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Our Savior Lutheran Church
Pentecost 9
August 2, 2020

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

So it has been several weeks now since we started doing outdoor ministry.

Yes, it was back on June 14th that we reconvened in-person worship, meeting as we are now, outdoors.

Before that we were making worship available through recordings only.

Now, yes, outdoor worship has had its drawbacks.

Some Sundays it has been pretty toasty out here in the sun.

And yes, we have learned to do communion in a different way.

And I know we would all love to be able to sing again the hymns and the liturgy.

But for the most part, we have managed pretty well outdoors

Some of you have even commented to me that you have come to really enjoy doing worship outside.

PAUSE

Now, outdoor ministry, outdoor worship...

These concepts are nothing new.

If we've noticed, our Lord Jesus predominantly did outdoor ministry.

For instance, there was the occasion when so many people were pressing in on Jesus by the sea, that Jesus gets into a boat and put out a ways from the shore, and began to teach the crowd from the boat.

That is an example of outdoor ministry.

There is also the time when Jesus went up the mountain sat down and gave his Sermon on the Mount.

Another example of outdoor ministry.

There are also the many healings Jesus performed out in the open air.

There is the Gerasene demoniac, whom Jesus heals of a Legion of demons, which Jesus then sends into a herd of swine.

There are also the ten lepers that Jesus heals while he is traveling between Samaria and Galilee.

Yes, Jesus does a lot of his ministry outdoors.

He is regularly outside, healing and teaching, and performing miracles.

But not all of his ministry happens outdoors.

It is true that Jesus also does some teaching and healing in the synagogue.

But with that said, a wealth of events in Jesus' life, many of those things recorded in the gospels, take place out in the open.

Indeed, another example of Jesus' outdoor ministry is found today in our gospel lesson.

Now the scene in our gospel is this.

John the Baptist has been murdered, beheaded by Herod at the instigation of his wife Herodias and her daughter Salome.

And having learned of John's death, Jesus has gone off to be by himself.

Perhaps Jesus is mourning, after all Jesus had been in all likelihood a disciple of John.

Or, maybe Jesus retreats to a place by himself because he is avoiding the authorities.

If they have arrested and murdered John, who is to say that they won't come after Jesus.

So Jesus is off by himself.

But then we learn that a great crowd comes seeking Jesus, and when Jesus sees the crowd, the text says that he has compassion for them.

And Jesus proceeds to cure many who were sick.

And the day is passing by quickly, and at this point in our reading, dusk is coming.

It is starting to get late into the day.

And his disciples encourage Jesus to send the crowds away so they can get something to eat.

But Jesus tells his disciples that the crowds need not go away.

And this then is the POINT of our gospel reading today...Jesus has responded to the illnesses affecting the bodies of those in the crowd, and now Jesus responds to the hunger affecting the bodies of those in the crowds.

Jesus responds to the bodily needs of people.

And there is something truly powerful about that.

There is something Maslowian about that.

Maslowian, as in reference to Abraham Maslow who was a 20th century psychologist who created the theory of the hierarchy of needs.

His theory of the hierarchy of needs states that one attends to the basic needs of an individual first before you attend to their higher needs.

You don't preach the gospel to a starving person, you first give that person food to eat.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus is not preaching at the crowds and ignoring their physical needs.

No, Jesus' priority is contending to the physical needs of the crowd, both to the disease and illness as well as the hunger pangs, affecting the crowd.

It is powerful to see Jesus responding to the bodily needs of the people.

PAUSE

And, this passage made me think of an interesting quote I heard the other day.

I had heard a quote that relates to this image of Jesus responding to the bodily needs of people.

The quote was in a sermon from a rabbi, but I didn't catch whom the rabbi was quoting.

Nevertheless, the rabbi said these words, "As people of faith, our usual M.O...."

Our typical way of operating as people of faith is to be all-consumed with the souls of everyone else...

...we worry about whether others are saved, whether they know the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior...

We are preoccupied with the souls of everyone else, while we concern ourselves about the needs of our body...

Let me say that again.

We are preoccupied with the souls of everyone else, while concerning ourselves about the needs of our body...

...what clothes we will wear, how we look...

