

Christians Aren't Loners

“After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could count, out of every nation and of all tribes, peoples, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, dressed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.... One of the elders answered, saying to me, ‘These who are arrayed in the white robes, who are they, and where did they come from?’ I told him, ‘My lord, you know.’ He said to me, ‘These are those who came out of the great suffering. They washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb’s blood.’”
(Revelation 7:9, 13-14, World English Bible)

Individualism is not a concept that defines the Christian life. For the Christian walk in this life, and for eternity, includes more than just God and me and my Bible. It's interesting that we Lutherans celebrate “Reformation Day” on October 31st and then celebrate “All Saints’ Day” on November 1st (even though many congregations, ours included, typically celebrate these days on the last Sunday in October and then on the first Sunday in November). And we obviously celebrate the Reformation when we do because Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* on October 31, 1517 – on the eve of the day that the church in the west has celebrated All Hallows’ (or Saints’) Day for many centuries. So, there is a historical reason for celebrating these two events back-to-back.

And I find this interesting. For Reformation Day recalls with thanksgiving that Martin Luther recovered the Biblical teaching that ***“by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast”*** (Ephesians 2:8-9, ESV). For ***“we have been justified by faith”*** (Romans 5:1, ESV). In fact, the eyes of Luther himself were opened when he realized the true meaning of the words: ***“The righteous shall live by faith”*** (Romans 1:17, ESV) or ***“The one who by faith is righteous shall live”*** (Romans 1:17, ESV, footnote alternate translation). ***“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law”*** (Romans 3:28, ESV). ***“We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified”*** (Galatians 2:16, ESV).

What a wonderful doctrine. In fact, it's the central teaching of Holy Scripture. This serves as the basis of our Lutheran mottos “Sola Gratia” (grace alone) and “Sola Fide” (faith alone). And see, sola fide in particular is very personal – for the gift of saving faith is given to individuals. For just as no human being can save himself or herself or even another person, so too no one can believe for someone else. ***“Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit”*** (Psalm 49:7-9, ESV).

See, the emphasis for Reformation Day is very personal – namely, that *the individual* is saved through faith in Jesus Christ. But the very next day the emphasis is on *all* the saints. And a saint of course is someone (living in this world or in the nearer presence of Christ in heaven) who is declared holy before God through faith in Christ crucified and risen. On All Saints’ Day we focus upon all believers – the church. For God brings His saved into community with others. And while

the church can't save us (for Christians can't save themselves, only God saves), yet God uses His church to bring blessing.

First off, God tells His church: ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”*** (Matthew 28:19-20, ESV). And this happens in numerous ways. Christian parents bring their babies to the Baptismal font and also teach their children the Bible as they mature. Believers talk to their friends and neighbors about Jesus. Church bodies send out missionaries to ***“go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation”*** (Mark 16:15, ESV). For God has given His church the Word and the Sacraments which create and sustain the saving faith which receives the grace that the Holy Spirit delivers through these means. And every day, in many settings, the church, through the Means of Grace, offers to a world of sinners the forgiveness, salvation, and life that Jesus earned for mankind by His life, suffering, death, and resurrection.

The Lord also places us in community with fellow believers to ***“encourage one another and build one another up”*** (1 Thessalonians 5:11, ESV) and ***“to stir up one another to love and good works”*** (Hebrews 10:24, ESV). ***“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”*** (1 Corinthians 12:12-13, ESV). For believers ***“are the body of Christ and individually members of it”*** (1 Corinthians 12:27, ESV). So, ***“if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together”*** (1 Corinthians 12:26, ESV).

My fellow believer, as a saint in Christ you are not alone. For dear Christian, ***“God's Spirit dwells in you”*** (1 Corinthians 3:16, ESV) - just as Jesus promised to His followers (John 14:16-17). You are not alone. And you've also been brought into community with those who trust in Christ – ***“the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints”*** (the Apostles' Creed as confessed in *Lutheran Service Book*). Again, you are not alone.

And the Christian shouldn't even try to be a loner. For in doing so the believer not only refuses to participate with fellow Christians in the community that Jesus has created, but being a loner also opens the opportunity for all sorts of problems that can threaten the faith of the Christian. For the devil continuously tempts the Christian with false teaching and unbelief. And as a lamb that wanders away from the flock and the shepherd is in greater danger of attack, so too a Christian is far more vulnerable if he or she seeks to be a loner.

My fellow Christian, thanks be to God that He has made us His children through faith in Jesus and has brought us into His kingdom – His church. For the church is a community that has been given life through Baptism and will rise again bodily on the Last Day when Jesus returns. And life within this community exists now in this world as well as in Jesus' nearer presence. For the church abides in struggle and ***“great suffering”*** in this fallen world and also lives in victory in heaven. In the last book of the New Testament, John gives us a glimpse of this everlasting community who have ***“washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb's blood”*** – calling them ***“a great multitude which no man could count, out of every nation and of all tribes, peoples, and***

languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, dressed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.” This month (and every day of the year) may be thank God that in Christ we are not alone now and shall not be alone for eternity.

See you as we gather together for worship,
Pastor

PS – Watch the calendar next month for a special mid-week worship service in December for members who, for whatever reasons, find it difficult to worship on Sunday mornings. For starting in December, I plan on conducting a very short worship service once a month during the middle of the week (probably early in the afternoon, but the day, date, and time are not necessarily set in stone at this point). The worship service will resemble what I do with our shut-in members. There will be Confession & Absolution, a confession of faith (one of the creeds), a short reading and devotion from the Bible, the Sacrament of Holy Communion, and prayers. I plan on this service lasting no longer than 15 to 20 minutes. These worship services will be held at St. Paul’s. So, please watch the December newsletter and December church calendar for the time and date. If you have any questions, please call me at the parsonage (906-934-2570) ~ Pastor.