

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Pentecost 20

October 10, 2021

***God's people gather***

<sup>23</sup>Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup>And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. <sup>25</sup>Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

—Hebrews 10:23-25

Life was never meant to be lived alone. God did not create us this way. In the very beginning of Scripture God caused his own words to be written: “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him.” So God created woman from the rib of the man. God told them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” It was God’s will that the earth be filled with people, and it was his desire that the crown of his creation interact with each other, love and serve each other, even as we love and serve God.

Life was never meant to be lived in a sterile bubble. God did not create us this way. Sometimes people have to live this way for safety and protection. Some people whose immune systems are compromised literally have to be isolated from contact with everyone, because exposure to any pathogen could be fatal. Sometimes they literally live in a sterile bubble. But it’s not meant to be that way. Long before the word “Covid” was found in anyone’s vocabulary, long before “social distancing” was even a thing, some hospitalized patients were kept in “enteric isolation.” That usually meant that the patient was extremely contagious and could infect others with a viral or bacterial infection. Anyone entering the room—doctor, nurse, tech, clergy—had to put on personal protective equipment—mask, gown, gloves. Sometimes for the patient this caused additional stress. In addition to being in the hospital, they were in isolation. The only human words were spoken through a mask; the only human touch was felt through rubber gloves. It isn’t meant to be this way, but sometimes it’s necessary.

Over the last year all of us have learned what it’s like to experience isolation to some degree or another. Taking reasonable precautions to prevent the spread of a deadly virus is necessary, but it’s not what most people want. We’ve sensed the fear and apprehension in others and maybe we’ve felt it ourselves. We see what isolation and quarantine and social distancing have done to people, to the point where masked shoppers won’t even look at each other in the stores because—they might think—making eye contact could spread disease! We’ve seen what happens when people are alone, afraid, anguished, depressed; God did not make us to live this way. People were willing to stay six feet apart to help prevent transmission of a communicable disease, but we didn’t like it. Why not? It’s only six feet! We can still talk to each other, see each other, interact with each other. Yes, but it’s not the way God made us to interact with each other. We are social people, wired by God to crave the human touch. We need one another.

God’s people know this most of all. We want to be together. We are the church, the body of Christ. We need each other. So God’s people gather!

This is the hope we profess: God the Son became incarnate, took on human flesh, became our brother, walked among us, bore our sins, carried our sorrows, and died on the cross. He has rescued us from the darkness and hellish condemnation of our sins by giving us his forgiveness and clothing us in his righteousness. This is the hope we profess: We believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life of the world to come. This is the hope we profess in the words of Job: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another” (Job 19:25-27). This is the hope we profess in the words of Jesus, who said: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25,26). This is the hope we profess: I will not die but live and will proclaim what God has done. We have this hope anchored in the solid promise of Jesus Christ himself, who proved his power over death by rising from the grave, who is himself the resurrection and the life. “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”

We have all sensed the division in our nation. In this world people are constantly being separated by things that divide them: skin color, culture, habits, behaviors, preferences, political viewpoints, teams they cheer for—everyone is on different sides for different reasons. There are people who want to erect barriers between human beings, to divide us from one another. In the Christian church it’s different. We celebrate our diversity as a beautiful gift from God, but in the Christian church we are fundamentally about things that make us all the same. It doesn’t matter what ethnicity or culture or viewpoint we come from, there are some things we can say definitively about every member of the human race. First is that every human being is mortally infected by the same sin of

Adam. Every human being on this planet (Jesus is the exception) is mortal, condemned to die because of our original sin and the sins we have committed against God. And second is that every human being on the planet has been rescued by the same Savior, Jesus Christ the Son of God who died on the cross for our sins and has taken away the sin of the world. These universal truths apply to everyone. The Christian church is a community that breaks down walls and barriers because in the most important things, in the most fundamental things, we all are exactly the same: We are sinners who need a Savior. We have a Savior whom we trust and rely on. He is Jesus.

When we appreciate and understand how much we are like each other, we can appreciate how much we need each other. In the church, which breaks down walls and barriers, it's not just about a personal connection with God; it's about a personal connection to others. There is a proper place for solitude. Jesus took time alone away from the crowds and away from his disciples, so that he could have alone time with his Father in prayer and reflection on the Word; sometimes we do the same. But if my personal preference is to go into my room, close the door, shut out the world and be alone with my computer—or my video game; or my music; or my bottle—then something is wrong. My inward-looking infatuation with self is pushing me further from Jesus, not drawing me closer. Perhaps someone's idea of church is to come in for a one-on-one with God. Look straight ahead. Don't turn to the right or to the left. Don't greet anyone. Don't be friendly. Maybe even arrive a little late and leave a little early, so you don't have to interact with anyone. That's not God's idea for his church, the gathering of believers, the body of Christ. He says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the day approaching." We need each other. We are here for each other. We learn from each other. We grow from each other. We encourage each other, and we hold each other accountable. Because we love each other.

The Christian life to which God has called you in Christ is inherently dangerous. It is risky. It calls us out of our secure cocoons. It is messy. It caused us to roll up our sleeves and get involved in the lives of other people to love them to support them to care for them. When we gather in church there might be crying babies. There might be little kids with sniffles and snot. You might get hit in the back of the head by a flying Cheerio. Someone might sneeze and spew viral contagion into the air. You might catch Covid or some other communicable disease, and you might die and go to heaven. (I hope that doesn't happen anytime soon, because I'm selfish, I love having you here on this side of eternity, and we miss those who fall asleep in the Lord.) If it happens to me, I hope you will miss me, but I can honestly say with the Apostle Paul, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (Philippians 1:21,22). I don't say that because I'm reckless or careless or cynical or checked out or have a death wish. I say it because it *is* so. It's the truth. So we take reasonable precautions to protect life and health. We do not want to tempt God. We don't want to hurt or harm our neighbor. But loving people is messy and risky. Jesus touched the lepers, touched the untouchable. Jesus put his fingers into the deaf man's ears, then he spit and touched his tongue. Jesus spit and made mud for the blind man's eyes. We who gather in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and as his Church, are willing to step out of our comfort zones, take the risk of loving one another in Jesus' name, with all the mess, the danger, and the inconvenience that entails, as we encourage one another to hold unswervingly to Jesus' promise for forgiveness and eternal life.

One of our worship services begins with the words, "We have come into the presence of God." Think for a moment about what that means! What a blessing it is to be gathered in God's house! To be able to approach God through faith in Jesus Christ, to be baptized into the Name of God, not only to be in his house but to be a member of his household! This an amazing privilege. Here we listen to the voice of Jesus. Here we sit at Jesus feet and are taught by his word. And we don't just come to get; we come to give. Our presence is an encouragement to others. Our love builds up those around us. Who doesn't love a full Church? We want to be together. We want to be in God's house. We want to see each other and interact with each other and encourage each other. We want to spur one another on toward love and good deeds. This is part of the Spirit-worked desire in each of God's people to have a connection with one another in the body of Christ.

"And all the more as you see the Day approaching." This is the Day of Jesus' return, of redemption and release from all the effects of sin in this world. In heaven there will be no more illness, no more pandemics, no more cancer, heart disease, no more crying, mourning, pain or death. Then God's people will gather forever around the Throne of the Most High God and praise him for his victory over sin and death through his Son, our Savior Jesus. "Therefore let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." Amen.