...we obsess about our weight, and what we should eat.

We are preoccupied about the souls of everyone else, and fret about the needs of our body.

This is what this rabbi was saying.

When it really should be, so said the rabbi.

When it really should be the other way around.

We should be preoccupied about the bodies of everyone else, and concerned with our own soul.

We should be concerned with the bodies of everyone else, and worry about our own soul.

Interesting words, aren't they?

It is a powerful statement of what we as Christian people should be focused on.

But so often we do get it backwards.

We focus on the souls of people, and concentrate on the care of our body.

When it should be the other way around.

We should be caring for the bodies of everyone, and worry about our own soul.

And this is what our Lord Jesus is doing in our gospel lesson today during his outdoor ministry.

Jesus is not worried about whether the souls of those in the crowd are saved.

Jesus is just curing the sick of their infirmities.

And Jesus does not fret about whether those in the crowd know Jesus Christ as their Savior.

No, Jesus is just making sure there is enough food for the many hungry bellies in the crowd.

And Jesus wants us to be concerned with the bodies of our neighbors, too.

Which is why Jesus, tells his disciples that “they are to give the crowd something to eat.”

Jesus multiplies the loaves and fish, and then he has the disciples distribute the food.

Jesus is teaching his disciples what outdoor ministry is about.

Jesus is teaching his disciples that they are to care for the bodies of their neighbors, by having the disciples give out the bread and fish.

Care for the body of your neighbor—that is outdoor ministry.

It is ministry that is focused first on the body, what’s on the outside.

You see what I did there.

I redefined the term “outdoor ministry,” or “outside ministry” to speak of the body as the outside, versus the soul which is on the inside.

“What’s on the inside, the soul, well, we’ll get to that,” so Jesus seems to say. “But focus first on the outside.”

Care for the body of your neighbor.

And by our focusing on the outside, by doing this kind of outdoor ministry, well then we will be caring for our soul.

And so here is the question we need to ask ourselves.

When is the last time we have done that?

When is the last time we have cared for the body of our neighbor?

Maybe we have given food for the second Sunday food offering of our church, food that will go to provide for the body of our neighbor.

Or maybe we have donated clothing to a mission, clothing that will go to provide for the body of our neighbor.

Or maybe we have provided assistance to the Family Promise program of our church, assistance that helps provide for the bodies of our neighbors, those bodies in a family so that they can get off the street.

Or maybe we have supported our prayer shawl ministry that provides chemo caps, lap robes, and shawls for the bodies of those dealing with illness or who simply need the comfort of knowing these items they use are blessed with prayer.

Or, maybe we have done something in our lives, whether we marched or advocated, in support of civil rights, caring for the bodies of our neighbors in this way.

Caring for the black bodies everywhere by taking a stand against racism or brutality by those in authority.

Maybe we have cared for our neighbors' bodies, for those who are lonely, by just being present with that somebody so that they have somebody to talk with.

Maybe we have cared for the bodies of our aging parents by helping them when physical demands in their home become too much.

Maybe we have cared for the bodies of our children as they grew from infant to young adult, providing them food and shelter, hearth and home.

Maybe we have cared for the bodies of other animals, our pets or even God's endangered creatures by giving monetary support.

Maybe we have cared for the body that is this planet earth by recycling, by picking up litter when we see it, by driving a fuel efficient vehicle.

Yes, outdoor ministry is caring for the body of our neighbor.

This is what Jesus shows us in our gospel lesson this morning.

And this is what Jesus showed us on the cross and in the tomb.

Jesus died that sin and death may not have eternal sway over our bodies.

We often think of death as our soul ascending up into heaven.

But I remind us this morning that we profess the faith of our creed, which does not proclaim a promise in the ascension of the soul, but a promise in the resurrection of the body.

We confess that we will be raised on the last day with a new undefiled body.

This is our hope. This is what we confess.

And this then is our outdoor ministry, caring for the outside body first, because in doing so we are proclaiming, we are looking toward that new creation where we will live life in those undefiled resurrected bodies.

We need to care for the body of everyone around us, and in so doing we will care for the soul that is our own.

Thanks be to God. Amen.