

TRINITY XXIV

Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee

November 11, 1972

"AUDIENCE OR COMMUNITY?"

"And so, from the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." (Col. 1:9-14)

"What does it take to keep a congregation alive?" "How can the church get beyond a management theology?" "How do you enable a pastor to enable his people to be ministers?" "Do we have people-oriented-ministries, or statistics-oriented ministries?" How can a church synod help congregations become religious communities?"

These and many more were questions raised at a two-day meeting last week. It was a meeting of the Function and Structure Committee of the Wisconsin-Upper Michigan Synod of the LCA. As a member of that Committee I struggled with twelve other members to find answers.

The answers are needed because the questions are being raised by persons like yourselves. Answers are also needed because our Synod wants to reshape itself so that it will help pastors and congregations TO BETTER minister to each other.

Lay persons on the Committee did not waste time beating around the bush. They challenged we pastors continuously with the same question: When will you stop dominating the ministry? When is the church going to let lay people share Christ's ministry? Pastors talk about the priesthood of all believers, but they don't let all the believers BE the priesthood.

These people - not ordained pastors - concluded

that the church has ^{often} become the AUDIENCE OF FAITH,
not the COMMUNITY OF FAITH.

They claimed, that like an audience, congregations have been **CONDITIONED** to receive, but not to share. They claimed that people have been **ENSLAVED** to the pastor's witness, and not **FREED** to witness themselves. They claimed, that like an audience, congregations are fed by pastors, but **ARE NOT** motivated **TO FEED** the pastors, each other, or society.

These same lay people felt the church should be **A COMMUNITY**, not **AN AUDIENCE**. Much like a family, they see the church as a sharing community. A community in which the leader motivates others to lead. Motivates others to call. Motivates others to share ideas. Motivates others to witness to their knowledge of God's will - to share their fruits of the Spirit.

For the most part, I listened to their challenge and accusation. I often felt up-tight. I wanted to be defensive - and sometimes I was. And yet so much of what they were saying is true. Ministry too often is seen **ONLY** as the pastor's thing. Sometimes that's true because pastors want it that way. Many times it's true because pastors are **CATEGORIZED** as the only ones capable of ministry.

Both pastors and congregations are wrong when they promote these attitudes. This is clearly seen in the words of Paul's prayer to the Church at Colosse:

" . . . we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."

Paul's prayer was not DIRECTED to PASTORS. It was directed to the whole church -- the total ministry at Colosse. He asked that ALL may be filled with knowledge. That ALL lead a life worthy of the Lord - fully pleasing to him. That ALL bear fruit in every good work. That ALL increase in the knowledge of God. Finally, Paul says that God has delivered ALL FAITHFUL from the dominion of darkness and transferred them to the kingdom of his beloved Son.

Paul does not see the Church as an audience; he sees ALL OF US as a community of knowledgeable, committed, talented servants of God. He does not limit our knowledge, or commitment, or talents to an hour of worship. As God's faithful followers, we have been delivered from the darkness of guilt - and despair - and sin. We have been delivered from the burdens of yesterday's faults and failures.

But in being delivered, we have been commissioned to deliver others - to free others from their faults and failures, guilts and despair. My Christian friends, God has given each of us the power to do that. That is the ministry of our Lord, and that is the ministry of those who lead a life worthy of the Lord. And that ministry is NOT LIMITED to pastors.

We are called to minister to each other, because we EACH possess the knowledge of God's will. We each KNOW that God wills THAT WE FREE each other from the faults and failures, the guilts and despair of our yesterdays.

It does not take a theological education to minister in this way. But it does take a community of faith to do it. And that is more than an audience. God's will takes more than the ministry of a pastor.

If each of us is to be REALLY delivered from the darkness of yesterday's faults or failures or guilt, then each of us must witness our knowledge of God's will. That means each of us must free and accept one another and any other sinner, regardless of the sin, the fault, or the failure.

Of such is the community of faith. Of such can be this community of faith. Of such is the heart, soul, mind, and strength of our ministry to each other. My friends, there are many among us who need to hear this witness of our ministry. They need to be freed from the sins, and faults, and failures of yesterday. And they need more than the pastor's words -- they need to know that the knowledge of God's will can be spoken from each of us. They need to know that we are more than an audience -- they need to know that we are a community of faith in thought word, and deed.

Let us minister together -- let us share our knowledge of God's will together -- let us free one another from yesterday's sins.

But we also have another very specific way that we can minister to one another. We have a way that we can share with one another our knowledge of God's will.

Many of you have led a life worthy of the Lord in this congregation for many decades. But your ministry cannot stop now -- for no one is too old to DO God's ministry. And NO ONE ever has a full knowledge of God.

Each of you has been called to minister to this community -- and to minister to the pastors of this community. If Redeemer is to remain strong, we need the ministry of all - young and old.

Each of you has or will be invited to a Cottage meeting. Your response to this invitation

will indicate whether you are a PART OF THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH or the AUDIENCE OF FAITH. If we expect to minister to each other's needs, then we must take time to SHARE our hopes, our fears, our expectations, and our disappointments.

