Woody planted his hands on the trunk and slowly and grimly pushed the car back into the open space. As Coach Hayes illustrated, openness does not always mean easiness.

The same has certainly been true for our Age of Accessibility. Open Housing has not meant easy housing for anyone. There has been determined resistance from many whites and even lending institutions. Likewise, minorities have come to the realization that home ownership is not easy living -- there's upkeep and mortgages and yards to trim and neighborly standards to be kept. Openness often demands struggle.

Right here in the church - openness has not meant easy street for many ordained women. The door for women has been wide open now for more than 20 years in the Lutheran Church -- but it has been a very narrow door ... meaning, there's been much struggle for those women who have entered ordained ministry. The open door policy of the church or any other institution has never offered easy living for those who enter through it.

And in a real way -- this is exactly what Jesus was meaning in his answer to the one who asked: "Will only a few be saved?" First of all, Jesus makes very clear - the issue of salvation is never an issue of numbers. It's not a matter of "how many," it's a matter of "how faithful!" Jesus says, "Strive to enter by the narrow door." In other words, the door to salvation is wide open to everyone ... it's not a matter of a few or many ... it's open to all. But those who enter are reminded that IT IS A NARROW DOOR. That means, the door is not just any door, it has a very specific NAME PLATE and INSIGNIA upon it. Across the door is the name JESUS CHRIST ... emblazoned upon a cross. That's a graphic reminder that those who enter by his door ARE CHOSING TO LIVE HIS LIFE ... and that's never easy living. Jesus uses the word "strive" - the Greek word meaning to "agonize." Those who enter by his door must STRIVE, STRUGGLE, LITERALLY AGONIZE TO BE FAITHFUL. They are not perfect or totally righteous, but they are always STRUGGLING to be righteous like Christ ... even though they will never fully achieve it.

Said differently, there is NO COST to enter thru the open door of Jesus Christ. Christ himself has already paid the entry fee with his own life. But once we have entered through HIS WAY, then there is always a PERSONAL COST (a personal struggle, a personal striving) to stay faithful and in fellowship.

Jesus goes on in this text to say that many will seek his way, but they will choose not to enter the narrow door. In short, they will be unwilling to pay the personal cost ... to profess Christ as the alpha and the omega -- the first and the last, the ultimate priority of life. Instead, they will hover around his door, they may associate with Jesus and his flock, they may even occassionally attend a church party where they wine at a distance with Jesus -- but they will never strive to be fully committed followers.

It's like the Peanuts comic strip where Charlie Brown and Linus are summing up their baseball season. In 12 games, they almost scored a run, they almost all had a hit, Lucy almost caught three balls in right field, Charlie almost pitched a shut out for one inning, and Linus almost made a double play. Their conclusion was that they led the league in "almosts."

Regretably, some good people relate to Jesus Christ in the same way. They "almost" enter thru the narrow door ... they "almost" believe that Jesus is their Lord and Savior ... they "almost" worship God once and a while ... they "almost" love and forgive their neighbors ... they "almost" offer themselves for the hungry and hopeless and lonely of the world ... but for one reason or another -- THEY JUST NEVER GET AROUND TO REALLY STRIVING AND STRUGGLING TO BE FAITHFUL. There are many who lead the league in being ALMOST FAITHFUL.

And that's why Jesus tells the parable of the householder in this text -- Jesus simply is saying that we don't have forever to choose to enter the narrow door. The time is not tomorrow or next year -- the time is always now. It's not a matter of hating Jesus; most people in Jesus day did not hate him. They just were indifferent about following him. They chose their own loves and loyalties and priorities and principles ... and if they had time some day, they would finally respond to Jesus' open door.

Jesus describes these people as "workers of iniquity" -- not because they are necessarily immoral - but because they have allowed all the other forces of life (incl evil) to control them. Jesus is saying that once we enter by his door -- we realize that we are forever trying to walk up a down escalator. We come to the realization that there are daily forces trying to pull us down while we must constantly strive upward to be like Christ. And which one of us hasn't known those forces -- powers trying to pull us down from generosity to selfishness, from compassion to indifference, from sacrifice to greed.

The point is obvious -- to live the life of SALVATION is not to be morally perfect. We all plead: GOD BE MERCIFUL TO ME A SINNER: we all struggle & strive to reflect God's uplifting power every day. The life of Christian openness ... of accessibility to all ... is by no means easy living. But it does lead us beyond what one author has called a LINEAR PERCEPTION OF LIFE. Those who live the linear life see everything in a straight line -- it's first or last, worst or best, male versus female, East against West, haves versus the have nots, us against them.

To respond to the open door of Christ leads to a totally different perception of life. To enter the narrow door means that Christ shows us that he is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. Since he is both the beginning and the end, then everything else in life is CIRCLED AROUND HIM. In Christ, we no longer have a linear but rather a circular perception of life. It's no longer a matter of being first or last, or the best or the worst, or the biggest or the smallest -- it's a matter of being in communion with the beginning and the end of everything ... of being FOREVER in circular fellowship with the ultimate power and priority of life.

When we enter the narrow door, life is no longer a tug-of-war -- no longer do we merely think of winners and losers, first and last, best or worst. Now our faithfulness is to affirm and

participate with everyone we can possibly touch, regardless of who they are or where they came from. Is it any wonder that in the circle of Christ's fellowship -- the possibilities for God's love and glory through our lives are without limits.

