

“All the Company of Heaven”

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb (Revelation 7:9).

In the last two weeks, many of you received an information packet sharing details about our current capital campaign. This stewardship effort is operating under the title “Thus Far...” and this heading recalls the Old Testament story in which Samuel set up a stone monument, called it Ebenezer and then reminded God’s people, “Thus far the Lord has helped us” (I Samuel 7:12). This phrase is important to the story of our congregation and it seemed the perfect phrase to lead this campaign because we have an incredible history of God’s provision for His ministry in this place and the purpose of this current effort is to fund a project that will celebrate Christ’s ministry in this place for generations to come.

In a plan that will unfold over the next two calendar years, we will develop the west side of our campus, make safety and structural improvements to the church building and finally, in the summer of 2016, completely restore the interior of this sanctuary. Throughout this month, you will be hearing about this project as we prepare to make pledges toward the campaign on November 22nd and 23rd.

Today, I want to tell you why this project matters and, as we kickoff the “Thus Far...” campaign, I can’t imagine better day on which to do it. Today, we observe All Saints’ Day and this historic festival of the Church points us to the ultimate promise of God. Today, our eyes are turned toward heaven. Today, we remember the saints who have gone before us and we give thanks that by grace through faith in Christ’s righteousness we also stand together as forgiven sinners and holy saints. On this day we proclaim that thus far and forever, God has led His people; that thus far and forever God has forgiven His people; that thus far and forever God has given His people life. It has been said that, “God gives eternal gifts to temporal people” *and the place God meets us with these eternal gifts is right here.* That is why this place is special and that is why this project matters.

In the Augsburg Confession, the leaders of the Reformation made a bold statement about the purpose of the Church: “The Church” they wrote, “is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered” (Article VII). This simple, profound definition of the Church is important for our ears today because today, the Church has been saddled with demands and distractions that completely cloud this clear purpose. Churches have become everything from social centers to self-help clinics and while our faith is always lived out in arenas that intersect with every area of life, the purpose of the church is not to help us live better lives. It’s not a spiritual gym where we perfect our behavior. The purpose of the church is not mobilizing us for social causes. The purpose of the church is not to serve as a political powerbroker. The purpose of the church is totally unique and the truth is that the Church is the only place where God’s temporal people gather to receive His eternal gifts.

It’s a place where broken hearts are mended. It’s a place where the spiritually sick find healing. It’s a place where sinners are forgiven. It is the place where heaven and earth meet. My friends, these are the gifts that Christ brings to us through Word and Sacrament. This is where Christ comes to us. This is where God helps us. *This* is the purpose of the Church and everything about this place points us to these gifts of God. We see it in the art and architecture that surround us. We hear it the hymns that fill our ears and in the liturgy that directs our voices in praise and we experience it in the language of God that binds our worship together.

When I was a seminary student I took a course on worship that helped to shape and form my understanding of this unique purpose of the Church. In this class we studied the theology and history of worship, we practiced reading Scripture and we examined the liturgy of the church. This class covered every aspect of what happens during worship from the prelude to the closing hymn and as we talked about

the Sacrament of the Altar, we zeroed in on the liturgy and prayers that prepare the congregation for the celebration of Holy Communion. These were words and phrases that I had heard hundreds of time before and I could recite most of them from memory and yet, as we studied this liturgy, things became clear to me for the first time and the most dramatic and life-changing revelation came as we studied a portion of the communion liturgy called the Proper Preface. The Proper Preface is probably more familiar to you than you know. It always begins with the pastor saying, “It is truly good right and salutary that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to You, holy Lord, almighty Father, everlasting God...” Then, as the Proper Preface draws to a close, we hear these words, “Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify your glorious name, evermore praising you and saying...” and then the congregation joins in singing the Sanctus: “Holy, Holy, Holy...”

Our professor, Dr. Just, explained that this familiar liturgy speaks about an amazing reality that Christ creates in Holy Communion and that when we come to the altar to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, we are also gathered together with the entire Church – not just the people sitting next us in the pew, but every believer of every time and place; “with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven...” Thus far and forever we are together in the presence of Jesus; we are united in this Holy Communion. Dr. Just says it best in his own words when he writes, “What we must always remember when we go to the Lord’s Supper is that we commune with Christ and wherever Christ is, there is heaven. And this communion includes all the saints who have died and risen in Christ: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Ruth, Peter, Paul, our grandparents and great-grandparents – perhaps even our spouses or our children – and all the saints now living all over the world, and those still to come...In Christ, in that great mystery of our union with Him, we are joined to all who are joined to Him”¹

After explaining this incredibly comforting teaching, Dr. Just then illustrated its importance with a story I’ll never forget. He told us about a family in his congregation that had a young daughter who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. They sought out the best doctors and fought the illness with every treatment possible, but in the end the young girl was overcome by the disease and the family buried their only daughter. The funeral was held at the church and, in the Sundays that followed, Pastor Just noticed that the grieving father had stopped coming to church. After missing services for more than a month, Pastor Just paid a call on the man and asked him why he had stopped attending worship. The exhausted father explained that he didn’t think he would ever be able to return to church and said that being in the sanctuary was a painful reminder that he would never see his little girl again. Dr. Just then described this theology of worship, teaching him about the Proper Preface and the Communion of the Saints that exists in the Sacrament and that it is *precisely at that communion rail* that Christ would be present and it was there in the presence of Christ that he would experience a new unity with his daughter that transcended the limits of this temporal world.

The next Sunday, as Pastor Just conducted the service and the congregation began to receive Holy Communion, he saw the man rise from the back of the church and with tears streaming down his face he approached the altar, knelt at the rail and received the Sacrament and “with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven” he was united in the presence of the Risen Christ.

This is where Christ is present. This is where God meets is people. This is where broken hearts are mended. This is where our spiritual sickness is healed. This is where heaven and earth meet. We can rejoice on this All Saints’ Day because in Christ Jesus we are forgiven sinners and we are holy saints and today, we can cry out together in a loud voice with “angels and archangels and all the company of heaven” thanking God that our salvation belongs to Him – thus far and forever. And that is why this place matters. Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold

¹ Arthur A. Just Jr., *Heaven on Earth: The Gifts of Christ in the Divine Service* (St. Louis: CPH, 2008), 212-213.