A Cottage meeting allows each of us an opportunity TO SHARE our knowledge of the will of God. We minister to one another by TELLING EACH OTHER how God's will should be expressed through the ministry of Redeemer. We hope you will lead a life worthy of the Lord by responding to his invitation to ministry at Redeemer.

In so doing we can only BEAR FRUIT and increase in the knowledge of God. These meetings may even allow us TO FREE one another from the guilts or disappointments of the past.

Let us accept the invitation from a fellow minister, so we will continue as a Community of Faith - always striving to be more than an audience.

Finally, your knowledge of the will of God must bear fruit beyond this community. You and I are called to share our knowledge of God and lead Christ's life with those outside this community.

Suppose someone asked you: How do I become a Christian? How can I be saved? What is the will of God? How do I repent when I feel that God can't forgive me?

How would you respond to any one of these questions. What if someone came to you in need of food - in need of acceptance and love -- in need of forgiveness?

Would you answer the questions - or respond to the need - by telling the person to go to the pastor? Too often we've been conditioned to say: "Go to the pastor." But is that really ALWAYS necessary?

God has revealed himself to each of us. We each have knowledge of his will. We each have led lives worthy of the Lord. We each have the ability to bear fruit - to do God's good works. We each have been strengthened with God's power. We each share God's kingdom as faithful saints. We have each been delivered from the darkness of yesterday's sins.

So when asked a question -- when asked to respond to the need of another person -- we have the answer and we can fulfill the need if we REALLY want to. For we are all ministers of the Lord. We have all been given the knowledge of God's will.

So let us be -- let us remain forever -- a community of faith. A community of fellow ministers who have been strengthened with God's power - who have led a life worthy of our Lord -- who continue to bear fruit in good works, always increasing in the knowledge of God -- who continue to give thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light - the light of freedom from the faults and failures of yesterday.

Amen.

PENTECOST XXIV
Church of the Master - Troy
November 17, 1974

"GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?"

"When Jesus came to that place, he looked up and said to Zacchaeus, 'Hurry down, Zacchaeus, because I must stay in your house today.' Zacchaeus hurried down and welcomed him with great joy. All the people who saw it started grumbling, 'This man has gone as a guest to the home of a sinner.'" Luke 19:5-7

Imagine that Jesus were scheduled to visit the Motor City this afternoon. Do you think you'd find any of the corporate chiefs of our auto industry climbing trees to see him? Do you think it's foolish to even suggest such a picture?

Well, that's somewhat parallel to the situation with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was not a tree climbing kook. He was a very rich and highly successful Jewish businessman. He was what you and I might classically describe as a real wheeler & dealer -- he was a profiteer par excellence. Needless to say, it was not his normal daily exercise to climb trees.

And yet here is this Jewish tycoon - prominent for his wealth - feared for his power - hated for his defrauding profits --- here was "Mr. Success" climbing a tree to see Jesus. Would a man of such prominence do such a thing simply out of curiosity? Would a man who was void of ethical concern be moved to tree climbing by a man who was virtue incarnate? It surely must have been more than a spectator need that prompted Zacchaeus to scale a sycamore.

Obviously, we can only speculate as to the real motivation. We do know from Jesus own words in this story - at least by implication - that he possibly considered Zacchaeus to be "among the lost." Jesus hardly means "lost" referring to highway directions -- he means "lost" to God ---

no longer in the company of believers - out of a living relationship with Christ and his way in life. ~~Yes~~ It is highly likely that Jesus considered Zacchaeus to be among these "lost."

Such being the case, it is very possible that Zacchaeus' tree-climbing reflected a deep yearning on his part to come into a meaningful relationship with this Jesus. Is it not possible that Zacchaeus knew that his life was shallow -- he knew that his life was simply filled with the trickery of his tax trade. He knew he had cheated many -- he knew he had compromised any semblance of religious value -- he knew he had sold his soul to a foreign Roman regime -- yes, it is highly credible that Zacchaeus was an empty man - filled with guilt - deeply yearning just to see this man whom he had been told had freed others from their drudgery in life.

So that was very likely Zacchaeus' motivation. *to get a better work*
What is yours and mine? Why do we come to share this moment? Is the motivation for church attendance merely one of curiosity? Do we come only out of habit? Do we come only because we have to perform as usher, or choir member, or lay assistant, or SCS teacher?

Or like Zacchaeus, do we climb out of bed (which today I would compare with climbing a tree) because we know within ourselves that we need to share the presence of Christ? Each of us experiences the stresses -- the forces of dehumanization - the slanderings - the constant pressure to produce. And these forces, along with the normal breakdowns of life, hopefully motivate us to be here -- to share the presence of Christ through the fellowship of believers -- to hear his promise of forgiveness and to share it with one another.

Yes, Christians need this because EACH OF US, like Zacchaeus, knows within he is an outcast.

And so our motivation in life is to seek out Christ's presence - the presence of this fellowship -- a place where we are accepted, forgiven - yes, made whole again.