My dear friends in Christ -- the door of salvation is wide open. Through Holy Baptism -- ALL of us have entered in. How do we see THE PICTURE FROM THE INSIDE? Are we in some long line -- with Jesus so far ahead of us that we can't even see him or be supported by him? Or are we in a circle with Christ - struggling to remain supportive to Him and all who are a part of his fellowship.

I truly thank God for each of you who has continued to struggle with me to remain faithful to this circle of fellowship -- Hope Lutheran Church, truly a gift opened to all of us thru the narrow door of Jesus Christ, our Lord. The door of salvation is wide open, thanks be to God for everyone who strives and struggles and agonizes to be faithful to his global circle of fellowship. For through his open door ... and our constant struggle -- we continue to make the whole world accessible to God's saving love. And that's what it means to enter thru the open but very narrow door -- not that we can be perfect like Christ, but that we might always be faithful to Christ.

AMEN.

PENTECOST XIV (1991)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
August 22 and 25, 1991
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"S T A Y I N G T H E C O U R S E !"

"Many of Jesus' disciples, when they heard it, said, 'This is a hard saying, who can listen to it?' ... After this many of these disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.'"

John 6:60; 66-69

We have all had a good laugh when Dana Carvey, from "Saturday Night Live," impersonates President Bush about "Staying the Course." But few of us laugh when we see someone in real life "staying the course" -- hanging in there against overwhelming odds; staying tough when the easy way would be to sway with popular opinion. This week we have seen the heroic happenings that result from "Staying the Course." Boris Yeltsin "stayed the course" against overwhelming odds in a land of confusion and chaos. He did not back down when faced with the Kremlin coup. Instead, he courageously came out into the public square ... he rallied the people for renewed vision of democratic principles ... and he held his ground inside the Russian parliament, not succumbing to the hard-liners seeking to oust the reforming regiment. And the result, much like that of an earlier 16th century reformer, has been the renewed liberation of a people from a potentially oppressive and ruthless regime. Let it never be said that one person cannot make a difference between freedom and captivity. Boris Yeltsin "stayed the course" - he remained committed to the people and the principles that he and Gorbachev have pioneered in this chaotically, confused country.

This headline news this week of the coup in Russia was a "news story" but not a new story. Almost every country, every corporation, every community, every congregation, yes every Christian who has had to struggle with "coming of age" has known the reality of a coup -- people or factions that resist and seek to overthrow those who are legitimately attempting to build up the body. (IN EVERY ORGAN/CONG - THOSE COMMITTED TO TEARING DOWN RATHER THAN BUILDING UP.) That was exactly the reality facing Jesus as John was reflecting his ministry in today's text. The carpenter's son was no longer a religious novelty; he had become a force to be reckoned with in this Jewish culture. His preaching called for a practice of real sacrifice rather than mere pious ritual. In short, he was asking too much, too soon, too often. "Love God first. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemy; turn the other cheek. Deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me. Count as your brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, family and friends ONLY THOSE WHO DO THE WILL OF MY FATHER IN HEAVEN. Be willing to lay down your life for them. Give of all that you have!"

As happens too often, too soon, and too much -- religious enthusiasm falters when "staying the course" demands real faithfulness and commitment. Jesus' disciples were beginning to drop out fast. Resistance to his principles was growing internally and externally. Is it any wonder that John says: "Many of his disciples, when they heard him, said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to him?' ... And after this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went with him." "Staying the Course" is no laughing matter in Russia ... in Washington D.C. ... in Israel or the middle east ... or in the life of Hope Lutheran, Toledo -- or any other place where the Kingdom of God is coming into being.

So it is that Jesus finally turns to his most intimate twelve and asks: "Do you also wish to go away?" And Simon Peter, this time eloquently responds, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." Good, ole Peter! Impetuous! Excitable! Sometimes hot, sometimes cold! Too often, too soon speaking before his mind was fully in gear. But this same Simon Peter was always THERE TO "STAY THE COURSE" - his commitment was no momentary, fleeting experience -- only good when things were going his way. Certainly there were times when he was down and discouraged ... times when he was ready to return to his fishing nets. But his commitment to Jesus the Christ never failed. What a privilege for you and me to be counted among those like Simon Peter who have "stayed the course."

Be assured, there is no greater virtue in the body of Christ than "staying the course." Morality, modesty, perfection, piety, purity -- these are all worthy expressions of our religious faith; but nothing ranks more sublime than "staying the course" -- remaining faithful for a lifetime! A little over a week ago I had to write appeals of renewal to more than 60 families/individuals of Hope who have neither communed, contributed, or for that matter worshipped for two years or more! There is nothing more painful for a pastor (or for Christ himself) than to watch members become baptized, confirmed, married, shepherded by other dedicated Christians ... and then disappear and drop out from those committed to Christ. It seems almost beyond belief that someone could "stay the course" with Jesus Christ for 30 or 40 years ... and then a little disagreement with another member or the pastor leads to a dissolution of fidelity with one's Lord! How can a petty difference over some committee decision or church procedure lead a faithful disciple to say, "I'll never make a commitment to HIS mission again!"

But thankfully, like Simon Peter and many since his day, you are among those who have "stayed the course." What a treasure - what a blessing - what an encouragement you are to the mission of Jesus Christ and to me, to Jeff, to Larry, to Debbie ... to the many who have served you in this place. That's the message for today and every day: STAY THE COURSE! Have that kind of faith that reflects an unshakeable commitment to Jesus Christ no matter what struggles may come!

