

## **“Thank God for Our Congregation”**

**1 Corinthians 1:1-9**

**Second Sunday after the Epiphany + January 15, 2023**

**Dear Friends in Christ,**

**This text and theme for this sermon were chosen long before I heard of these shenanigans marking 35 years since we began our partnership here at St. John’s and St. Luke’s. But it fits, doesn’t it. There is truly reason for me—and each one of us—to thank God for Our Congregation, whether you belong to St. Luke’s or to St. John’s. Oh, to be sure, there are many ways in which we can grow to be more like the family of faith that Jesus has called us to be. And, as pastor, I stand first in line for accountability to the Lord when it comes to our weaknesses. Scripture is very plain that I will have to give an account to the Lord for the work I did or did not do in my calling as your pastor (Hebrews 13:17).**

**But the text gives me many good reasons to say, with Paul, “I give thanks to my God always for you” (v.4). And I hope you will join me in giving thanks to God today. Why should we gave thanks to God always for our Congregation? (1) We thank God for what He has done in the past for our Congregation. (2) We thank God for what He is doing in the present for our Congregation. (3) We thank God for what He will do for our Congregation in the future.**

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**As Paul gives thanks for the congregation at Corinth and describes what it is for which he gives thanks, he speaks a lot about what has been done for them in the past. In fact, he uses the passive voice quite a bit. The active voice is when you say, “The batter hit the ball.” The passive voice is when you say, “The ball was hit by the batter.” The ball doesn’t do anything on its own, but it has been acted upon by someone else, in this case, the batter. So it is with the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ: we are those who have been acted upon. The blessings for which to give thanks and praise to God are the things that have been done to us, the gifts that have been bestowed upon us, the changes which God Himself has worked in us. The Church is all about what was done for us,**

rather than what we have done for God or for others. Let's take a look at some of those passive verbs.

To begin with, He addresses the Congregation as “those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (v.2). You see, we are not members of the Congregation because we have made a decision to turn ourselves into holy people. We are not part of the Church of Jesus Christ because we have cleaned up our act and chased sin away. We are not Christians because we have set aside Jesus Christ as our Lord, but because He has set us apart for Himself. We are saints, not because we have gained a higher level of sanctification than other Christians, but because we have been washed clean in the blood of Jesus Christ. Later on Paul will tell these people that though they were many brands of sinners, “Such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:11). The holiness of Christ has been counted as theirs. Their guilt was removed by His death on the cross for them. The resurrection of Jesus proclaims the forgiveness of sins for the world, also for you and me. We have been counted as “saints” by virtue of the work of Jesus Christ.

To have been “called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (v.9) means that God has issued a Gospel invitation that was so powerful and wonderful it changed our stubborn hearts and made them willing to accept the offer. Another way of saying this is that the grace of God was given us in Christ Jesus. Grace is undeserved love. There can be no other way to receive it than by way of gift. “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus” (v.4). Yes, grace was given – God took the initiative, He followed through, He made you to be who you are.

God is not stingy with His grace. It says here that the Corinthians “were enriched” (v.5) in Christ Jesus, “in all speech and all knowledge” (v.5). Paul brought to them the full truth of the word of God, the full counsel of all that God wants the human race to know.

In Corinth the testimony about Christ “was confirmed” among them (v.6). That means that God even provided outward demonstrations by which the apostolic word was plainly confirmed as one truly sent by God. In Second Corinthians he tells them: “The signs of a true apostle were performed among

you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works” (2 Cor. 12:12). In other words, Paul performed miracles among them so that there might be no doubt among them that he was bringing them the truth of God – and yet many still doubted his apostleship.

Surely God has not been stingy with us. We have before us in the Holy Scriptures the full counsel of God. We do not have to wonder about what is true and what is not true; it is all here for us in black and white. We thank God for His Church because this is where sinners such as you and me are enriched in Christ Jesus, where the word of God is confirmed among us. Here we have the visible signs from the Father, the Holy Sacraments, by which we see and feel and taste and see that the Lord is good.

