

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
Genesis 45:3-11,15
Psalm 37:1-11,39-40
1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50
Luke 6:27-38

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Holy Spirit Lutheran Church

Grace and peace to you all from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – Amen.

I'd like to start today by saying how good it is to be with and among you Holy Spirit. It is a blessing to belong to this family of faith. Holy Spirit is truly a special place. Whether you have been here for moments, years, or generations – I have a feeling you know what I am saying – because you are here and you have helped build this community into the welcoming and loving church it is.

As someone who has the honor of serving you as your pastor, I can share that this identity isn't just known within our walls – it's also known within our synod, among other pastors and churches who look to us as role models for the kind of community we as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) are trying to foster and create.

A church that is willing to listen to the call of the Spirit – even if that call stretches us to grow outside of our comfort zone. A church that is willing to admit when it has been wrong – repent – change its ways and turn to welcome all in Christ's name. A church that inspires us to reform in ways of grace and love – sparking new ways of knowing, worshiping, forming community and serving God.

This is what so excites me about serving this community of faith alongside Pastor Trish and you the good people of Holy Spirit. You are truly striving to be God's people within this community and our wider world.

As many of you have heard over the last few Sundays, our new strategic focus is titled "the church we and others need". While it was named over the course of our discussions that this goal is something we have long aspired to over our 54 years serving the community of Malmo – we feel as your pastoral team and the congregational council, that it is all the most important for us to focus on this now – in this current cultural moment we find ourselves in.

We all know from our own lived experience that the church isn't what it used to be. We aren't as full as we used to be Sunday mornings – and in many respects we no longer hold a central space in our community. But it's not just us that have come to think about the changes we have come to see – sociologists of religion have also come to study and name many of the things we have come to know.

From their research we have learned that less people are turning to the church for answers to life's big questions, and if they are - they are less likely to intentionally attend church each Sunday. Some people have been so hurt by organized religion that for many valid reasons they would never consider returning to worship on a Sunday morning. Yet others have named that they are looking for ways to connect with faith communities to truly make a difference in this world, however they simply don't see the church actively involved in this work outside of their walls.

Thinking about these responses and our own experiences I decided to do a google search this week on “quotes about church” and I came to find some interesting ones that I think speak to many of the ideas that were just raised – especially around how the world has come to see the church.

“Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian anymore then standing in your garage makes you a car.” – unknown

“The early church was married to poverty, prisons, and persecution. Today the church is married to property, personality, and popularity” – Leonard Ravenhill

“A church is a hospital for the sinners, not a museum for saints” – Abigail Van Burer

I think each of these quotes speaks to a reality of the church many of us have experienced over our lives. Christians who publically announce their faith yet don’t seem very Christ-like. Churches who seem to have wandered slowly away from Jesus call to be with the last and the least. And communities of faith who seem more inclined to worry about their own needs and perception then about their communities.

So the question remains how do we refrain from falling into these problematic narratives?

How do we become the church we and others need?

Our Gospel lesson today is a great place to start. Jesus message is an active template for the kingdom of God being born among us here as follower of Christ. In fact, it’s almost a biblical checklist of do’s and don’ts for any Christian community to follow. I’ll paraphrase the way I hear this passage for us today:

Love everyone – yes everyone – without judgment – even those people that annoy you or that you might even consider your enemy. Do good, wish the best for others, and pray for your neighbors – even if they mistreat you. Be faithful stewards of all you have been given – don’t be swayed to keep a secret tab on those you think owe you. Do your best to continue to do these things with the truest of hearts – even if you face hate – because you are God’s beloved.

In this short passage Jesus tells his disciples, us, and the whole church in every time and space, how we are to be the very people of God here on earth. But he also seems to leave out some important details ... like what kind of good are we supposed to do? How should we faithfully support the church and our neighbors as good stewards? And how are we supposed to love those who actually work to harm or hate us?

These are some of the hard and faithful questions we are left to answer as God’s people. And if the church is to be the body of Christ, the kingdom of God within this world – we need to start by being more open to these questions and the very community we hope to support, love, and steward along with our neighbors.

Yet, this is also where the rubber hits the road – because honestly pursuing questions like these as the church means being open to the answers of both God and the world.

It means being open to holding space for other stories and voices. It means being willing to experiment in an attempt to learn and grow in the ways we can meet and know our neighbors and where they are at within the world. It also means being open to the process of healing, restorative justice, and care the world may need to see because they can come to trust the body of Christ as the church again.

And I will be the first to name that truly being “the church we and others need” won’t be easy. Sometimes we will wonder if we are on the right path when failure or our fears start to creep in on us. We may even be tempted to revert back to our own levels of comfort rather than continuing to reach out in hope.

But, Holy Spirit – THIS is when we will need to press on – because I fully believe we are uniquely positioned as a church to live into the grace of God we have all come to experience. A grace that continues to say to us all – I am not finished working in and with you yet beloved!

This is the very same grace that continues to call the church back to its roots as the body of Christ. A place where all our truths, hurts, and gifts can be named, held and known in our midst.

The church offers a unique place for this to happen – a place centered on whose we are – rather than whom we are.

I believe this is the radical message we, our friends, family, and community are desperate to hear. That our lives, stories, sadness, and joy matter to those who gather here! That we all have a place we can come to be named, known, and welcomed for all we have been created to be. And that we can all come to experience the all-encompassing love of God we have found in this community.

I know this to be true because you yourselves have come to name these reasons for us as you have found a home in this community of faith. These are the same reasons you have volunteered to serve at the food bank, opened your homes and lives to new comer families, or have worked quietly behind the scenes to carry out the life of this congregation.

Holy Spirit we trust and know that you are already doing your best to be the church we and others need - we are simply asking for you to engage with this question in new and exciting ways in 2019. To continue to experiment, grow, and change with us as we seek to respond to God’s call. To look for ways to invite others into this welcoming community we have found here. To pray for us as a family of faith as we continue to listen for the ways God is asking us to share our many gifts and blessings we have received with our wider community.

And as we do – I know we will continue to strive to be the church we and others need.

And may this be so among us – Amen.