AND HOW DO WE KNOW THIS? Here again our lesson instructs us. Jesus walked through that crowd and sought out Zacchaeus -- he chose to COME TO DINNER with that man who had previously denied him. That simply means that God aggressively chooses the outcast -- he seeks out the lost. There are times we've all been there -- God uses each of us and NEEDS each of us to bring one another back when we're lost.

For instance, yesterday six confirmation kids and three adults delivered several boxes of food to St. Philip's Workers Lutheran ministry in the inner city. I can only believe God was using us -- his servants at the Master -- to help him aggressively meet the needs of some of society's outcasts. I am deeply grateful for your food offerings for this momentary outreach.

But God does not stop after he has come to dinner only once with us. It is my prayer -- and I'm sure God's hope -- that this offering of food was only the beginning of our sharing. So as we celebrate this accomplishment today -- let us make it our launching pad for the future.

But in line with Jesus' aggressive relationship to Zacchaeus, we'd best not limit Jesus' concern to the obvious outcasts of society. From an external perspective, Zacchaeus was not an obvious outcast -- he was rich and undoubtedly took very good care of himself. Zacchaeus was a hidden outcast - only when you knew him well did you know of his crockery. He was a man trapped by his past -- desperately looking for release from his own guilt and from the hatred of those around him.

Whether by one's own actions, or the hurtful actions of someone else, there are abundant numbers of hidden outcasts in our society. As God's instruments of forgiving love -- as his church -- he calls upon us to seek out those persons whom we've come to realize ~~are~~ hidden outcasts.

To seek out those who have made a mistake - who have failed - who have been rejected at work or by society - to seek these out and to let them know that from Christ's perspective they are still acceptable. It is unlikely that these persons will be climbing trees in order to find a Christ-like relationship. But they will be sending other cues of their need.

Cues of Boredom
~~From~~ ~~grinders~~ -- uncontrolled fits of anger-- constant depression -- withdrawm silence -- exaggerated laughter -- and many similar signals might be the reaching-out attempt today for deliverance from the sins of the past.

Jesus' cue from Zacchaeus was not a detailed confession - he simply saw Zacchaeus in the tree. And then Jesus invited himself to dinner-- he took the aggressive step to get involved.

That was not a religiously safe thing to do -- it was not safe to get involved with a Jewish cheat - a defrauder. But Jesus does not choose "safety" as his standard for involvement -- he chooses need -- he chooses to seek and save the lost.

Zacchaeus was lost to cheating -- the poor are often lost to stealing or apathy -- the rich are often lost to their own possessions.

Jesus aggressively chose to break bread with Zaccacheus who was lost. Christians aggressively choose to break bread with persons who need a relationship of forgiving love -- who need to be made whole and honest to God again.

Finally - what happened to Zacchaeus after accepting Jesus' self-invitation. Because Jesus cared about Zacchaeus even before any changes in his life, because of that, Zacchaeus was able to ACTIVELY CHANGE. Because his life had been freed from guilt and continued defrauding - Zacchaeus could finally direct his life to fulfill God's purpose.

Zacchaeus' response was a lot more than a pious phrase about how Jesus had changed his life. Zacchaeus lived out his faith. This final segment of the story puts straight many of the foggy notions that mislead people: i.e., the illusion that faith in Christ has nothing to do with the way we regard and handle our money; the notion that you can do to people whatever you can get by with. Zacchaeus had lived an empty faith. He was tired of it -- so tired that he went to great lengths just to get a glimpse of someone who represented everything he was not.

Jesus has invited himself to dinner with us -- he extends his loving presence to us whenever we have lost touch with his way -- he calls us as his earthly agents to do the same for all outcasts. And we take the risk to follow him with our money - our talents - our time because we believe there is nothing worse than to be lost from his presence.

May this worship fellowship always strengthen us with his love and TO DO his love.

Amen.

PENTECOST 24

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

November 18, 1979

"GOD SO LOVED THAT ... "

Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them; that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey." Deut 6:3

You will note that I have intentionally NOT finished the sermon title this morning. With the celebration of Thanksgiving just four days away -- it's far more important for you to finish this statement than for me or the Bible to do it.

How would you finish the title? In what ways do you believe that God has loved you? Do you consciously look for the multitude of ways that God expresses his love to you? Has God's love for you really changed your response to Him and Others in the last decade.. or the last year ... or the last week?

Unfortunately - many Christians know John3:16 very well: God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have eternal life." We all know that beautiful Bible passage. But in what way has it changed our living and loving of each day??

Or have we made it such a heavenly sounding passage that it has nothing TO DO WITH OUR DAY TO DAY receiving and giving of God's love?

Or possibly we've come to the place in life similar to that of a catechism student who said to me after reading John3:16 -- Big deal!?!

His response reminds me of a telephone call I received this past week. A young lady wanted me to marry her. After inquiring about the fact

that she had no active worship life for several years -- I asked her why she wanted to be married by me at Hope Church. Her response was: because I want to be the third generation to be married at Hope Church.

As was obvious -- her response was totally devoid of any understanding of God's love ... or of the real purpose of the church. She just wanted to use God and his church for a one-night stand. She totally failed to understand that God's purpose for his church WAS FOR MORE THAN WEDDING CEREMONIES.

