

Grace, mercy, and peace in the name of Jesus Christ.

There is no doubt about it, the church as we have known it is facing some trying times these days. In many ways this is nothing new. But here at Grace we have been somewhat shielded from the reality that many other congregations have been facing for years. You know what I mean. There is an undeniable, long-term trend of people becoming disconnected from the church. It's a trend that affects other religions as well, and other institutions that have nothing to do with religion at all. One famous example is bowling. When I was a kid, bowling leagues were all the rage. It was hard to find a place to go bowling if you weren't in a league. Now things are quite different. A famous example of using bowling as a gauge for general social engagement was a book by Robert Putnam published in 2000 entitled "Bowling Alone." There are undoubtedly many reasons for our changing social habits. One of them, identified by Putnam, is the development of technology and devices that channel our attention away from the physical world, including being physically present with other people. He had television in mind. This was well before the smartphone, or highspeed internet and social media, which have only accelerated the trend. Of course those same technologies allow us to connect with real people at a distance in ways that was never possible before. Some of you are watching and listening to me right now are using the technology in that way, some of you because you're not near enough or mobile enough to Grace to make attendance practical. And that is a good thing! I've talked before with the children about how different the world is in that way. When Helen moved here from England 36 ½ years ago, she would occasionally phone home. But she had to keep it short, because international calls were expensive. Mostly she wrote letters, and sent pictures, which would take a week to arrive. Now our daughter Marian has moved to England and we can talk to her whenever we want, and see her face through a screen. It's like she's in the next room. That is a huge change in the way the world works in just one third of a century. And as I said, I think this change is for the good. But it's a change, and one that we don't yet know all of the consequences of yet.

So change has been happening in the church, and while we at Grace haven't ignored the broader reality, and have tried different ways to try to address it, it seems that COVID has accelerated the trend and brought us to a place now where we are being forced to think seriously about how we can afford to continue, and what changes might need to be made in the way we're used to organizing and running our congregation. That's a big discussion that needs to continue, and that I can't begin to address now. This isn't the time or the place. But what I want to do, with the help of today's readings, is to focus our attention on what things we *must* do, whatever the practical details of our organization look like, what must always remain at the center of our life together as a community of faith if we are to be a church and not something else.

Our first reading from Isaiah ties in nicely with our first reading last week from Malachi. God's people are worshipping God dutifully, but they are doing so in a way that has no impact on how they live their lives outside of their religious observances. They fast. That's an ancient religious practice meant to help you focus on what is essential in life, and to make you grateful for the blessing of food that sustains your life. God's complaint is that while the people are fulfilling the technical requirements of their fasts, they are using the time not to strengthen their relationship with God or one another, but to continue to focus on their daily business of taking advantage of one another. A genuine relationship with God should lead them to see that

exploiting and oppressing others is exactly what they *shouldn't* be doing. “Do you really want to fast?” God asks them, “Do you really want to give up something meaningful that will make a difference? Try this: stop profiting off of others’ misery. Stop making yourselves rich by making others poor. That will not only give the poor a break, but it will change *you* for the better as well.”

The reading from Matthew does something similar, but in a less confrontational way. Remember that this is a continuation of last week’s reading, which was the Beatitudes. And the Beatitudes were Jesus’ way of upending the disciples’ assumptions about God, particularly about whom God blesses. “It’s those people down there,” Jesus tells his inner circle, “the poor in spirit, the mourning, the persecuted, the peacemakers – those are the ones God is particularly concerned about. If your heart is aligned with God’s, you’ll find yourself wanting to do something for them.”

Both God in Isaiah and Jesus in Matthew are making the point that our relationship with God is connected to our relationship with other people. Christianity is not and has never been a private or an individualistic religion. It can’t be just about you and what you get out of it. It’s not a self-improvement strategy or a “life hack.” It is putting you in touch with your creator and redeemer who is on a mission to reclaim the world and bring it to the fullness of what it was meant to be. And when you are in touch with that one, you will be drawn into that mission. How could you not be?

Putting you in touch with your creator and redeemer is what Paul was on about in his letter to the Corinthians. The proclamation of Christ crucified, and only that, Paul insisted, is the power of God that unleashes the Holy Spirit to create faith in us to trust that this mystery of God, Jesus on the cross, frees us from the power of sin, death, and evil, liberates us from all the powers of this world that rebel against God and draw us from God. Here is that one thing, sisters and brothers in Christ, that must always be at the heart of all we do, beginning first and foremost in our gatherings around word and sacrament on a Sunday morning. This is what makes us the church, and nothing else – not our building, not our pastor, not our fabulous music, whether of the baroque or the folk variety, not our generous service projects, not even our marvelous food pantry. As wonderful and inspiring as all of those things may or may not be (and that’s going to vary from person to person), the one thing we cannot let go of are these regular gatherings in Jesus’ name in which we remind one another of the promise of life that is ours and the world’s in the cross of Jesus. As I said last week, we need each other first and foremost for that. Everything else is secondary. That doesn’t mean that anything else is *not* important or something we should do without. We just need to make sure that anything else we do is a *result* of our proclamation of the mystery of the gospel, and that nothing ever replaces the gospel as our reason for being.

If we attend to that one task that we are given to do as the church, we will be in good shape going forward, even if we might have to change the way we do some things. So take heart, beloved of God. God is with us in Jesus Christ today, in this place and among these people, freeing us from sin, death, and evil and opening for us the way to life that really is life. Count on *that*, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.