

Pentecost 23C + October 23, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Luke 18:9-14

Why We Need the Church

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These days there is a lot of talk about the church in crisis. Congregations are merging or going out of business. Many people, particularly younger families, seem to be choosing culture over church. After all, kids can't miss soccer practice, right? But let's pause and take stock of what the church is, and what it does.

God calls us through the church to serve a world in need. Each of us is a minister of the Gospel. As a minister, God is calling us to equip others for ministry. This is what evangelism is all about, equipping God's people for ministry. To do good equipping, we must see world as it really is. That includes the reality of sin and human suffering in all its many forms. To this we, as ministers, bring the good news that Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Messiah, suffers alongside us. Jesus knows our pain and is there with us in the midst of it to tell us that life, not death, has the last word. We know this is true because Jesus suffered death, was buried, and on the third day arose, fully alive. The Resurrection really happened. It's not just a nice story; it was an event in human history. And not just AN event, it was the most important event in human history.

The good news the church shares with the world is that, because of God's victory of life over death, we need no longer live in fear. When you come right down to it, fear of death is responsible for all the bad things that happen in the world. But Christians do not live in this chokehold of death. We know that when we die, that's not the end of the story. Instead, we meet death joyfully in the certain knowledge that Jesus takes us into his arms until that last great day

when all are raised to eternal life.

This is the good news of the Gospel. And this isn't just about the future—it's about the present, because it frees us to live fully and to love fully just as God intends. We experience eternal life right here, right now, because we live knowing death has no power over us. This is the good news of the Christian church, and it's news that Christians spend their lives spreading. This is the mission of the church—the church in general, and our church, Atonement Lutheran, in particular. We are not some social organization or society. We're here because the world has changed and we want to tell people about it.

But before people can spread the good news, they must first be able to receive it. We receive it by confessing our need for God's mercy and grace. We desperately need God's forgiveness, because just like the Apostle Paul, we do things we know we shouldn't, because we are in bondage to sin. This is why we open our worship service by confessing that we have turned from God and given ourselves into the power of sin. We plead for God's forgiveness and mercy. We ask God to turn us back to him, and in the very act of asking we are reconciled to God.

But if we refuse to confess this need, we remain apart from God. Could this be the stumbling block for the mainline Protestant church? Have people become complacent, unwilling or unable to admit that they desperately need God to free them from the power of sin? Could it have been the stumbling block for this congregation, Atonement Lutheran Church?

This stumbling block and its effects is the message of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18. Here we have two individuals who have both come to the temple to pray. On the one hand is a Pharisee. He is a textbook picture of pride, the worst of the Seven Deadly Sins. In his boasting he holds himself up as a model for what he thinks God's church should be like. The clue that he's missing the mark is that he overdoes it: He doesn't have to fast *twice a week*; fasting

was necessary in Jewish practice only on special days. And he doesn't have to give a tenth of *all* his income; Deuteronomy and Leviticus require tithing only that which is edible, meaning produce and livestock, and do not mention money as such. On top of all that, this Pharisee sets himself apart, making a show of his own piety. You have to wonder why he came to the temple at all. Did he have a need to pray, or simply a need to prove his own superiority?

On the other hand we have the tax collector, a despised occupation in that day. Tax collectors could walk up to any traveler, on any road within his district, and demand payment of various taxes on the spot, often without regard for the proper amount. The tax collector sets himself apart, too, but for a different reason. Something has caused him to become acutely aware of his need for God's mercy—to the point that he feels he's not even worthy of being in the temple, and can't even bring himself to turn physically toward God. He is standing far off, beating his breast, a sign of extreme humility and shame. He repeats the same petition over and over, one that has been embraced since throughout the world as the most famous of all penitential prayers: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" In both Eastern and Western Christian spirituality is known as the Jesus Prayer and often takes this form: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

And what is the result? The tax collector is the one who goes home justified, meaning that his right relationship with God was restored. We are left to presume that is not the case for the Pharisee, since he didn't know his relationship was out of whack to begin with.

No human being can escape suffering, but there are many ways to deny it. The Pharisee uses his arrogance. And no human being is self-sufficient, but people pretend that they are. The Pharisee doesn't think he needs God – in his supposed prayer, he doesn't even ask God for anything! The same can be true of congregations. In the arrogance of their complacency they fail

to see the world as it really is. They begin to think that the church is only about themselves and their agendas.

Here at Atonement Lutheran Church, right now we are the opposite of complacent. Rather, as we prepare our financial picture for the coming year, we live in something akin to the world of Jeremiah 14 in our first reading. There, Israel is in the midst of a great drought and the people are examining their hearts. Our sins are many, they cry, all the ways we have turned away from you, but, O God, where are you? Why should you be like a stranger in the land? Do not forsake us! Remember your covenant with us! Only you can bring life-giving showers. “We set all our hope on you, for it is you who do all this.”

Why are we parched here at Atonement? Why do we suffer? Membership is half what it was six years ago, and pledging for 2016 was half of what it was in 2013. Last year we let our custodian go and cut our secretary’s hours drastically. I am only half time. We have no budget for office supplies or education. I am told we cannot worship in our beautiful sanctuary during all of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, the most evocative seasons of the entire church year, because we can’t afford the heating costs. There are other marks of the church we are missing, such as Christian education on Sundays and weekly Bible study, although I’m here at 4 p.m. every Thursday now for Bible study if anyone is interested.

Our Gospel reading may help account for what has happened in this congregation over the past several years. Did people recognize the need for God’s saving grace, or did they think they could manage without it? Wherever it is the latter, consider these possible consequences:

- When we think we know all the answers, we are putting ourselves between God and God’s work in the world.
- When the church becomes just another choice we make that reflects us back to ourselves, like the brand of laundry detergent we use, this means that we are conformed to the world

and not to Christ.

- When our idea of who should come to church, what they should look like, and how they should behave negates the vitality of God's people in worship, we have become a club and not a church.
- When we withhold giving out of anger, whether at others or at God, we are starving the body of Christ.
- When we abandon the church because we say there is no hope, we are throwing ourselves to the wolves. Lest you think I exaggerate, listen to Matthew 7:15: "Beware of false prophets," Jesus warns. "They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."

No matter what, God is still there and God will never abandon his people. But if we as Christians care about equipping others for ministry, we must first glimpse the vision of a new heaven and a new earth. This vision comes to us most powerfully through the church. Take any of the words of our liturgy or our hymns, all of which testify persuasively and poetically to salvation in Jesus Christ by faith through grace. Here are words we are about to sing:

"When we are living, it is in Christ Jesus, / and when we're dying, it is in the Lord.
Both in our living and in our dying / we belong to God, we belong to God."

This is right out of Romans 14:8, "So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." We need to hear more of that. In one of the yellow sheets on how Atonement is meaningful to you, one person wrote, "People go here on Sundays. I feel good when I am here. I like being here." People need to hear more of that, too. This is why our community and the wider church needs Atonement Lutheran. Thanks to each of you from the bottom of my heart for all that you are doing to spread the good news and to equip others to do the same.

Amen.