In short -- she wanted to USE God -- she wanted to use God the way some people use a prostitute. She wanted to use him for her own selfish purposes -- and then discard Him and his church. Well - needless to say -- she was not too happy when I told her that God WANTS TO BE LOVED with our hearts, minds, soul, and strength -- not just to be used for a one-night stand.

Yes - God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son -- but for many people, that hasn't made much difference. They go on with business as usual. They only have time, talent, and treasure for God WHEN THEY WANT TO BUY HIS SERVICES or WHEN THE CHIPS ARE DOWN.

But thank God for his remnant of faithful ones-- which includes all of us who are here out of gratitude for his love for us. Yes - thank God that he has always called a remnant of followers who have remained faithful even in the worst of times. Throughout history -- this remnant has often been the true backbone of God's love... and likewise, this remnant has been the backbone of society.

We need only look at the text before us. God was calling Israel to be his chosen ones -- his remnant people. And he promised them a land of milk and honey. And if they would remain faithful to his cause OF LOVING HIM AND LOVING EACH OTHER -- they would enjoy this land for many generations to come.

Interesting isn't it -- that God would chose this small group of imprisoned Israelites in Egypt TO BE THE UNIVERSAL MESSENGERS OF HIS LOVE. While in captivity in Egypt - Israel was a motley, measely, murmuring aggregation. She wasn't strong -- she didn't command thousands of battalions. She was a weak group of slaves.

But God's love worked through that motley remnant of people. They wandered for years in the wilderness -- they sacrificed -- they starved -- they suffered. But with God's word of loving freedom as their battle cry -- they finally came into a land flowing with milk and honey. And then they worked hard to maintain the blessings that God had bestowed upon them.

This remnant of Israel knew that God's love was down-to-earth and very real. And they gave thanks with sweat, and sacrifices, and Psalms of joy for their deliverance.

Likewise, it was some 2500 years later that another remnant of God set out upon the Atlantic for a land flowing with milk and honey -- a land in which they could freely labor and love in the likeness of God. And after wandering in the wilderness of the Atlantic - after suffering and starving and sacrificing -- they came to this great land of promise.

Like the ancient Israelites -- this band of pilgrims was not a great army. But like the Israelites -- they were led by a deep gratitude for the love of God. And they would not let

hardship and hunger dampen their spirits. Terrors and tragedies filled those early days in Jamestown. One chronicler put it this way:

Of little more than a hundred settlers who made it in May - half were dead by September. Before the fort at Jamestown was finished, it was totally destroyed by fire. Food rotted, rats invaded, and supplies disappeared. In the winter of 1609-10, the Jamestown colony was reduced from 500 to a mere 60 miserable, starving creatures.

But these people believed that God had brought them there. They believed that God truly loved them and wanted them to establish a new land flowing with milk and honey. And like their Jewish forefathers -- they sweat, they sacrificed, they loved God with heart, mind, soul and strength, and they loved their neighbor as themselves -- BECAUSE WITHOUT LOVE OF NEIGHBOR, they knew they didn't stand a chance of surviving.

God so loved that he gave them a land flowing with milk and honey -- and they would be damned before they would take it for granted. For these pilgrims -- for this remnant -- God's love was more than a one-night stand. It meant daily sacrifices -- daily worship - daily thanksgiving -- and daily loving your neighbor as yourself.

Dear friends in Christ -- we belong to both of these remnants -- to both of these pilgrim peoples. We belong to their traditions -- traditions which do not take the love of God for granted. Traditions which have been built by the sweat - and sacrifice - and suffering of a few for the sake of the many.

These are the roots that you and I come from... we come from the very roots of God's great remnant

people -- a people who KNEW WHAT IT MEANT TO SAY:
God so loved that he gave.

Yes - we come from a people who deeply
appreciated what God had given them. But they
never took God's giving for granted. They were
a people who showed by the sweat of their brows,
and the sharing of their goods THAT THEY WERE
TRULY THANKFUL. They not only loved God with
their hearts, minds, souls, and strength --
but they loved their neighbors IN THE SAME WAY.

We listen to the news of inflation. We listen
to the news of unrest in Iran and other places.
We listen to the news of bad times for the big
three. Yes, we listen to all this bad news,
and then we try to convince ourselves OF HOW
BAD WE'VE GOT IT. We try to excuse ourselves
by telling one another that God doesn't love us
'cause we've got it so bad.

But the truth is not in us if we believe those
kind of lies. Because we've got it much better
than our forefathers ever dream of ... we've got
a land flowing with milk and honey that they
would have thought never possible.

There is only one way for us to ^{live} -- and
that's to show our thanksgiving -- BECAUSE GOD
HAS SURELY LOVED US by not only giving us
a land of milk and honey -- but also by giving
us a life of eternal abundance through
his son, Jesus Christ.

Let us give in the example of his Son ...
which was also the example of our Jewish and
Christian forefathers!