And what does that kind of faith really look like? What are the dimensions of COMMITMENT when we "stay the course?" Quite simply - a "staying the course" commitment is one that is decisive, continuous, and complete!

First & foremost, our commitment to Jesus Christ and his mission is decisive! Boris Yeltsin could not wait to see which way the Moscovites would sway. He decided UP FRONT that he would lay down his own life for the principles of democratic reform. Similarly, Jesus Christ did not wait for a majority vote from the disciples to lay down his life on Golgatha. Had he waited for a vote, we would yet be waiting for a Messiah (like our Jewish friends). This same Savior does not demand moralistic or messianic perfection from his followers, but he does command that we be decisively faithful! Each one of us must faithfully say from the time of his/her baptism: "there is nothing in all creation that will separate me from the love of God in Jesus Christ." When parents, godparents, and individuals make promises in Holy Baptism -- there is no more decisive promise ever made before God and his people. And yet sometimes Christians are very indecisive/vague in these baptismal promises - we seemingly don't say what we really mean -- or don't mean what we really say. Sometimes we get caught up with "being prim and proper" - doing the "prim and proper" thing, but not being fully committed to the reality of our promises of faith."

It reminds me of the story I told several years ago of the prim and proper Baptist lady who wanted to attend a Lutheran camp in Wisconsin but didn't know what kind of accommodations Lutherans offered. Like so many Christians, she had been ritually trained -- always to say what was prim and proper, without maybe saying what she actually meant. Her real concern for the Lutheran camp director was regarding "toilet" accommodations. But as a prim and proper Baptist, she just could not use the word "toilet." So she finally came up with the terms "Bathroom Commode," referring in her letter to the B.C. (not even using the words bathroom commode.) Her letter ended: "Finally, kind sir, does your campground have its own B.C. on the premises?"

The Lutheran camp director, attempting to be sensitive and not wanting to hurt the feelings of this prim and proper Christian lady came to the conclusion that she was obviously referring to the local B.C. - Baptist Church on the premises. So he wrote this response: "Dear Madam. I take pleasure in informing you that a B.C. is located just nine miles north of our Lutheran campground, and it has a seating capacity of 250 people at one time. I admit it is quite a distance if you are in the habit of going regularly, but no doubt you will be pleased to know that a number of our people regularly pack a picnic lunch and make a whole day of it at the B.C. The last time that my wife and I went was six weeks ago, and it was so crowded that we had to stand up the whole time that we were there. They're planning to raise money for more seats. If you decide to come to our camp, perhaps I could accompany you your first time and introduce you to other folks at the B.C. Truly yours,"

That's the result of being "indecisive" and not calling Jesus Christ the Christ when it comes to Christian commitment. Commitment to Jesus Christ means decisiveness -- not believing in some indescribable superior being, but believing that Jesus Christ is the Holy One of God, the Savior, the Redeemer of the World.

But "staying the course" of commitment to Jesus Christ is not only decisive, it is also continuous! One author has said that life in Christ is an ongoing marathon. It is not just a routine morning jog, it is a never-ending marathon filled with a multitude of obstacles -- cancer, heart attacks, strokes, diabetes, loss of work, unfair tragic happenings, loss of loved ones, family disputes and disagreements, etc. The author goes on: the great secret of faith is not how we begin, but how we finish. Many of us are good starters. We are at the baptismal starting blocks with talent, enthusiasm and a burst of showy commitment. But sustaining that beginning - that is the true challenge of "STAYING THE COURSE."

Olympic champion Jesse Owens once put it this way: "There is something that can happen to every athlete, every human being -- it's the instinct to slack off, to give in to the pain, to give less than your best when your under the heat of the day. Too often," Owens continues, "there's an instinct to hope that we can win through luck or through our opponents not doing their best, instead of going to the limit where victory is always found." Jesus Christ has shown us that way, that life, and that truth -- that faithfulness always means going to the limit ... giving the very best from the beginning to the very end. That's the way you and I have been blessed with God's grace in Holy Baptism -- there is no room for slacking off when God has graced us with such an abundance of his merciful goodness and limitless love.

How tragic that some disciples drop out when God is counting most upon them to help accomplish his victory! How tragic that other disciples give the impression that they have got all the absolute answers and they close the doors of continuous discussion. In the world where you and I live, continuous commitment means wrestling with the issues of drugs, hunger, nuclear weapons, abortion, capital punishment, global preservation -- a continuous search for ways to make God's love, peace and hope more visible in this world.

Which leads to the third and final dimension of commitment: COMMITMENT TO JESUS CHRIST IS COMPLETE, TOTAL, AND FOREVER! Someone once said, "It doesn't take much of a person to become a Christian; rather, it takes ALL of that person." General William Booth, creator of the Salvation Army, said, "The secret (of my success) is that God has had all there was of me. There have been men with greater brains, with greater wealth, with greater opportunities! But from the day I experienced the plight of the poor and had a vision of what Jesus Christ could do for them ... I made up my mind that God would have all of William Booth that there was to have!"

