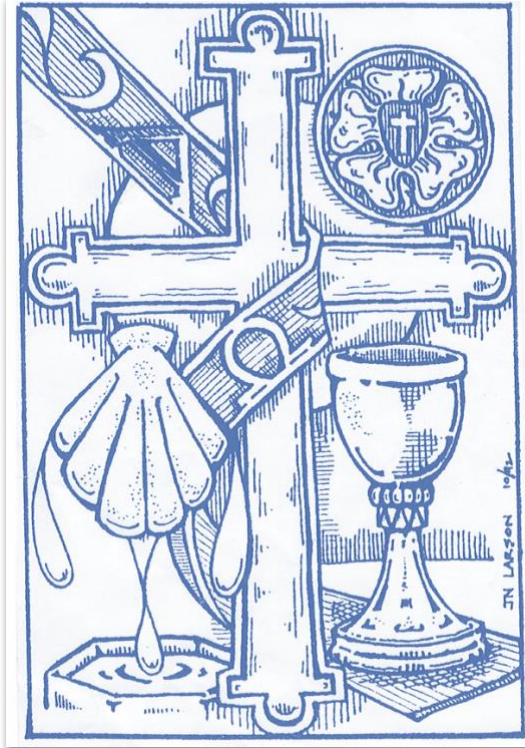


The Vine and the Branches

REACHING OUT AND ENCOURAGING FELLOW CONGREGATION MEMBERS TO ATTEND DIVINE SERVICE REGULARLY FOR FAITH



I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. - This is most certainly true.

[Small Catechism, Explanation, Third Article of the Creed.]

BEING “KEEPER” FOR OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST IN LOVE

Attending the Divine Service on Sunday morning is not simply a matter of legal obligation under the law of God, but it is foremost something necessary for the feeding of faith. For this reason, there is a significant difference where a Christian won't attend Divine Service in the fellowship of the Church versus being unable to attend. One might be due to some health disability and another one is willfully absenting oneself or neglecting to attend, which not only negatively affects the one not attending but also the rest of the congregation. What affects one member of the Body of Christ affects the rest. Also, faith is NOT to be spiritually self-sufficient.

In centuries past, Christians understood that to be a Christian and to live in this world is to face risk. There is always the risk of attacks from the devil, the world, and our own flesh. There is always the possibility of persecution from various sources (other religions, the government, pagans who hate the Church, et al.). And, according to the Lord's promise, the Church has persevered and will persevere until the end of the age. The Lord will preserve His faithful remnant in this world. The Church has endured through plagues, wars, persecution, cultural hostility, governmental oppression, and attacks from heretical teaching. We pray that the kingdom of God may come among us also and endure where we are.

In love we have regard for fellow members of our fellowship around Christ in His Word and Sacraments. Christianity is not simply a solo project for ourselves at home alone with our spiritual thoughts or applying the Bible however we wish. 2 Peter 1:20-21 reminds us:

...no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

We are concerned for our fellow parishioners for their wellbeing in faith but also for their wellbeing in daily bread, their households, in body, soul and mind. We show care according to our varied callings in life (vocation) and according to the gifts the Lord has bestowed upon us to use in keeping with His Word. *Whether it be persecution, pandemic, or cultural pressure, we encourage one another to fear not, and to gather together, even in the face of death, or especially then.* Virtual reality is still not reality. So when we might not see them or know of their troubles and sorrows and crosses in life we seek to encourage them and help them to remain steadfast:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

[2 Corinthians 1:3-4]

And while the church rightfully thinks first of sustaining the believer in the life of repentance and faith in Christ unto salvation, we do not neglect the earthly cares as Jesus Himself has redeemed us in body and soul and provides for us now and in eternity as human beings who are both body and soul together as whole persons. Christmas (the incarnation of Christ) and Easter (the resurrection of the body) remind us of this as well. For biblical Christians the physical and spiritual remain together.

WHAT ABOUT ATTENDING THE DIVINE SERVICE AND FAITH?

1. The chief point in attending church is not what we do for God, but what He has done and is presently doing for us in delivering forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation to us through His designated means. Faith in Christ lives from what it continually receives from the Lord in His means of grace, the Word and Sacraments. The Divine Service in the fellowship of the Church is the chief, but not exclusive place where this goes on. In joining together in singing the liturgy and hymns, hearing the Word of God together and being taught, confessing our sins and receiving God's absolution, and in being fed, each with the very same body and blood of Christ we learn and realize that we are not alone or left to our own resources but depend upon Christ in all things.
2. In neglecting to attend the Divine Service regularly (won't attend), we are cutting ourselves off from the means by which the Lord has bound us for our nurture and the medicine of immortality in Christ. To use the language of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, it is to let the oil of God's grace run out and endanger the flame of faith which lives from what Christ continues to distribute freely.
3. God, for our good, commands us to gather with one another when the congregation has set orderly times for these purposes. When we let this become something optional or worse, we do damage to ourselves and our fellow believers. In the fellowship of Christ serving us with forgiveness, life, and salvation through His means of grace we in faith and gratitude respond with the glad sacrifice of thanksgiving, praise, prayer, offerings, holy living, and bearing witness to others of Christ out in the world where God puts us the rest of the week.
4. When we approach our fellow congregational members to encourage them to join us each week, we do so humbly, in love, with patience and kindness but also with steadfastness. We do not excuse sin nor do we repeat gossip. We encourage both repentance and faith, while seeking to lovingly address concerns. We might even offer help – perhaps they need a ride or just someone to sit with in church during the service. And if they genuinely can't any longer make it to church, let the pastors and elders know and we will seek to bring Church to them where they live, whether home, nursing home, or hospital.
5. For all these reasons we emphasize that the chief concern is not about being "delinquent" or "inactive" but being fed and cleansed in Christ.

SOME KEY PASSAGES TO KEEP IN MIND AS TO WHY WE SPEAK UP FOR THE SAKE OF THOSE WHO ARE SPIRITUALLY MALNOURISHED FOR FAITH

John 15:1-9 (NKJV)

[Jesus said:] "I AM the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ²Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He ^[a]takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. ⁵"I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned. ⁷If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you^[b] will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. ⁸By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. ⁹"As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.

Luke 10:38-42 (NKJV)

³⁸Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. ³⁹And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." ⁴¹And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. ⁴²But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

Romans 10:17

So then faith comes by hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ

Acts 2:42

And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers.

Matthew 25:1-13 (NKJV)

"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ²Now five of them were wise, and five *were* foolish. ³Those who *were* foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, ⁴but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. ⁵But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. ⁶"And at midnight a cry was *heard*: 'Behold, the bridegroom ^[a]is coming; go out to meet him!' ⁷Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us *some* of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.' ¹⁰And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. ¹¹"Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' ¹²But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.' ¹³"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.