AMEN

PENTECOST XXIV (CONSECRATION SUNDAY)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
November 14, 1993
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE WISE & THE FOOLISH"

But the bridegroom replied "Truly I tell you, I do now know you." Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. Matt. 25:13

There is a parable that at one time was rather sarcastically aimed at Russia; today it could be aimed at any world power. The story goes that the United States, Japan and Russia had each selected their best astronaut to participate in a joint two-year mission in space. At a pre-launch briefing, the astronauts were told they could take anything with them as long as it weighed no more than 125#.

The American said "that his wife weighed only 112#, so he'd like to take her." The Japanese flyer had a fascination with Greek philosophy, so he asked to take along 125# of classical books so that he could learn Greek and study the culture. Finally, the Russian said: "We'll be gone so long that I want to take 125# of the best Havana cigars." All of their requests were honored.

Two years later the astronauts returned to Earth. The American stepped out of the spaceship holding an infant in each arm. The crowd roared with approval. The Japanese crawled out of the spaceship and immediately addressed the crowd in flawless Greek. Again, there was a large roar of approval. Then the Russian stepped out. His mouth was turned down and his teeth clenched onto the end of a cigar; with juice drawing down his chin, he stepped to the microphone and said: "Does anybody have a match??"

So goes one of the greatest lessons of life: BE PREPARED - of what value are cigars on the moon when the matches are back home on earth?! Much like that Russian, probably most of us in this room have made "foolish mistakes" in our preparations for cherished events. We've all paid good money for a fine garment and then never worn it; many of us know first hand what it means to buy a lemon; some of us have made significant investments only to end up losing because we had received short-sighted advice. Yet our tragedies of foolishness have seen transformation in our triumphs of WISDOM.

Well, it would probably be fun for us to gather in clusters this morning and talk about our experiences of foolishness and wisdom. But that wouldn't address the point of today's parable. In fact, when we look carefully at the five wise and five foolish bridesmaids of this text ... we can readily identify with both of them. Like the five wise maids - we have all had moments when we have truly been ready for whatever will come. But equally, like the foolish maids - we have all known missed opportunities simply because we had not made adequate preparations. On the surface, the point of this parable is very simple: JESUS IS SAYING, "DON'T BE FOOLISH ... BE READY AT ALL TIMES ... YOU DO NOT KNOW THE HOUR OR THE DAY."

In the simplest sense - this parable has always been a warning to be ready for what our faith calls "THE DAY OF THE LORD" -- the end time, the ultimate moment of truth, the day of accounting, one's own time of death. In this sense, THE WISE are always those who never take "time" or "life" or the present situation for granted. Most mainline Christians do not like to confront the theme of today's parable - the notion that there is "a Day when Christ will come again!" But that's exactly what we profess every week in the Apostles' Creed: "Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead." In its simplest sense - the parable is saying that THE WISE recognize that every day is a time TO BE READY for the "Day of the Lord." But, since none of us knows that time/that hour, then we need not live obsessed or traumatized by this thinking. Simple profession & belief are sufficient.

But there is a deeper meaning for "THE WISE & THE FOOLISH" in this parable. When we look carefully at all 10 bridesmaids we see that in many ways they were exactly the same: THEY BOTH HOPED TO BE THERE WHEN THE GROOM APPEARED; THEY BOTH SHARED THE GOAL OF FEASTING AT THE BANQUET; THEY BOTH SHARED THE FRUSTRATION OF WAITING FOR THE BRIDEGROOM ... not knowing what had delayed him. THEY BOTH BECAME DROWSY AND SLEPT. There was only one thing that was different between the wise and the foolish: THE AMOUNT OF OIL EACH HAD BROUGHT FOR THE CELEBRATION.

On this Consecration Sunday - this is the ONLY symbol that needs uplifting for the day: THE OIL OF PREPARATION. The oil in this parable symbolizes that SOMETHING in every Christian's life needs constant replenishment. This that

And since life is always unpredictable ... since we never know what lies ahead of us in the next hour, the next day, or the next year -- then it means that we must NEVER TAKE FOR GRANTED THAT THE OIL OF YESTERDAY WILL BE ENOUGH FOR US TO FACE THE STRUGGLES OR UNKNOWNNS OF TOMORROW! Just saying that reminds me of the good fortune of hearing many stories about Robert George, the 30 yr-old teacher who died at Ottawa Hills elementary 11 days ago. I have been awed and inspired by the WISDOM surrounding this young man. Here was a teacher who gave his all to his profession; here was a man who was constantly concerned about exercising and taking care of himself; here was a man who dedicated himself to his kids in the classroom. Certainly, it was totally unfair that he should die at 30. Yet, here was a man who was fully prepared; not only for death, but for any challenge in life: BECAUSE HE REGULARLY REPLENISHED HIS LIFE AND HIS SPIRIT WITH THE ENERGY AND PRESENCE OF GOD ALMIGHTY!