I sincerely hope that God will always make that kind of difference in your life and mine. That was the kind of difference that Boris Yeltsin made this past week -- he "stayed the course" ... he remained decisively, continuously, and completely committed to the principles of democratic reforms even in the face of overwhelming opposition. And that's what it has always meant to "stay the course" with Jesus Christ ... to be decisively, continuously, and completely committed to his words of eternal life. Because those who have "stayed that course," like Jesus Christ and General Booth, have made up their minds that God will have all that there is of them to have -- their minds, their bodies, their souls, their spirits, their whole beings! And like Peter and all of you who have "stayed that course," then the world will have reason to believe and come to know that Jesus Christ is the Holy One of God! To whom shall we go? "Stay the Course" with Jesus Christ, for he and he alone has given us the everlasting Good News that we will be victorious over all coups, all odds, and all resistance - including death itself!!

AMEN.

THEME: In and through Jesus Christ, God has decisively, continuously, and completely "stayed the course" of his promise to be graciously benevolent and forgiving to his disciples. The only appropriate response is a discipleship of the same faithfulness -- "staying the course" by being decisively, continuously, and completely committed to Jesus Christ and his eternal word.

PENTECOST XIV
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
August 25 & August 28, 1994
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"TO WHOM WOULD YOU GO?"

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

John 6:66-69

(First, just a few brief words to the women today about Paul's words: "Women, be subject to your husbands!" (Best advice in the Bible!) Seriously, there are some parts of scripture that are applicable at all times in all places; there are others that were intended only for a specific time or specific place, but now have been superseded by the Holy Spirit. We know this is absolutely true or otherwise we would all still be eating by kosher laws yet. Kosher laws are in the bible, but were only intended for a specific place and time in history. Within the culture in which Paul lived, "Women, be subject to your husbands" was very kosher. It was the social order. We know that Paul meant no harm to women because he then says: "Husbands, love your wives as Christ gave himself for the church!" In other words, sacrifice your life for your wives! What woman here would not like that kind of husband? Paul's point is simply: "Out of reverence for Christ, we are to be fully subject to each other!"

But another troubling verse from the gospel: "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." That verse says that Jesus was not always successful -- many of his disciples didn't like what he was saying. He offended people; in verse 59 he said, "Eat my flesh and drink my blood." As Pastor Michaels said last week - that was making this "belief thing" too real ... too intimate ... too human and down to earth!

There's a cute story of a little girl who became fascinated with a clown who was regularly seen in the city park. One day she asked him, "Mr. Clown, how do you decide each day which way you will go?" With a twinkle in his eye he replied: "I always travel with the wind to my back, honey."

That's often the way it is with the followers of Jesus. As long as Jesus' sayings are popular/comforting, we can go along with him. Throughout the fifties and early sixties, there were legions moving along with the church. Those were the days of smooth sailing -- the wind was at the church's back. But with the challenges of the 70's and 80's and now 90's - with racial unrest, with abortion, with homosexuality, with crime & health care challenges, with special interests ruling our hearts - these are the times

when many "turn back and no longer follow him." Because Christ challenges misguided priorities! Let the water get rough, let the pastor speak the challenging words of Jesus, and soon the revolving door syndrome sets in. We all know how that revolving door syndrome affected Hope in the late 60's and early 70's. Many disciples of this congregation wanted only their version of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When the sailing is smooth, then we are rarely looking for someone to really trust. But when the going gets rough ... when life gets a little turbulent, when the temp. rises and we're called to sacrifice, then we ask: "TO WHOM CAN WE GO?" When the going gets tough, then even the tough ask: WHO CAN I TRUST? WHO CAN I CONFIDE IN? WHO CAN I TALK TO? WHO WILL UNDERSTAND? WHO WILL ACCEPT ME AND NOT JUDGE ME? WHO WILL REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN MY LIFE NOW THAT THINGS ARE NO LONGER PERFECT?

TO WHOM WOULD YOU GO if you were faced with the tough questions or a heart-wrenching decision that might cause rejection from your friends. What if that decision involved termination or separation or the "tough love" of telling your child to "get out!" Not so long ago one such member of Hope was facing that tough decision. He was fearful that his friends and fellow members would condemn him and no longer associate with him. Thankfully, another church member said to him: "Have all those people been standing with you now?? The ones who REALLY STAND with you NOW will continue to stand with you regardless of your decision. Who's standing with you NOW? Those are the faithful and loving ones: just listen to them!"

TO WHOM CAN WE GO? Who will understand us when our backs are up against the wall? Who will help us when the tide turns -- when the winds are turbulently knocking us down? Who will empathize rather than condemn? Who will really listen rather than self-righteously judge? Who will hear us out and still accept us? The answer is the same today as it was in the first century: THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN FAITHFUL AND LOVING AND CHRISTLIKE ALL ALONG!!

Dear friends in Christ -- each of us will have his or her own day when the wind is no longer at our backs. And on that day we will be yearning for someone to trust ... someone who will listen ... someone who will understand and accept us, even in our failure or futility. In those times when the winds are uncovering our fears and failures and human weaknesses, then we yearn for understanding and trust: TO WHOM WOULD YOU GO?

Would you go to a fellow church member? Many studies indicate that Christians often do not turn to their own church, or their own members or pastors because there is often too much gossip as well as "clicks" in the church. How tragic ... that the one place that God intended to be a sanctuary is felt to be UNSAFE by so many people!!

Why is it that church folk cannot be trusted? Why is it that church folk are often the hardest & most condemning of each another? Why is it that church folk seem to relish self-righteous judgment rather than self-giving love?

Don't we understand what it's like to be in deep pain? Have we never been up against the wind? Don't we understand that "salvation" and not "morality" is the goal of our faith? Don't we value honesty and truth more than deception and saving face? Has our moralistic ancestry made us feel too embarrassed about human weakness & pain? Maybe we really don't trust God; maybe we really don't believe in the forgiveness of sins and the communion of saints???

