

SERMON IN THE OPENING EUCHARIST
OF THE GENERAL RETREAT OF THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY TRINITY,
St. Mary of the Lake University and Conference Center,
St. Michael and All Angels, September 29, 2009.

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Text: Luke 10:17-20

Our Society gathers together once again in retreat. After a year of doing ministry in the places to which we are called, we gather again at St. Mary's to be refreshed by common prayer, Word and Eucharist, and strengthened by mutual conversation and consolation. As we return to this place can it be said of us, as it was said of Jesus' seventy disciples, that we have returned with joy?

This year's retreat has the highest attendance in the history of the Society. This is a source of joy because our Society has been growing each year. But at the same time many of our members come to the General Retreat burdened by the decisions made at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. Some are assessing their relationship to this church body that rosters them as pastors.

As an inter-Lutheran Society, we don't get involved in the politics of particular Lutheran denominations. But we exist as a ministerium to support each other, and we can't ignore the impact that decisions made by our denominations may have on us where we do ministry. And the ELCA Churchwide Assembly has in effect thrown the ball back into the court of the congregations in terms of deciding how to show love to the gay neighbor and whether to call a non-celibate gay pastor. This puts the burden of leadership on each ELCA pastor.

Now in the providence of God, many of our members come to this retreat after having first gone to Fishers, Indiana. There, in Holy Spirit Catholic Parish in Geist, the beginning was made for a new, confessing synod — a synod open to congregations within and outside of the ELCA — a synod that may just be the kind of synod many have long been longing for. Maybe some burdens are lifted just by knowing that there may be a positive outcome to this dismaying situation.

We all experience the ups-and-downs of life in our denominations. We all, at one point or another, think that our church body has gotten off the track. I remind us all that this Society came into existence because the founders perceived a crisis of faith in the Churches and concluded that pastors needed a disciplined way to remain faithful to their ordination vows.

The issues that are reflected in this crisis haven't changed much in the last twenty years. I remind you of some of the issues enumerated in our Founding Statement that seem relevant to the actions of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly: the confusion of the church's mission with the world's agenda; the confusion of the ordained Ministry of the Word and the sacraments with denominational shopkeepers; the confusion of divine revelation with human experience; the suppression of the teaching office in the Church in the name of democratic participation; a false sense of gospel freedom that suppresses the Law of God.

As we look back at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, suppose the matters being considered had failed to attain .666% or 50.1% Would that have mattered? Would that have diminished the crisis in

Church and society in which we do ministry? No, the crisis continues. The issue for us is: how shall we live out our pastoral callings in this crisis?

As we gather in this retreat can we say, with the seventy, that "even the demons submit to us"? Can Jesus say to us, as he said to the seventy, "Yes, I saw Satan toppled from heaven as you performed your works"?

No, the demons don't always submit to us. Sometimes our situation is more like that just after his Transfiguration when Jesus came down from the mountain and was accosted by a man whose son was possessed by a demon that Jesus' disciples weren't able to expel. Jesus had to do what the disciples could not do. But even as everyone marveled at his power, Jesus announced for a second time that "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands."

The disciples didn't understand that, and we tend to forget that the shadow of the cross hangs over even our most powerful deeds, as it did over Jesus' deeds. That's what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus. That's why we cannot gloat even when we do win political victories in church assemblies and conventions. Those victories will turn out to be deceptive. Those victories can be the deceptions of Satan causing us to take our ease in Zion.

I think many believe that the votes at the ELCA Assembly were victories of Satan. But Satan wins in other ways than just through votes at church conventions. Many snakes and scorpions can get loose while we're tempted to get sucked into the all-consuming machinations of church politics.

The day I was fretting over how to address the results of the Churchwide Assembly in my Sunday sermon — my first sermon after returning from vacation — one of my members came into my office to seek counsel because he had lost his job of thirty years, had sunk into depression, and was turning to drink. A snake was loose among the flock, but the man's guardian angel brought him to the pastor's office and the Holy Spirit said to the pastor: pay attention. Tend your flock.