That's why Consecration Sunday is so vital in the life of Hope Lutheran and every congregation. Not merely because it's the day of offering our pledges! Obviously, pledging is an important token of our consecration & thanksgiving to God. Likewise, returning a NAIL is another consecration act which symbolizes our willingness to sacrificially stretch ourselves & our mission. These are important acts of Consecration! BUT THE MOST IMPORTANT COMMITMENT WE MAKE TODAY IS TO RE-CONSECRATE OURSELVES TO BEING IN GOD'S PRESENCE AND COMPANY ON A REGULAR BASIS. Because it is only in worship that God replenishes the oil of mercy & forgiveness; it is only in worhsip that God offers the light of His grace & truth; it is only in worship that God trims away our excesses of greed & jealousy; it is only in worship that God re-energizes us to live life as if we are going to a wedding party and not a funeral procession. There is one ... and basically only one ACT OF CONSECRATION that God wants from each of us before leaving this sanctuary: NAMELY, THAT WE NO LONGER ACT AS IF WE'RE LIVING IN THE DARK ... THAT WE HAVE SEEN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST, AND TRUE WISDOM IS TO FOLLOW HIS LIGHT WHEREVER IT MAY LEAD US.

Now, contrast that wisdom with the foolishness that is often passed off as the ULTIMATE glory & sophistication of this world. One hundred years ago - at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 - the 74 most prominent social commentators for

consecrated to the foolish proposition that "man lives by bread alone."

The Stewardship Committee of Hope Church has recognized that it takes a lot more than "bread" to inspire people to be CONSECRATED TO JESUS CHRIST ... it takes eggs and sausage and toast and muffins and coffee and rolls and hundreds of hours of planning and phoning and caring and contacting each of you. But behind all of this is the basic oil of preparation first stated by Jesus: THAT HE OR SHE WHO HEARS MY WORD DOES MY WORD IS LIKE THE WISE PERSON WHO BUILT HIS HOUSE ON THE ROCK ... AND NOTHING COULD DESTROY IT. Both the Stewardship Committee and I give thanks to God that you have been WISE enough to hear God's word and continue to be consecrated TO BUILDING UPON IT ... TODAY, TOMORROW, AND FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS TO COME!

AMEN.

Pentecost XXIV

First English Lutheran Church, Toledo

November 18, 2001

Peter R. Martyn, Part-time Interim

KEEP THE FAITH (at all times)!

And Jesus said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he,' and 'The time is near.' Do no go after them. ... By your endurance you will gain your souls. Luke 21: 8,19

Once a schoolteacher served a special assignment with children confined in a large city hospital. While serving she received a routine call asking that she visit a particular child who had been admitted and would require a long stay. She took the boy's name and room number (#409) and was told by the boy's regular teacher: "We're studying nouns and adverbs now. This boy really needs help so that he won't fall behind."

The next day the visiting teacher reached the boy's room only to realize that it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to confront a boy who had been horribly burned and who was in great pain. She wanted to run ... she wasn't sure she could face this difficult situation ... but finally she stammered into the room and said, "I'm the hospital teacher and I've been asked by your regular teacher to help you with your nouns and adverbs."

Because of his serious condition, the boy could hardly respond to any of the lesson. But the teacher stumbled through her lesson plan feeling guilty for asking the boy questions ... and trying to correct him when he did respond.

The next day, however, the visiting teacher ran into a nurse on the burn unit who asked the teacher: "What did you do to that boy in 409 yesterday?" The teacher started to apologize, but the nurse interrupted saying, "You don't understand! We've really been concerned about him. He seemed pretty hopeless. But ever since your first day with him ... his whole attitude has changed. Now he seems to be fighting back ... he's beginning to respond to treatment ... he seems to want to live."

Later on the boy himself explained with tears rimming his eyes: "I had given up. But then at my lowest moment this teacher came into my room. And she said she wanted to help me with my nouns and adverbs. Well, I figured if somebody actually came to help me with nouns and adverbs I couldn't be a diving, hopeless

your nouns and adverbs ... keep remembering that you have a loving future with me. Both today's gospel and this story ask us to ponder questions that arise when we are facing our worst possible situations: "What do we do when there seems to be nothing but negative events all around us?? Are these signs to be understood as "signs of the end of the world" ... or are they simply ongoing turbulence that comes with a sinful world?? How do we interpret the negative events that are constantly impinging upon our daily lives?? Certainly since September 11th and the current war effort ... all of us have been faced with the challenge of these questions.

Well essentially there have been three different responses to the signs of turbulence, persecution and all the questions they create. The first group we might call the Epicurian response named after the Greek philosopher, Epicurus. This philosopher taught that in the face of life's tragedies and tumult "one should simply eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." That position probably best describes the cynical or agnostic choice when faced with a life-threatening future. Basically this position simply says "get all you can get while the getting is possible." It's a response that says "serve yourself, and the heck with the rest of the world!" As you might guess – there are many in our secular culture that would identify with this position. But I would guess there are very few Epicurians here at First English.