Church folk need to become more like the lover who was afraid that he was going to lose his best friend. He wrote her this note: "My love, since I met you I can barely sleep. I'm so often in torment wondering if you might fall in love with someone else. Some days I'm in agony - fearing you might not really love me. Each day I'm afraid you'll decide I'm not good enough for you ... and the facts are ... I'm heartsick because I don't deserve you. My love, I'm more miserable than I have ever been in my life. And it's the best thing that has ever happened to me ... I'm finally taking a relationship seriously!!"

There was no question in this man's mind as TO WHOM HE SHOULD GO? He had come to know the relationship which could be trusted and valued above all others. Is there any doubt about YOUR ANSWER? Who is it that will totally understand YOUR pain no matter how guilty YOU may feel? Who is it that will offer compassion when even neighbors would quickly give rejection? Who is it that has forgiven YOU & ME and will remember our sin no more? Who is it that gave us more than advice by innocently offering his life as a ransom for all sins? Who is it that loved us so much that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life?

TO WHOM CAN WE GO? We go to none other than Jesus Christ! Because Christ alone is the only one with the words of eternal life! And what are those words? They are WORDS OF UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTANCE regardless of the conditions of sinfulness. They are WORDS OF LOVE AND FORGIVENESS regardless of the degree of guilt. They are WORDS OF RENEWAL AND REFORMATION regardless of the faults and failures of yesterday.

AND WHERE WILL WE FIND THESE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE? Obviously, wherever people gather to hear His Word /receive His presence thru bread and wine. In other words, right here in this place. But I would even take it one step further: YOU WILL ESPECIALLY FIND JESUS CHRIST AND HIS WORD OF ETERNAL LIFE AMONG THE WHITE & GRAY HAIRS IN THIS PLACE!

Let me explain. Many people in our society today contend that the church "is no longer relevant" because it has become too old. They want everyone to believe that the church has some kind of archaic haze of "white & gray" over the altar. Since the young are the ones "going for it" (whatever that means) ... they believe the church should be "going for it." And the only thing they see old folks "going for" is "trying to catch the caboose."

But let's consider this from another vantage point: what greater advertising strategy could the church have than hundreds of "old folks" who have "gone for it" all their lives and finally come to the realization **THAT THERE'S REALLY ONLY ONE THING TO GO FOR: JESUS CHRIST AS THE BREAD OF LIFE.** I give thanks to God for the "white and gray hair" in this place ... because you are the ones who have tried everything else ... and now you are teaching BOTH YOUNG & OLD by your presence **THAT THE WORDS OF JESUS CHRIST ARE THE ONLY WORDS THAT LAST!**

Some of the best evangelists that I have ever met live in nursing homes. Because they are the ones who have said to me: "When THE YOUNG have endured all the turbulence that I have known - then it will be interesting to see what they consider to be "eternal" and what they dismiss as "fad." Yes, it's those "white and gray" who teach us the only answer to the question: **TO WHOM WOULD YOU GO? TO NONE OTHER THAN JESUS CHRIST FOR HIS WORDS OF EVERLASTING LIFE!**

Florence Chadwick was one of the first swimmers to cross the English Channel. On one of her earliest tries, she encountered fog & turbulence and was exhausted by the cold and wind. Finally, she had to quit. As she was pulled into the rescue boat, she commiserated: "If only I could have seen the shore, I would have made it ... I would not have given up!"

Only when you and I can see the shore, the goal, the one whom we can really trust -- only then can we make it! That is the difference between just living and having "real life." In Jesus Christ and his legions of white & gray ... we have seen the shore, the goal, the one **TO WHOM WE CAN GO ... THE ONE WHOM WE CAN TRUST.** His word is "real life ..." lasting life: forgiveness, acceptance, compassion, mercy, understanding and peace! Don't leave home without Him!

AMEN.

Pentecost 14
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
September 1, 1996
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“WHEN LOSERS BECOME WINNERS!”

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!’ But Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but human things. Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. Matt. 16:24-26

A few years ago, *Teen Magazine* published an article entitled: Succeed at Anything Through These Ten Principles (we might compare these to the Ten Commandments). I can’t comment on all ten, but let’s look at the first five to get the flavor of things.

The first principle: BELIEVE IN YOURSELF. Who would disagree with this; we all know the importance of self-confidence; but compare this to the 1st Commandment: *Believe above all else in God!* Secondly, *Teen* advises, ALWAYS ACT CONFIDENTLY! ... and then goes on to say that “even if you don’t feel that way, just “fake-it-til-you-make-it.” So, now teens have been told to “believe in themselves even if they must fake it!” Thirdly, SURROUND YOURSELF WITH GO GETTERS! that sounds pretty good, but now what do you do with 80% of your friends who aren’t Go-Getters?? Fourthly, NEVER TAKE FAILURE PERSONALLY! In other words, don’t really be responsible for your mistakes; don’t worry too much about ever having to say “I’m sorry!” Finally, ALWAYS REWARD YOURSELF! In other words, think first and foremost about yourself and filling your own needs. Obviously, I’ve exaggerated the analysis here to make a point.

Are these mere teen-age platitudes ... or are they the basic principles and strategies for WINNING in this world? Let’s face it -- by and large, most of us agree with them: believe in yourself; act confidently; surround yourself with go-getters; never take failure too personally, always reward yourself. Which parent here doesn’t want his child/children to be winners; we all want this for our kids ... we certainly don’t want them to be LOSERS.

