

“Is Your Church Too Old for You?” by Pastor Steve Sommerer
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost July 5, 2020

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The sermon text is from Matthew 11:25-30.

Memory is one of God’s greatest gifts to us. Monuments and statues and ceremonies link us to our past, reminding us of good things to treasure or bad things to change. And families, countries and churches have some of both, the good and the bad. Carrying forward our past can make us appreciative of sacrifices, as we are on the 4th of July. It can also remind us where we need God’s grace and strength to grow in a good way. A sign of immaturity is an unwillingness to receive and pass on what’s worthy of passing on. In that respect, it’s sad to see churches separated by age. The wisdom of the Church’s past is surely a better guide than the lightning changes of our culture. Everyone loses. The young become discipled by churches that mirror the culture. We elderly worry there’ll be no one to help; which is the worst of sins for us who have a victorious Savior.

I always encourage my confirmands to view their task – not as getting out from under mom and dad’s thumb so they can worship with their buddies, or not at all, but to serve their elderly and be active leaders and workers and worshipers in our church, continuing to build the bridges that connect us in an unbroken link . Loving, prayer-filled hearts cause many older members to serve their young and support a school and Sunday school and youth gatherings, but mature children grow to see it works both ways and there’s something you can do; rather, than taking until it’s time to bolt for the door. The Church is God’s hospital, not for the young or the old, but for sinners.

Jesus makes an invitation in our text, “*Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-burdened and I will give you rest.*” And not only does Jesus invite children, He specifically reveals the invitation to infants in our Greek text.

But that seems to make Jesus guilty of age discrimination! Does God really like children better? Ezekiel 33 says, “*God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that they turn from their ways and live.*” 1 Timothy 2 says, “*God wants all people to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth.*” So what’s the deal? Why would God hide the Gospel from the wise and learned?

There are always those who think the answer is because children are so sweet and cute and innocent. If kids were sweet and cute and innocent, adults wouldn’t always make them sit at the kids’ table at family reunions. No, Psalm 51 tells us children aren’t innocent at all – like us, they’ve been sinful from the moment of conception in their mother’s womb. Young or old, Romans 3 says, “*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*”

In the verses just before our text, Jesus pronounced God’s judgment on three towns in which He did many miracles, but the people still refused to repent. He said, “*On the Day of Judgment it would be more bearable for Sodom*” than those towns that rejected Christ the Savior. If you think God was unusually harsh in His judgment on

Sodom in the Old Testament, Jesus says, “Oh no, Judgment Day will be far worse for you if you don’t repent and believe on Me.” And that’s still the case. If you think yourself wise and sophisticated but are too proud to turn to Christ in repentance, Hebrews says, “*It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*”

So grow up in Christ by becoming child-like; that is to say, a little child lives from being given to. If a child isn’t receiving and being fed and clothed and nourished they’ll die. Little children are absolutely helpless, and so are you. You either acknowledge that truth or you don’t.

Jesus warned, “*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*” If the way of a little child is to be wholly at the mercy of mom and dad-totally dependent - the “wise and learned” don’t think they need anything. They may have great intelligence, but no Godly wisdom.

The so-called wise and learned ones laugh at Paul’s epistle reading, “How dare you say that in me there’s no good thing! Surely, you overstate the case! There are many fine things about me.” We sinners wiggle and squirm and hate to admit the truth. We even try to change the definitions to avoid the Law’s accusation: “In you there is no good thing... Oh, yes, that means you.” But for all the squirming excuses – shifting the blame, rationalizing our own sin so we can look down in contempt on others. We get it wrong when we “wise and learned” folks start to believe we’re in control, not dependent like those babies!

Our prideful sinful flesh has a million ways to avoid saying with Paul: “*In my flesh there’s no good thing. What a wretched man I am!*” The problem with pastors or churches or cheerleaders who are always telling you, “Yes, you can...” is as James puts it: “*If you stumble in just one point of God’s Law you break it all.*” Plus, it keeps you from finding peace in the Savior who did it for you. Better to become the helpless child.

A little baby sits in his or her filth and waste and cries, a mournful awful cry – an agonizing cry, but she’s helpless to make it better. The little child needs grace – a free gift. That baby can’t relieve the discomfort of her diaper or soothe a burning rash. She can’t earn a living, shop for food or clothes, cook and clean. Babies live from grace. That’s how you and I should be, like that baby who lives from grace.

The strange and wonderful paradox of the Christian faith is that it’s just in this Spirit-given recognition of infant-like dependence we receive the grace – the undeserved love that God our Heavenly Father wanted to give all along. Whether you hold your baptized baby in your hand or you’ve seen 100 years on this earth, Christ Jesus took up living, breathing flesh and blood in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He became a tiny embryo until He drew His last labored breaths in this world on the cross, because God loves you and wants you to share His heavenly home. His grace is the soothing balm of forgiveness for us His beloved babies. His Baptism your water of life.

The amazing thing about grace is you can be a genius saved by grace through faith like Isaac Newton or Martin Luther or you may have more ordinary gifts like the rest of us. You may not be able to point to a long list of accomplishments and the world might regard you as from pretty humble stock, but you’re in a good place if you can say with St. Paul, “*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” From the least to the greatest, richest to poorest, oldest to youngest, we have one and the same Savior who laid aside His glory to die your death and give you a new eternal life and hope – an “*inheritance*” *1 Peter 1*

says “that can never perish spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Christ the first and the greatest became last and least so that we who are last might be first, we who are humbled in repentance over our sins are exalted by Christ’s victory for us. Trusting in Jesus, you are fully and freely forgiven in the blood of your crucified and risen Savior.

So, dear Babes in the arms of Jesus, God has much work to accomplish through you – young or old – as you children serve and honor your parents and grandparents out of reverence for Christ, and vice versa. But don’t aim your good works up into heaven, as though you think God needs them, rather leave them down here as you serve one another in love. And when you’ve spent yourself in labor for God’s Kingdom, “*Come to the Savior who gives you eternal peace and rest from all your heavy burdens.*” Amen.

And now may the peace of God which surpasses human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.