The night of my August Church Council meeting I had given more attention to presenting the decisions of the Churchwide Assembly than to carefully presenting some exciting new programs that the evangelism committee had come up with over the summer, and I was unprepared for all the questions the council members were raising about those new programs. It dampened my enthusiasm to do these programs. Ironically, the names of the programs all began with the word "Joy". On successive Sundays of each month we would offer the "Joy of Hospitality," "the Joy of Music," "the Joy of Learning," "the Joy of Worship." But the Council's fussing was sapping my joy to offer these Joys — that was the scorpion biting me. On reflection I recognized that their concerns could have been easily anticipated and addressed with a little more forethought, if I hadn't been consumed with the Churchwide Assembly.

The most insidious ploy of Satan is to rob us of joy in doing the ministry to which we are called, because the gospel from the beginning has been the proclamation of joy, and we lose the world when we lose our joy.

In the first gospel announcement the angel said to the shepherds at Bethlehem, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:14). The shepherds

went to see what had happened. They related what the angel had told them and "returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."

But when the angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah the priest that his wife Elizabeth was pregnant with his son, to be named John, and promise him "joy and gladness," Zechariah didn't believe the good news of one who stood in the presence of God and he was struck dumb, "unable to speak until the day these things occurred" (Luke 1:20).

I'm afraid that's us all too often. We're more like joyless priests than like joyful shepherds, struck dumb by our joylessness and unable to praise God for his mighty acts. There's nothing that can take the joy out of us more than being mired down in the reality of the church political. But there's nothing that can give us joy more than embracing the reality of the church sacramental, because in the Spirit-filled proclamation of the Word and celebration of the sacraments we receive the risen Christ. Who can stand in that presence and not rejoice?

I'm not calling for a gnostic retreat from the visible reality of the church into some kind of spiritual, invisible reality. I'm reminding us of where the true visible church is to be found. Not in Rome or even Wittenberg, said Luther. Not in the churchwide structure or even the local judicatory; but where the word of God is publicly preached, where Baptism and Holy Communion are publicly celebrated, where the office of the keys is publicly administered, where called and ordained ministers of the Word and the sacraments publicly officiate, where prayer worship is publicly offered, where the sign of the cross is borne. Our Society has been involved in a three-year study of Luther's marks of the Church. These marks are the publicly-discernible evidence of a visible gathered church. They are the means of grace from which we live. They generate the good works of the saints, and we rejoice to see that happen. But the church doesn't live from those good works, and it is not destroyed by its bad works.

Luther was prepared to call the churchwide leadership (the pope) the Anti-Christ. But riddled with error though he believed the Church of his day to be, he was not prepared to say it was not the true Church, not as long as the Word and the sacraments were publicly celebrated.

Was the devil at work in the churchwide assembly? Probably. The devil is always at work in the church, contending against God's kingdom. But was the Holy Spirit absent? Hardly, since powerful witnessing was done in the power of the Spirit.

We don't always succeed in beating back Satan. But the good news for us on this day of St. Michael and All Angels is that we don't have to topple Satan from heaven. That's the job of God's heavenly hosts. The Archangel and his legions fight the cosmic battle, drive Satan and his hosts from heaven, and pursue them even into the earth.

In the meantime, Jesus gives us power to tread on snakes and scorpions, all the little demons that are at work where the true church is gathered. We have the power of the Word, the sacraments, and the keys to lift up the fallen and instill in the saints the joy of ministry. But even if the evil spirits submit to us, the greater cause for rejoicing is that our names are written in the book of life.

How providential that the schedule here at the Conference Center required us to begin our retreat on the Day of St. Michael and All Angels and that we commence our time together with this

Michaelmass. The readings and hymns and Eucharist of this day give us the big picture by which we can put our struggles into a proper perspective.

Our first act together is to hear the good news that, in Christ and by the power of His Spirit, we can beat down Satan under our feet and then, by that same Spirit, to be lifted up to heaven in the anaphora as we join with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven in praising God in the thrice-Holy hymn and appealing to the Lord God of Sabbaoth, on whose cosmic power we may rely in our earthly contests. Amen.

Society of the Holy Trinity

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