In fact, we (at least most of the men here) show their faith in these principles every week at this time of the year. These are basic principles for successful football teams. In fact, a few years ago, two small cities in MICH. combined their H.S. football teams. They claimed their motive was to “Save Money.” But we all know the real reason. They WANTED A WINNER! Combining their muscle made them bigger than any other team in the league. YES, being raised in Lombardi-Country-Wisconsin, I know the mentality well: Winning Was Everything to Vince Lombardi. And I’ve yet to find any true-blooded football fan who promotes LOSING. Certainly the Jim Findlay’s of Toledo expect WINNERS at the Glass Bowl!!

And that was the same set of circumstances confronting Peter in today's gospel. Peter was still "on a high" from being told by Jesus "*that upon the rock of his faith, the church would be built!*" Wow! Peter was really feeling like A WINNER: he was believing in himself, he was acting confidently, he was surrounding himself with go-getters, he was looking for big rewards! Then in the next breath, Jesus conveys a very different mission: *that he must go to Jerusalem, undergo great suffering and be killed.* That hardly sounds like a WINNING strategy to Peter ... and he'll have no part of it as the mission of the church. So he rebukes Jesus on the spot! And if you or I had been there, we may have done the same thing ... because it's just not the American way "to suffer and die!!" We only think about, talk about, and care about WINNING! You can't be from Ohio or Michigan and talk about "suffering defeat!"

Well, if you're from Jesus-County then you can talk about it -- in fact, the word "sacrifice" becomes a daily part of your vocabulary & lifestyle. And that's where the American Way and Jesus' Way often part company. In fact, when it comes to the word "sacrifice," I only know of one American sport that uses it: baseball. It's called a "sacrifice fly;" and you only hit a sacrifice fly when someone is on third base with only one out & you can be assured of scoring the run. Thus, you only sacrifice when it really isn't much of a risk!

So you see, Peter is not the only apostle who has trouble with the concept of "sacrifice" as a winning strategy. We all have trouble when our team or our country or our church calls us to make sacrifices. And obviously, it only follows that we also have trouble with the notion of LOSING. This past week I visited a Glenwood family that is truly going through many losses; losing this community, losing some of their children, losing their church, losing an area they've known all their lives, losing their jobs here, and the list goes on. Losing is a very painful process! And this family knows there will be painful days ahead; but thankfully, they are a family of faith - so they will be there for each other. But they also know it takes more than a family to really raise a child and assure that child of security. It takes a whole village, a whole congregation, a whole supportive community. Hillary Clinton didn't create that notion; Jesus Christ was the author. His faith in His Father was a faith which understood that God never promised that life would be without painful losses. In fact, quite to the contrary, Jesus told his followers they would face all kinds of painful hardships, rejection and losses. He said, "they would have to take up their crosses and follow His Way, His Truth & His Life!!"

So, one week Peter is the Great Confessor; and the next week he's the Great Contradictor! One week Rock of Gibraltar; new week Stumbling Block! And isn't that the way it is for most of us. One week we profess great faithfulness; the next week we live like cowards. One week like Peter, we claim to total allegiance; yet the next moment of opportunity to show it, we deny that we even know Him. We do the things that we know we should not do, and we don't do the things that we know we should do. In short, we think we are WINNERS, but in reality we're really STUMBLING BLOCKS

... REAL LOSERS FOR OUR LORD. *We constantly make mistakes; we regularly fall short of the glory of God; we make promises and then don't keep them; we try to be patient and kind, not jealous or boastful only to lose our tempers and go crazy when we said we'd never do that again; and we certainly don't always win, even when we're Michigan, Ohio State or the University of Toledo!!* In short, we all need to be redeemed ... made over again ... given a fresh, renewed start!!

And that's WHEN LOSERS BECOME WINNERS ... when they realize that only Jesus Christ can make us over again!! The first real step of winning is realizing that the world does not revolve around me or my church or my school or my income or anything else of mine. According to Jesus Christ, the first step of WINNING is to admit that we screw up -- that we are often LOSERS -- THAT WE NEED HELP. Like members of AA, at that moment we reach out to others like ourselves and see that God's help comes from Jesus' friends. And what a revelation it is to be with all the friends of Jesus who are helping us carry his cross. Jesus never said, "Carry it alone!" Look at the text again -- he said "let them carry their cross!" It's plural! he was saying, "Get together at 2545 Monroe Street and carry it with one another, regardless of your color or gender or identity or whatever." *JUST LOSE YOUR LIFE FOR MY SAKE ... JUST BE WILLING TO FORGIVE AND UPLIFT AND CARRY ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS.*

While serving at Hope Lutheran, I was very blessed to know many such "cross-bearers." I'm sure I'll get to know many more here at Glenwood. But let me just remember one such cross-bearer! He was 25 yrs old when I first met him; he had suffered his whole life with spina-biffita and had become a total paraplegic. Over the eight years I knew him, he was constantly on kidney dialysis and was in-and-out of Mercy Hosp. at least 30 times. Yet every time I saw him he was determined to live and give of himself; he was extremely physically weak, but he was tremendously spiritually strong. His constant mission was to be a source of mercy and joy and kindness for others. Even though he was no longer a physical "Don-Wan," he had more women loving him than I've ever thought of. Yes, he had trouble lifting himself out of his wheelchair, but he lifted the cross and carried it better than 99% of Hope members. When he died a year ago, I proudly said at his funeral: Here was a man who knew the essence of "losing his life for others." Many in this world saw him as a Loser, but anyone who really knew him recognized that he had Become a real Winner!!

