

I don't mean to cause any panic, but next weekend is Labor Day Weekend! Can you believe it? If time really does "fly" when you're having fun, I must've been having a blast this summer, because time has seemed to zoom by at speed of light! Today we have "Blessing of the Backpacks" and in just two short days, a brand-new school year begins at First Lutheran!

This summer we have welcomed both Principal Miller and Pastor Ewert to our staff. Earlier this month we had an amazing, fun Vacation Bible School. In July our DCE, Megan, her husband Bryan, and five of our high school youth attended the always awesome LCMS National Youth Gathering. What's more, this summer a group of volunteers have started working on the celebration plans for the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of First Ev. Lutheran Church next year. Lots of upkeep and improvements have also been made at our school and our church. The list of summer happenings could go on. No wonder it feels like I just blinked, and summer is over!

Every week, week after week, whether time seems to be flying by or just crawling along, we come to First Lutheran Church as a family of believers for the purpose of worship. We're a congregation that has a place in this neighborhood, (even when we're surrounded by street construction!). We're a congregation that has a place in our town. We're a congregation that's part of something much bigger than what we experience on a local level. We are part of a 2-million-member church body from across all 50 states, called the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Together we share a common confession of the Christian faith that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, as revealed in Scripture alone.

And of course, we're also part of God's entire Christian Church on Earth, which as of this year is made up of 2.64 billion people from around the globe. What's even more amazing to think of is that we're also connected with all the believers who have ever lived of all time who are at rest with the Lord in paradise! That's sometimes easy to forget. Oh, it's *so* easy in the midst of our ordinary weekly routines to become complacent. It's so easy to take for granted what it means- the power and purpose of- being God's people gathered around His Word. But today through the last chapter of his book, the prophet Isaiah opens our eyes to see just how remarkable and how awesome God's work through His Church truly is.

This morning, through His Word, we see that as God gathers His people, He **transforms** us into an ***instrument*** capable of declaring His glory to all the nations of the world. At the end of our Gospel lesson today from Luke Jesus

assures us that “People **will** come from east and west and north and south and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.” (V. 29) What an amazing sight that will be! And yet this very day God has drawn **us** to the feast of His life-giving Word right here in this Sanctuary, from the east, west, north, and south.

Some of our members drive into town from the south, on County Road 2, also known as the Brewery Road. Some members drive into town from the north by taking Falcon Ave., Garden Ave., or County Road 2, also known as the Silver Lake Road. Some come into town on our efficient 4-lane Highway 212, both from the East **and** from the West. In addition to the four cardinal directions, we also have members who drive into town from the **Northwest**, making their way to First Lutheran via Highway 22. The rest of us, I think, live right here in town, I hope I haven’t left anyone or any direction out. My point is God gathers us as His people from **all over** this community and this area from **every** direction.

And if we, members of this congregation, a body of believers in this place, have come from all these directions, picture, if you will, all the places around the world from which God gathers people to Himself week after week. All the diverse countries with wondrous varieties of cultures and languages. Yes, God gathers people who are very different from one another. And this is actually much more amazing than arriving here in Glencoe from all different directions.

In His Church on Earth, God gathers people of different age groups, walks of life, and ethnic backgrounds. There are blue collar workers, white collar workers, retired workers and just plain tired workers. People with different physical and mental gifts and abilities. People who have different talents and interests, even different favorite football teams.

In God’s church, there’s also a large variety of family situations that are represented. God gathers people of all kinds of different life experiences. But best of all, God gathers to Himself even **sinners**. Yes, even more remarkable than God’s ability to bring together those who are different, is His willingness to bring together those who hold something in common: sin.

Sin is something that’s in everyone’s nature. In Psalm 51:5, David confesses on behalf of all of us, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” And in the New Testament book of Romans (5:12), St. Paul tells us how sin first entered the world through one man, Adam, and in this way, death came to all people because all have sinned.

Our everyday experiences bear this out. God's commandments are broken by what we think, say, and do. Whether knowingly or un-knowingly, we so often place our trust in our own abilities rather than in God who promises to provide us with what we need and to always work things out for our good. Often times too, we get caught up in our own circumstances and problems that we don't think of helping those in much more need than us. That's part of our nature as sinful people. And eventually, we all know how true those words are: "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 3:23).