That brings us to the second group – a group that might be called "Dooms Day Derelicts" in times of turbulence. This group simply sees daily life as so rotten that it calls for a retreat from reality as we know it. A variety of this type of group was seen as early as the ascetic and monastic movements in the life of the church. A more modern version might be the Amish community. The whole emphasis here is to condemn the sinful world & to run away from the problems created by sinful people. Often in this movement a charismatic personality convinces sober-minded people to forsake home, family and possessions in preparation for the end of the world – the date already set by that leader. Such was the case in March, 1997 – when 37 members of Heaven's Gate cult took their lives in anticipation of the end of the world as they knew it. Led by Marshall Applewhite, this group interpreted passages from the four gospels and Revelation as referring to UFO visitations. So the Hale-Bopp comet of 1997 was viewed as a sign of a spacecraft that would take them away from this evil world. I am certain that the events of 9/11 will lead to other Dooms Day Derelicts in the days ahead. But here again – I doubt that there are many Dooms Day

persecutions & betrayals. But these signs do not give us cause for an “end time calendar” – instead they give us reason for renewed faithfulness. In other words there is but one purpose for the Christian during bad times – namely, to show his/her faithful reliance upon God’s Word. In short, no matter what signs are happening around us, God has but one mission for us: to **KEEP THE FAITH!** And that faith as he states in today’s text is not a faith in a beautifully adorned temple but rather in the mercy, love & forgiveness of a living God.

A couple of historical illustrations will hopefully clarify the point. Before traveling to Worms to go on trial for his life, Martin Luther was asked: “Where will you be, Brother Martin, when church, state, princes and all people turn against you? Where will you be then?” Luther answered, “Why, then as now, I’ll be in the hands of Almighty God!” Luther makes clear that it doesn’t matter what others say about our faithfulness ... but it does matter that we are faithful to God above all others. That same faithfulness was recently shown by the Mission Aid workers in Afghanistan.

Likewise, a Norwegian bishop (named Berggrav) refused to be silent when being held in solitary confinement in a Nazi prison camp. Finally the Gestapo chief threatened, “If you don’t stop giving us trouble, we are going to line you up against that wall and shoot you!” Showing no fear the bishop responded, “Very well, and what will you do with me after that?” The bishop testified that not even death could separate him from the love of God.

To live in this world especially since September 11th is to be very mindful of the signs of turbulence all around us. Jesus made clear in today’s gospel that these signs have always (and will always) be with us. The question is: How will we respond to them? Will we act as if they don’t exist? Will we run away from them seeking a perfect life in some kind of cocoon? Or will we realize that signs of turbulence give us an opportunity to witness to God Almighty who holds us securely? The gospel message is profound yet simple today: **LIVE FAITHFULLY TRUSTING IN GOD’S ULTIMATE CARE** – no matter what the signs of the times. Just look at every moment as an opportunity to witness to the goodness and grace of a merciful God.

So today God has gathered us NOT to glorify this temple ... NOT to glorify this country (even as great as it is) ... and NOT to glorify ourselves or the praise of our worship. He has gathered us to glorify His name and to witness to His love.

*Pentecost XXIV
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Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor*

“WAKE UP!”

... the other bridesmaids came back saying, “Lord, open the door to us.” But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. Matt. 25:11-13

There is a great parable of world powers that illustrates “readiness.” The story goes that the United States, Japan and Cuba had each selected their best astronauts to participate in a two-year mission to the moon. At a pre-launch briefing, each astronaut was informed that he could take anything with him as long as it weighed no more than 125#.

The American said that his wife weighed only 112#, so “I will be taking my wife!” The Japanese flyer was fascinated with Greek philosophy, so he requested 125# of the classical works to learn the Greek culture & language. The Cuban said, “We’ll be gone a long, long time; I want to take 125# of the best Havana cigars.” All their requests were honored.

Two years later the astronauts returned. The American stepped out of the spaceship holding an infant in each arm; the crowd roared with approval. The Japanese crawled out of the spaceship and addressed the crowd in one of Socrates’ greatest Greek soliloquies; the crowd roared again. Then the Cuban stepped out. His mouth was turned down and his teeth clenched to the end of a cigar; juice was drooling down his chin as he stepped to the microphone and said: *“Anyone have a match?!?”*

So goes one of the greatest lessons of life: BE PREPARED! Of what value are cigars on the moon when all the matches are back on earth. It’s like the story of the pastor who had great difficulty one week finding the time to prepare his sermon. His Baptist friend down the street told him: *“I never write a sermon; I just let the Spirit move me. Brother, you’ve got to learn to let the Spirit do the work for you!!”* So the pastor took his friend’s advice. The next Sunday he ascended the pulpit and waited for the Spirit to move him. But nothing came! He managed to say, “The Lord be with you,” then descended the pulpit and sat down!

Much like the Cuban or this pastor, we've all made silly mistakes ... and paid the price for our foolishness. Some of us have paid good money for a fine new outfit and then never worn it; many of us know first hand what it means to buy a lemon; some of us have even thought we've made the best investments possible only to lose because of some shabby advisor. But there have also been periodic moments of great wisdom. Saying "Yes" to a cherished LOVE & "No" to the one that was only taking you for a ride. Starting to "SAVE" long before the children were even thinking about college. Accepting a very challenging job only to find out that it was finally the real beginning of fulfillment & satisfaction like never known before. Maybe even a few of us here have realized there is no greater WISDOM than surrendering to the Way, the Truth & the Life of God.