I'm certain you've seen many like Jeff at Glenwood. I've already become deeply impressed with your Social Ministry Committee's outreach to "lose itself for the less fortunate." Likewise, your vision statement says you are committed to diversity: "to reaching out & welcoming all people!" I hope you pray that mission statement every day! So, I know that Glenwood is seeking to follow in the Way of its Lord!! To be a cross-bearing church.

Thus, I leave you with only one final challenge, not only for Glenwood but our whole community and nation! Next week Glenwood launches its teaching ministry; we call it Rally Sunday! In reality, it's one of the greatest ways that the church "bears the cross of Jesus!" It takes a lot of sacrificial effort to teach the gospel -- for teachers, for parents, for young people and for adults. But without a teaching ministry, the Way of Jesus gets an improper foundation -- it doesn't become the Rock of our lives.

My dear friends, there are a lot of Stumbling Blocks that get in the way of teaching the gospel. And the real LOSERS become our children. When we make soccer games or football or whatever else the Stumbling Block for Jesus, then like Peter, Jesus says: "Get behind me Satan, you are a stumbling block to me; you have only put your mind on human things!" And people who only put their minds on human or worldly things ARE THE REAL LOSERS in this world.

I appeal to every person at Glenwood, but esp. to the parents and adults here. Take up the cross of Jesus for our teaching ministry. Help when you are asked to help. Be positive when the Name of Jesus Christ is involved. By all means, don't give your children the impression that church or Sunday School or catechism is only for Losers!! The stuff of Jesus Christ is the very stuff of Winners! When you encounter Glenwood kids at church -- be strange like me: smile at them! give them a hug! it may be the only hug they'll get that day. But above all, don't leave home or don't leave Glenwood without bearing the cross of Jesus ... without making a sacrifice for our Lord! After all, he gave his whole life for us -- and that love & that mercy of Jesus is not only the ultimate Victory God has already promised us! It's the Victory God wants us to live and give every moment of our lives!!

AMEN.

*Pentecost XIV / St. Bartholomew
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
August 24, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor*

“THE SWORD, THE SHIELD & THE HELMET”

When many of Jesus’ disciples heard these teachings they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it.’ ... Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went with him. John 6:60;68 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand the wiles of the devil. Ephesians 6:10-11

This past Thursday I served as a spiritual advisor for a prospective Lutheran seminarian. This 40-yr old person has been very successful in several careers, including a sales executive, a marketing analyst, a public school teacher, a non-profit fund raiser for community organizations, and most recently a prison instructor. And now at 40+ years of age he wants to be a pastor. Through his many career moves, he’s always moved from “Plan A” to “Plan B” -- always having a back-up plan in his back pocket. But he said, “With this calling, I think I’ve finally reached a pivotal point in my life where there is only one response: I will serve you Jesus Christ from now on as a Lutheran pastor.”

We might say in light of today’s text that this person has been struck with “the sword of the spirit!” Not to say that he had never been there before! But this time he admitted it was more graphic; this time he could no longer compromise his response to God. Paul identifies that confrontation with the Word of God as “the sword of the Spirit.” To me - and I think for this seminarian - that means that God’s word often comes to us like a sword -- like a very decisive, invasive, interrogating & authoritative demand for a response. If it is truly God’s Word, it often cuts us away from all other loyalties & calls us first and foremost to be obedient to God’s will ... and his will alone. Not that we can always achieve that will -- but at least that’s what we are called to do. So listen to a few of the multitude of Jesus’ sayings which are examples of this “sword of the spirit:”

“Follow me and don’t look behind ... let the dead bury the dead!”

“I have not come to be served, but to serve and to offer my life as a ransom for everyone else.”

“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life - no one comes to the Father except by me.”

“You cannot serve God and money [with one will]!”

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you!”

“I have not come to bring peace to this world but a sword -- to set sons against fathers and daughters against mothers ... and whoever loves other things or other people more than me is not fit to be my disciple.”

“Not everyone who calls me ‘Lord’ ‘Lord’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

And then recently from our last few gospels, “Eat my flesh and drink by blood” - be totally consumed by my power & presence!”

Is it any wonder that the disciples said, "These teachings are difficult; who can accept them. ... And because of [these hard sayings] his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

Things have not really changed much in 2000 years. There are still many in this world who will not wear the whole armor of God. **They will take on a "little bit of Christ's spirit" as long as they don't have to give up much of their selfishness. They want the "shield of faith" without the "sword of the spirit." They want the assurances of God's promises without the personal commitment "to do the will of the Father." They want all the benefits of God's blessings without the benevolence of being God's servants to others. But Paul reminds us that God has not called us to merely take Christianity 101 -- the Freshmen course. Like all good followers of any Master, we are to move up to Christianity 401: the higher level course of greater maturity & leadership skills. As God gives us time, ability & possessions, we are to grow beyond a beginner's commitment!**

Ours is a religion which challenges us to run God's race - not merely a marathon for man or some human cure. God's race sets goals which transcend all human achievements because they require more than good health or a good physique: **God's goals demand a sacrifice of the heart, mind, soul and body. They require total surrender.** And let's face it -- there are a lot of Christians who surrender only one hour a week to run with God; the other 167 hours of the week are totally dedicated to self! So like many 1st century disciples -- a lot of folks drop out of God's race along the way because he expects too much of his runners. We need only look around on Sundays as well as the other six days to be mindful of the many Christian dropouts.