Yes, God’s word is still effective today! We complain a lot because church attendance is not what it once was or what it should be. But one Sunday when I was home sick, I watched all the cars gather in the parking lot and out front and it hit me: these people could be doing lots of other things. They could be at home sleeping in or catching up on chores. They could be out at all kinds of different events. They could be hunting or fishing. They could be having a delicious brunch somewhere. But God the Spirit led you to come to church. You came here to listen to your Lord Jesus speak to you. You came to receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins and to strengthen your faith, to offer Him thanks and praise, to offer to Him your gifts and your prayers, to be here for your brothers and sisters in Christ. This is really a miraculous thing! I did a little bit of math and discovered that some of you come and listen to your pastor preach the word of God as many as 60 times a year. That means that there are some of you who have heard me preach God’s word as many as two thousand times. And what is really astounding is, you will be here next Sunday as well. That is a true testimony that the Lord Jesus is truly speaking through His word. It’s a fellow sinner standing up here and flapping his jaws, but, as Jesus told seventy-two disciples when He sent them out, “The one who hears you hears Me” (Luke 10:16).

It is because of all these things that the Corinthians have received that Paul gives thanks to God. Paul is thankful for the church because of what God has done for them and who He has made them to be, by grace.

## **--- II ---**

**That brings us to talk about the present. To be sure, things were not good in Corinth. There were terrible divisions in the church. Strong factions had arisen to oppose one another. Members of the church were taking other members to court. Horrible, scandalous sin was being committed – the kind that would make non-believers shudder -- and instead of calling the sinner to repentance, the church celebrated what was happening! Some were falling back into the pagan practices of idol worship. Worship services had become a disorderly mishmash. At church dinners the rich were dining sumptuously while the poor went away hungry. There was so little regard for the Lord's Supper that people were getting drunk! And there was circulating the false teaching that there is no such thing as the resurrection of the body.**

**And yet the apostle says, “I give thanks to my God always for you” (v.4). Why? Because, right now, Paul says, “you are not lacking in any spiritual gift” (v.7). You have everything that God bestows on His church through the Holy Spirit. You have faith in Christ and God has blessed you with membership in His blessed family. God through His Holy Spirit richly and daily forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers in Christ. You see, the Christian church is not a group celebrating human achievement. It is not an award society. Rather, we are here to commemorate the awful condition of man and the wonderful response of God to us in our lost state. Every other human organization is about human achievement. We come together at sporting events to see which team has the best talent, the best strategy, the best coaching, and the most will to win. Who can achieve the most? Which team will be the last one standing? In the realm of politics we gather to see who can get the most votes, who can get his or her agenda enacted into law, who really has the ability to succeed. At the work place it is a contest to see who can be the most efficient and cost-effective. Who will be promoted? Who can make the most sales? How can we out-perform our competitors or do best in this market? It is all about human achievement. Schools and colleges are about human achievement in the realm of knowledge. Who will get the highest test scores? Which teacher is the favorite of the students? Who can come up with the most innovative ideas? Who can achieve the most?**

**The church is a place for celebrating divine achievement: for commemorating and giving thanks to God for what He has done. That is so important! We are indeed poor, miserable sinners, yet we lack nothing because God Himself is among us, forgiving us richly and daily. The greatest thing we can do in support of life is to live under and proclaim this good news that in the church God is daily forgiving our sins. It is, after all, the forgiveness of sins through Jesus that keeps us from eternal death in hell.**

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**The thanksgiving over our Congregation is not simply over what happened in the past or over what is happening now; it is also important for the future: “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful” (vv.7-9). Christians gather in anticipation of the day when our Lord Jesus Christ will be revealed. We are ready for Him to return because He has made us ready. We do not fear that day but look forward to it. Over the years I have been privileged to be with many faithful Christians as they prepared for death. In the face of that most trying time, I have seen again and again how God uses His word and the Sacrament to keep people with Jesus in the true faith until the very end. That’s His promise, and He will make good on it for you, as well! As far as our future together goes, only God knows what lies ahead. But this we know: We do not have to worry that God will desert us. God Himself promises right here that He will sustain us to the end “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful” (vv.8-9). He will not withdraw His blessing and power from His church. He will continue to forgive sins and strengthen faith through the Gospel and sacraments.**

**Look around you, dear brothers and sisters in Christ! You are part of the Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ! We give thanks because you have been called into fellowship with Jesus. We give thanks because you are not lacking any spiritual gift. We give thanks because God is faithful and He will sustain you as His children until we join Him in glory. Please join me in giving thanks to God for our congregation! Amen.**

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