Like many of our own experiences, today's gospel confronts us with THE FOOLISH and THE WISE. And when we look at these five foolish and five wise bridesmaids, almost all of us can identify with both of them at one time or another in our lives. Like the five wise maids - we have all had moments when we have truly been ready for whatever would come. But also like the five foolish maids - we have all known missed opportunities & tragic circumstances simply because we had not adequately prepared. So on the surface of this parable, Jesus is simply saying: "Don't be foolish: WAKE UP ... BE READY AT ALL TIMES, FOR YOU DO NOT KNOW THE HOUR OR THE DAY!

In the simplest sense, this parable has always been a warning to be ready for what our Christian faith calls "*THE DAY OF THE LORD*" - the end time, the ultimate moment of truth, the day of accounting, one's final moment. In that sense, THE WISE are those who never TAKE TIME OR LIFE for granted! As Christians, we profess in our *creed* "*that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead.*" That means the WISE are those who have not taken any of GOD'S GIFTS OR GOODNESS FOR GRANTED! And since none of us knows "the hour or the day," we are not to be traumatized by "this end time," but we are to be READY ... to be ALWAYS AWAKE & VIGILANT!

The facts are -- most of us are not faithfully vigilant! Many of us, like the foolish maids, have become very lazy & spoiled by all the abundance around us. Like them, too often we figure: what the heck, if I'm not prepared, someone else will cover for me. In short, like those foolish maids -- many live as if they've got all the time in the world TO WAKE UP; THEY DON'T WORRY ABOUT the SUPPLY OF GOD'S OIL NEEDED TO LIGHT CHRIST'S WAY IN THIS

GOODNESS & PRESENCE! Only when we have enough of God's power do we have the ability to give & forgive ... to be patient and kind ... to be merciful unto the least and the lost and those yet in the dark. The oil represents my preparation & my willingness to shine God's goodness & grace on others rather than always expecting the light to shine on me. I ask you today: **HOW MUCH OF GOD'S OIL ARE YOU CARRYING INTO EACH DAY'S WORK AND ACTIVITIES??**

Are you prepared for the unpredictable?? If today was my last day or your last day -- would others be able to say: NOW THERE WAS A MAN OR WOMAN WHO WAS ALWAYS SHINING GOD'S LIGHT ON OTHERS? There was one who was always **READY** to light God's **WAY** for others! Or would we hear: That person just was never ready ... always seemed to be waiting and wondering about God ... just seemed to be lazy & apathetic toward his faith and his service to God. **THAT PERSON REALLY NEEDED A WAKE-UP CALL!!**

Well, God's hope and my hope is that no one will ever say that about any of us here today. Because that's why God has given us this gospel today: **TO WAKE US UP NOW** before it is too late! And the one thing that God demands, commands, expects, desires, requires and looks forward to ... is that each and every one of us will be CONSECRATED TO HIM ... that we will be like the wise maids ... always ready to light HIS WAY in the world.

We get that oil by being totally consecrated to worshipping, glorifying and serving Him above all others!! Worship replenishes the oil; Service offers us the opportunity to share the light with a needy world. Is it any wonder that we have talked so much about the importance of **EVERY MEMBER RECONSECRATION NEXT SUNDAY!!** Like the foolish maidens -- God doesn't want any excuses!! In fact, he offers the most harsh words of the entire New Testament in this text: *"Truly, I tell you, I don't even know you!"* God has little tolerance for people who claim to be his followers, but never prepare themselves to show it! He doesn't expect perfection, but he does expect faithfulness!! Faithfulness in worship; faithfulness in lighting His Way ... which in these days is shown with financial giving and service, not lamps. Anyone who says that he or she **LOVES GOD** ... and never worships God, or never supports God's mission or causes ... that person is **JUST ANOTHER FOOLISH MAID ... SOMEONE WHO NEEDS A WAKE UP CALL.** God

1993 ... the US government would have grown to be fully streamlined and simple, because true greatness always tends toward simplicity.” So goes the wisdom of the 19th Century elite commentators: **HAVE YOU EVER HEARD GREATER FOOLISHNESS??** Is it any wonder that today, like never before, this society needs to renew its **CONSECRATION TO GOD AND HIS MISSION**. That renewal begins with each of us ... and must be made not only every year (as we will do next Sunday) but every day!!

I appeal to each of you today: **DO NOT LIVE LIKE FOOLISH MAIDS, WHO THINK THEY CAN USE SOMEBODY ELSE’S FAITHFULNESS WHEN THEY ARE CALLED TO BE GOD’S LIGHT!** God expects each of us who has been given the oil of his grace **TO OFFER THAT GRACE & GOODNESS TO OTHERS**. I will look forward with great anticipation to your act of consecration next Sunday ... both through your presence in worship ... and your willingness to offer a generous and meaningful financial commitment to God’s mission through Glenwood. And remember -- God is not pleased with glib excuses. It’s not my word, but God’s Word which was offered to those who came running to the door who have not been faithful and yelled, “Lord, let me in!” And he responded, *“Truly, I tell you, I don’t even know you!”* **SO, WAKE UP ... FOR NOW IS THE TIME TO SHOW THAT GOD’S LIGHT IS ALREADY A SHINING REALITY IN YOUR LIFE & MINE!**

AMEN.