

March 15, 2009
Third Sunday in Lent

“Church is...”

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

John 2:13-25

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Sermon

The Jews in our Gospel lesson make a mistake. OK, actually they’re making a bunch of mistakes the biggest of which is rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. But they make a mistake which the text points out to us. The Jews, or perhaps better understood as the Jewish leaders, ask Jesus for a sign and Jesus replies, “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*” Jesus is standing in the temple at Jerusalem, a grand structure that King Herod was building to try and

gain the favor of the Jews. These Jews mistakenly think that Jesus is talking about the building, the brick and mortar around them, and naturally they react to the absurdity of the idea.

“It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?”

The absurdity should have clued them in that Jesus was talking either figuratively or about something else, but they make the mistake of taking it as a literal statement about Herod’s temple. The leaders of the Jews always seem to be making the mistake that God’s church is about the temple or the gathering for sacrifice or their good works under the law. John clues us in that Jesus wasn’t talking about these but *“was speaking about the temple of His body.”*

We know what Jesus was talking about and it makes sense to us. We know that Jesus was raised from the dead after three days and like the disciples we have *“believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.”* Especially in Lent we remember that Jesus, the sinless Son of God, took our sins to the cross and there perished to pay for them. We know that three days later Jesus rose from the dead, assuring that God had accepted His sacrifice and gained victory for us over sin, death and the power of the Devil.

But despite our knowledge of Christ’s work and more importantly our faith in what Christ accomplished for us, I think we often make mistakes very similar to that of the Jews in our text. And I’m kind of walking a dangerous line here because I’m talking about some things that are very near and dear to people in this room. I’m talking about things that aren’t bad and are in fact to the glory of God, but can be taken in wrong directions.

For one, I’m talking about our physical temple; this very building that we worship in. Don’t get me wrong. I love this place. Let me tell you, in June of 2007 when I was driving into Houma for the first time, I kind of had the fear that my church was going to be some kind of big shack on the edge of a swamp somewhere with a flat bottomed boat tied up out back for making pastoral visits. When the elders brought me over for a walk-through I was dumbstruck at what a fantastic facility Grace has.

But in a way, maybe it’s almost too nice. It’s real easy for us to take pride in our church building. The sanctuary is beautiful. It has a great fellowship hall with a stage. Its got nice school facilities and a nice chunk of land in a good neighborhood. Did you know the pastor’s office has its own bathroom? Our facility is so nice, that when somebody brings up the subject of church or their church or our church, is this building the first thing that comes to mind? Speaking for myself, I’m ashamed to say that a lot of times it is.

And that’s really not how it should be. When the subject of our church comes up, what should we think of? Actually, who should we think of? Jesus Christ should be our focus, our true temple so to speak. Jesus is the one who redeemed us by His blood and the Holy Spirit has called us to faith in Christ. Our earthly thinking wants to limit our concept of church to these walls. But the church is without walls. It is the kingdom of heaven made up of all believers who are *in* Christ, not who are in a building on Sunday morning. Our identity is in a person, not in a structure.

Another way we go astray with church is seeing it as those folks on our membership roster. We think of church as the people you see if you look around right now; the people we sing with and pray with and listen to the sermon with and around here in large part, the people we eat with...in the building. We can tend to think that the church is the folks that do the whole God thing with us. Gathering is a good thing and I like the people who come together at Grace a whole lot, but our coming together with the praying and singing and hearing aren’t what makes church.

Earthly thinking wants to look at we who sacrifice our time to “go through the motions” and be proud of ourselves that we are church. Paul writes, “*For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ.*” In Christ. We are church because Jesus Christ redeemed us and made us church. It’s not who we know or hang out with. He has made us part of Himself. It is He who has claimed us for His own and brought us into His kingdom by His Holy Spirit. Our church membership outside of Christ would be just a bunch of folks who know how to sing and cook.

We also can go astray with the good things we do here. I have heard that we are the single biggest church contributor to the Food Bank. We all get together to put on Fall Fest every year and today we will award four charities the fruits of that labor. We help out needy folks locally and we support missionary efforts globally. We pray for the hurting. We do all this as church and more, and I’m sure there is tons more stuff you do individually as families.

Earthly thinking wants to take all these things and be proud of them and think, “Boy, are we a good church.” We look at our actions and we remember what James said about faith apart from works being dead and we somehow translate that into our works equaling a great faith and in doing so put our faith in our works. Oops. That’s putting ourselves back under the law just like those Jewish leaders liked it, but as Paul writes in Galatians, “*So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.*”

This thing we have that we call church; none of it is about us. It’s about Christ. It’s about what He did for us on the cross in bearing our sins to the grave. It’s about what He accomplished for us in leaving them there as He rose again to life everlasting. It is about the gift the Holy Spirit gives us as He calls us to faith not in our building or our assembly or our actions, but in Jesus Christ the crucified and risen Son of God.

That’s why Lent is such a good idea. It seems dour and dark as we recall our sins and maybe emotionally beat ourselves up a bit for our transgressions. But it helps us take a hard and honest look at ourselves. In doing so we’re forced to peel away all the earthly thinking that would have us believe that who we are or what we do makes us good or special. We’re forced to throw away any pride we have in the things we have in this world, even in the good practices we have related to Grace Lutheran Church.

We boil it all away and what are we left with? “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*” If we have made the same mistake as those Jewish leaders and somehow think that God’s church is about the building or the gathering or our own actions, Lent washes that all away. It calls to mind again the real reason we are church, because we have been baptized into **Christ**.

This building is not anything special in and of itself. It’s special because herein through the blessing of faith we receive the gift Christ’s blood bought for us on Calvary. Christ’s forgiveness of sins is proclaimed and eaten and drunk here. Sins are washed away with water and Word as sinful people join with Christ’s kingdom and become righteous before God only because Christ made it possible.

Our gathering is not special. What makes it special is whom we gather before. We get together and spend time gathering before God to strengthen that faith and received pardon through Christ. We gather before the one who is the way and the truth and the life, receive His gifts and in doing so are **His** body on earth.

Our actions are nothing special. Plenty of folks do things for people. But ours stem from faith in what Christ did for us in His Passion and resurrection. It is faith in **Christ** which drives us to love our neighbors and reach out to help them. Our good works are only good works because Christ has made them so by giving us **His** righteousness.

This place we worship; yeah, it's His house. And we are, with all believers, the church. The good things we do out of faith; they do please God. The things that God does for us have great effect on our lives here and in eternity, but it's not about us, what we build or do. Remember, none of it works without Christ. It all starts with Christ. It all works through Christ. God's grace continues unending because of Christ. Jesus died with our sins. Jesus rose to life again in victory. Jesus calls us to saving faith. "*When therefore He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*" Remember. Our temple is Christ Jesus. We gather around Christ Jesus. We love others because Christ Jesus first loved us.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, and which we have only because of Christ, be and abide with us all. Amen.