But that need not be the end of the story. Because when we receive and don't reject Him, God transforms us by His Word. Through faith in His Son, Jesus, we sinners stand in God's presence even now clothed in the forgiveness, righteousness, holiness, and purity that He gives to us in our Baptism into Christ. Through faith in Jesus, one day we will see God face-to-face in paradise. Jesus secured all this for us on the cross, the place where God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). By grace through faith in Christ alone we are forgiven. We are **free**! Free from sin and free to share this liberating and soul-satisfying Good News with others who so desperately need to hear it too.

Through the Means of Grace- the Lord's Supper, Holy Baptism, and through God's powerful Word we personally receive the forgiveness of sin Jesus died and rose again to win for us. 'God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight' (Eph. 1:4). In the means of grace, God's Word and Sacraments, God is at work now making us holy and keeping us holy and blameless in His sight as the righteousness of Christ continues to cover over our sins.

In 1 Corinthians 12, God's servant Paul vividly describes how God is at work through the Body of Christ, the Church, as the Church is gathered together. Every member of Christ's Church has an important part to contribute, much like every part of the human body has something to contribute to the whole body. God has given us each unique gifts and abilities that He wants us to use for the benefit of others, to serve others.

And this happens in so many ways here at First Lutheran. Through Board members and council members who conduct the business that needs to be done, through teachers in our Christian Day School, Sunday school, VBS, Catechism Classes, and Bible studies who share the Good News of Jesus with all who will hear. In so many other ways too, people use their God-given gifts and talents to the glory of God and the building up of His kingdom here on earth. Through both vocal and instrumental music in school choirs, the Senior Choir,

and more. So many things go on behind the scenes, too, that would take too long to list them all, and these people don't want the attention anyway, like the Altar Guild, Lutheran Women in Mission, Mat-Makers, and more. And as we look forward into the future, by God's grace there is a lot more work to do. There are so many opportunities we have to work together to share the Good News of Jesus, and yet ultimately it is God's Holy Spirit working through His Word that does the most important work; that of creating faith in our hearts. We are members of His body that He works through to do that very work.

This Good News of Jesus and all the work we do is not just for us here. By no means! God sends us out of our place of worship into the world with His Word. As He said in verse 18 of our text from Isaiah, God's plan is to gather to Himself a people from all nations and tongues, from every corner of the earth to come and see His glory.

In verse 20 the LORD makes it plain that He wants to gather us, all His people, as brothers and sisters, to worship Him. And this worship is continual and ongoing as the Lord makes plain in the last verse of our text. "From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me," says the LORD."

The Church is God's instrument, set in the world and sent out into the world to declare His glory to all nations so that everyone may come to know the Good News of God's love in Jesus and in Him to find the only place for forgiveness of sin and eternal life. On a global scale, the Church is taking the Gospel to every tribe and tongue, every region and false religion. It's done through the work of overseas missionaries and through Bible translators who put the Bible into the language that people can understand.

Here at First Lutheran, we participate in God's mission at the congregational level. For starters, we have the opportunity with our offering envelopes to send a portion of our every Sunday offering to fund mission work in the Minnesota South District, also on a national and international level, as well. We further support the work of missions with our prayers.

And what's more, there are opportunities in the community. Our Lutheran Day School is a prime example of the opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus with others. And of course, we can and **should** invite people to worship who have no church home, to receive the greatest blessings of all that God offers to everyone through His Holy Word. No, we don't have to travel to Tarshish, Pul, or Lud to participate in God's mission for the Church- not when His mission is everywhere around us!

So, as we go our way back home into our communities, neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, clubs, and homes whether it be to the North, South, East, West, or Northwest, we go out as forgiven and Spirit-filled children of God. We've been gathered to His Word and now we go with His Word to the world. The Lord has set us free from sin to declare His glory and to give us peace of mind knowing that one day, by His grace we will join with countless other believers from all times and places in worshipping Him face-to-face and enjoying the everlasting joys *of the new heavens and the new earth, the home of righteousness*. Thanks be to God! Amen!