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Our Saviour Lutheran Church  
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Epiphany 3

Sisters and brothers in Christ, 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, sisters and brothers in Christ, we have this passage this morning about Jesus' call of the disciples.

Yes, in our gospel reading this morning, we read that Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee.

And as he does so, Jesus sees Simon and Peter, and he says to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

And then Jesus goes a little further, and he sees James and John.

And Jesus invites them, too, to follow.

Indeed, we read today about the call of the disciples today and I think when we read passages like this one here in the gospel of Matthew, we can't help but wonder.

We can't help but focus on that all-important question...

We can't help but wonder why some people decide to follow Jesus...

...why some people decide to be faithful Christians...

...why some people faithfully choose to attend worship and be active in a congregation...

Why some people follow and why some people don't?

Why is that? Why do some people follow and others do not?

Is there something special in the water?

Is there something special about the genes in some people, such that they heed the call from God, while others are indifferent?

PAUSE

Now, it would seem most apparent. It would seem obvious.

To be a Christian would seem to be a no brainer, right?

Because what is Christianity all about? But healing and hope.

Most succinctly, this is how we would define the focus of Christianity.

Christianity is about healing and hope.

This is after all the message Jesus' proclaims, the message we hear in our gospel reading today.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

The word "repent," is but a big, fancy church word for healing, right?

Repent is to turn from those things which are not good, which bring hurt to ourselves and others.

Repentance is about healing, right?

And the message that "the kingdom of heaven has come near," is about hope, right?

The coming kingdom of heaven brings hope.

And so, yes, healing and hope, this is what Christianity is about.

PAUSE

And so, why, pray tell, would persons not want to be a part of such an organization that has this as their focus? It is a no-brainer.

Why would anyone not follow Jesus? Why would anyone not be part of the Church?

PAUSE

Now, to be sure, our world, Friends, is filled with an abundance of pain and suffering.

We hear it in the news every single day.

There is the ongoing war in Ukraine—we have been daily reminded of this unfortunate situation for almost a year now.

And, we hear in the news as well that there has been devastating flooding and mudslides in California for many days now.

There have also been deadly protests in Peru and in Iran.

There was a recent plane crash in Nepal.

This has been on top of all this deadly car crashes and house fires in our local area.

Just this past week in fact, I learned that one of my colleagues in the ministry, Deacon Leanne Elliott, who served at Trindle Spring Lutheran Church in Mechanicsburg was killed in a car crash a week ago Friday.

She was 32 years old.

So, yes the news reminds us day-in and day-out that there is immense pain and suffering in our world.

And I think to myself that the very least we can do as people is avoid adding to that pain and suffering by our actions.

The very least we can do is not contribute to the pain and suffering in the world.

There is already enough.

So if we can avoid being cruel... If we can avoid spreading hate...

If we can avoid being judgmental, avoid being critical and spiteful, hurtful and vindictive...

If we can avoid animosity and malice...

If we can avoid doing these things, that would at the very least be a start, so that we are not contributing the abundance of pain and suffering already in the world.

But, of course, this is only one side of the equation.

This is the passive side of the equation.

And, my guess is that many people try to do as much as that.

My guess is that many people justify themselves by saying, "I try to be a good person. I don't speak ill of my neighbor. I don't kill other people. I don't take from other people. I am for the most part a decent person."

I suspect that most people justify themselves in this way.

And this is the passive existence that seeks at the very least not to add to the pain and suffering already in the world.

But the Church is more than that. Being a Christian is not a passive existence.

No, being a follower of Christ entails being proactive.

Christianity is more than being passive. It is about taking the initiative.

It is about being an agent of healing and hope in the world.

PAUSE

Look at our Lord Jesus, if you will.

Consider his example in our gospel reading this morning.

What does Jesus do there?

He comes on the scene, and begins proclaiming a message of healing and hope, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

And then he goes on walk-about.

He travels around the Sea of Galilee calling people to the ministry.

And then at the end of the reading for today, we hear that Jesus went throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in synagogues and proclaiming the good news, and curing every sickness and disease.

That is hardly a passive existence.

No, Jesus takes the initiative. Jesus is proactive. He is in fact all about instilling healing and hope in the world.

And this then is what the Church is to be about, and this then is what we as members of the Church are to be about.

PAUSE

So, if this is the message and mission of the Church—healing and hope—why then do some people follow and some do not?

Why do some people receive the message and internalize that message and some people don't?

Why do some take up the cause and become active in the Church and faithfully attend worship and serve the gospel, while others shy away?

We could all wager our own guesses.

Some people no doubt are turned off by the church because they see the squabbles that go on inside the Church.

Look at our second reading from I Corinthians. They had divisions in their community, not unlike churches today.

And so, yes, some are turned off by the discord they see in the very body of Christ.

And it is unfortunate that even Church members in the very community of which they are a part, add to the pain and suffering in the world, by not being able to get along.

So there is that.

And then some people no doubt turn away from the Church because they feel they don't need the Church to be a good person, and that may be well and true, for some.

But, as Martin Luther once said, the Church is like a hospital.

We have to go to the Church, like we would go to the hospital, for healing.

And, the truth is, WE ALL NEED spiritual healing.

We are all in need of spiritual healing.

So, I am not sure people can claim that they can be a good and truly righteous person apart from the Church.

And so, with that said, I think the most likely reason that people do not follow Jesus, and do not come to Church, and participate in the Christian faith is because of sin.

Pure and simple.

Sin, by definition, is that which divides us from God and from one another.

So, if we are not part of the Christian faith, it is because sin is at work doing its darnedest to divide us from God.

PAUSE

So again, the question is simple, “If being a follower of Christ, if being a Christian is about healing and hope, why would anyone not be part of the Church?”

Who wouldn’t one want to be part of such an organization? Because sin has overshadowed the grace of the gospel.

PAUSE

And so that puts the onus back on us as an organization, doesn’t it?

That puts the responsibility back on us to emphasize what it is that we are about.

That makes us accountable.

In other words, perhaps the reason people are not flocking to Church is because congregations, and even our own included perhaps, are not boldly embodying that message of healing and hope.

Maybe it is because we get caught up in other things that people don’t see the gospel message we are proclaiming, that gospel message of healing and hope.

Maybe we get caught up too much in trying to keep our church doors open, such that we fall into “survival mode,” having moved away from “gospel mode.”

Maybe we get caught up too much in making sure our church constitution is up to date, and get caught up too much in reworking church policies for programs like our Child Protection Program, our Scholarship Program, and the like.

Maybe we get caught up too much in property and building issues, taking care of the physical plant, and the grounds around us, such that we become very insular, and fail to look outward.

Maybe we get caught up in all the details necessary for running the Church, that we miss the mark of what it is to be the Church.

This is not to say that all these others things aren’t important.

But it is just that these other things can't become the primary focus.

They can't or they shouldn't absorb the greater part of our time and energy.

These other things shouldn't derail us from following Jesus Christ and proclaiming the message of healing and hope.

PAUSE

In conclusion then, let me read again the words from our first lesson, those words from Isaiah, but let us hear these words in light of the Church and the gospel message of healing and hope.

The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light—the light being healing and hope.

Those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them the light (of healing and hope) has shined.

You, God, have multiplied the nation. We might even say, "You, God, multiply the Church."

You have increased our joy. We rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, because of the message of healing and hope in our lives.

PAUSE

Yes, these powerful words, yes, Isaiah's words ring true for the Church, Friends, if and only the focus of God's people is healing and hope.

It is after all why I imagine we ourselves had first heeded the call to follow, because we want to be a part of God's mission of healing and hope in the world. Thanks be to God. AMEN.