So it was that this prospective seminarian and I were reflecting on how he had been powerfully "touched by the sword of the spirit." I too have been touched powerfully by that sword -- and so have each of you in this room. It happened in our baptisms, confirmations, births of children, possibly marriages and any other times we've felt the "cutting edge of the spirit." **But the challenge is to keep that sword at our side in the midst of the many arrows of compromise and idolatry that are slung at us daily. Every day poison darts of status and earthly security try to overcome the sword of the spirit. We not only need the "shield of faith" to protect us from these darts -- we also need the "breastplate of righteousness" to stifle all our greedy & hurtful inclinations. We must daily pray: "O Lord-~~help~~ help me to hunger not only for my pleasure but for your righteousness; make me thirst not merely for my satisfaction but for your salvation for all!"**

Yes, my friend & I talked a lot about what a struggle it is to be touched by this sword of the spirit. **It often makes us very unsettled even with what we see going on in the church.** For instance, the decisions this past week at the ELCA Convention in Philadelphia. **Some of us wonder whose spirit is really leading our church to reject unity with one tradition while at the same time strongly affirming unity with three other traditions.** If all these traditions are affirming "one Lord, one faith, one baptism"--then how can we allow church structures or

different politics or ordination issues to prevent us from being obedient to God - who instructed his Son to pray "that we might be One as they are One!?" I advised my friend that as he leaves for Columbus -- "be careful that you keep clear that you are running God's race, not Martin Luther's ... and make certain that the faculty requires you to "wear the armor of God rather than the academic robe of Luther, Wesley or any other pope, priest or pastor."

I certainly don't have all the answers to the many questions posed by our church in Philadelphia - but I am fearful that our church and many others are becoming more concerned about "how we look in the mirror" rather than "how God sees us." For eons, one of the greatest sins of our church and each of us individually is that we spend too much time "primping and pontificating" in front of our mirrors and our altars. We are not called to serve ourselves in our sanctuaries but to become sacrificial servants of our Lord to the world. Regretably - today's church & too much of our society has become intimidated by the world's principalities & powers which require "political correctness or not being offensive to any different group." The facts are -- Jesus was not always "politically correct" and he was often "offensive" to his own people the Jews. That's why his Word was called "the sword of the spirit" -- because risked obedience to God rather than compromising to powerful people. Yes, sometimes the church has been so concerned about being "prim and proper" ... "about not offending anyone" that it ends up misunderstood / misinterpreted by everyone. Since by now we all need a little comic relief - I must tell the story of how a "prim & proper" spirit was big trouble for one Lutheran camp director.

A very proper & strict Baptist lady wanted to attend a Lutheran camp in Wisc. but didn't know what kind of accommodations Lutherans offered. Since she was so "proper" ... and wouldn't even use the word "toilet" in her request -- she finally decided to ask the director if the camp had a "BC"--bathroom commode. She ended her letter: "Finally, sir, does your camp have a BC on the premises?"

Obviously, the director, knowing this was a devout Baptist lady, concluded that she wanted to know if there was a "Baptist Church [BC] on the premises." So he wrote: "Dear madam. I take pleasure in informing you that a BC is just nine miles north of our Lutheran camp -- and it has a seating capacity of 250. I admit its quite a distance if you're in the habit of going regularly, but you'll be delighted to know that some of our people go "packing a picnic lunch and making a day of it at the BC." The last time my wife and I went was six weeks ago, and it was so crowded we had to stand up the whole time. But they're planning to raise money for more BC seats. If you should decide to come to our camp, perhaps I could accompany you the first time & introduce you to others using our BC.
Sincerely yours.

Amazing isn't it - in our attempts to be politically correct and non-offensive -- we become far more concerned with our own human image than we seek to be the image of God. The church's business is not one of promoting or protecting it's own "proper image" -- it's about stimulating messengers to carry "the sword of the spirit." Maybe it's time for the church to become much more

"offensive" -- "by taking up the sword of God's spirit" and cutting ourselves away from all the idolatry & greed & perversions of the world rather than compromising at conventions to avoid upsetting our own Lutherans.

And where does that take us?? Right back where the prospective seminarian and I started. To be about the business of God, we can't avoid the tough questions. And the toughest question ever asked by God is in today's gospel: TO WHOM WILL YOU GO?? To whom will you turn when you're faced with life's greatest burden?? Whom can you trust and really confide in?? Where can you go for compassion rather than condemnation when you've gone astray in this world?? Whom will hold you up when you feel like you're going to pieces?? Yes - who will be at your side from now 'til all eternity??

There's but one answer to all these questions. We have come to believe and to know that Jesus Christ is the Holy One of God. And He is the Only One who will be on our side no matter what! That's what he promised in Holy Baptism! That's what he continues to promise in Holy Communion. And that's His promise today through the sword of His spirit -- "I will be with you 'til the end of the age!" There is no more authoritative word in the world. It is hard sometimes to hear it. It is even more difficult at many times to follow it! But it is the helmet of salvation for this world -- it is the only Word that rescues us from sin/ sickness, from guilt/ greed, from defeat & death. **SO - NEVER LEAVE HOME WITHOUT IT!**

AMEN.