

Texts: Psalm 133; Rev. 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Subject: Salvation Belongs to our God

Theme: Good News for the Messed Up Church: Yikes

Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 26, 2022; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Presbyterian Church in America votes to leave the National Association of Evangelicals”

“Can the church still enact Justice when a Pastor Sues His Accusers?”

“Worshippers at Baptist Church in Nigeria Abducted”

“American Churches Closing Faster than New Ones Can Open”

There are just a few of the headlines from a recent Google News search on the word

“church.” Oh, and in Arizona, the “Church of the Eagle and the Condor” - (great name) is suing the Drug Enforcement fancy over confiscation of their shipment of Ayahuasca.

Yikes.

There’s a tendency when we read these headlines to say, “Well, at least we’re not *that messed up!*” But you already know what I’m going to say, right? We are the church. We are the body of Christ in the world, and whether it’s political upheaval, abuse scandals, financial misconduct, or culture wars, we’re a part of the whole thing. Statistics tell us that faith is *not* waning in America - with 4 out of 5 people still saying they believe in God. But along with the shift in our society, which has been happening longer than I’ve been alive, comes the lack of investment in so many institutions that we have relied upon for decades to bring us together, center us in community, and form us as a nation and a people.

If you’ve been a member of any church for more than a decade, you’re probably tired of hearing about it. The massive change we have experienced continues to happen at an exponential rate. This week was no exception. Many have written about

how the pandemic has only exposed what has been happening under the surface for so long, and the decline in church attendance here and in almost every congregation is just a symptom of what was already happening in our country. We are being pulled apart and have been pushing each other away, over small differences of opinion and massive disagreements on fundamental issues for too long.

Change happens. How do we navigate it as the body of Christ in the world? Friday morning, as I heard the news of the overturning of Roe v. Wade by the U.S. Supreme court, I heard the rejoicing by those who had hoped for this for a long time. But even more, I heard the fear and anger of those who have had their human rights taken from them. I heard pastors and bishops in our church offering prayers of support and solidarity, offering counsel and holding space for people to feel whatever they were feeling. Additional worries and outrage from the LGBTQIA+ community, and anyone in need of contraception add to the anxiety and rage stirring in our world this week. My prayer remains: Come Lord, Jesus, Come, Holy Spirit.

We are the church. We have no other call on our lives but to trust in God, and love each other. Love looks like walking with each other, and creating space for conversation even when we disagree. Love looks like supporting those who have been marginalized and oppressed over night. Loving each other will continue to look like advocacy and people standing up for what they believe in and seeking justice and paths to progress.

We might feel angry about change. Most humans resist it when we're able. We dig in, focus on the news we want to hear, creating our own echo chambers, or choosing to "focus on the positive" and stay in our lane. We lament the losses we have

experienced, too. A few of you will remember when this building was bursting with kids - I've seen the photos - that performed stage plays in Edwins Hall, or sang in children's choirs, and participated in camp and retreats, and mission trips. It's a different world now.

Some - call them early adopters - are excited about what change may bring and look forward to connecting in new ways, continuing to explore spirituality, seeking out communities in which they can belong and share their gifts. With new context comes new opportunities to create programs invite others in to see what God is doing in their lives, to gather around food or games, to find safety and community and build relationships in new ways.

The Augsburg Confession was written to the Holy Roman Emperor to bring unity in the church and to clarify the teachings of the reformers on June 25, 1530 - exactly 492 years ago. Its authors defined the "church" as "the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. (AC, XII). The church is where we hear the promises of God, given to us in Jesus, who lived and was crucified and was raised up to new life for us and for the world. It's where we learn what this means for us, where we remember those who have come before us and we rejoice for those new saints baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. It's where we gather around the table and receive the new life and forgiveness promised by our Lord in his body and blood and remember who we really are, loved and beloved of God and one another.

We are one body, but the body is tearing itself to shreds. The ELCA was formed in 1988 as a merger between the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church

in America. The ELCA has now in its 34th year, lasted longer than either of its predecessor bodies. The United Methodist Church, one of our full-communion partners, is on the verge of splitting over - you guessed it - the issue of sexuality and same-sex marriage.

I tried to understand an article about division between the Russian Orthodox Church - which is connected to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate - and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, not to mention the Serbian Orthodox church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Archdiocese of Ohrid, but I got lost. We are sheep of the same flock, followers of Jesus, ones called to be salt and light in the world, but more often, we seem like the latest train wreck reality show. But it's worse, since this is not entertainment - but at stake is the connection of people and the communities in which they live out their faith, and even more, the expression of devotion to the Creator of all.

So we have bad news and good news. The bad news is the **church is made up of people**: sinful, broken, addicted, selfish, hypocritical, mean, and scared people who think they have it all figured out and won't learn anything new. The good news is that the **church is made up of people**: hopeful, faithful, generous, grateful, creative, and caring people in need of a loving and grace-filled Savior who brings us back into relationship and sends us to be healers and light for a hurting world.

John's gospel is good news for the church in need: God came to live in the world with us, even when the world did not know God, or want anything to do with the scrubby upstart messiah from a little town called Bethlehem. God gave us the only one who could heal what was truly broken in us, and made the world brand new. Only One went

into the darkest and deepest places we think of as “hell” and announced freedom to those who has died without knowing this good news. The Savior of the world beat back death itself, and returned to breathe the spirit of life into the world, and gives us that same gift of forgiveness through baptism, and communes with us and the church across the world as we meet together at this table each week.

We are the sheep. We know the voice of our shepherd. We listen and come as the Word calls us. We belong to him and to each other. Salvation belongs to our God. Around the throne we gather and pray and bless and praise the one who made us, who knows us, and liberates us from death and sin and fear and guilt. God have given us everything in giving us a savior. And what Jesus has given us, no one can take away. No division can exist when Jesus shows up to be with us. All are welcome, all are healed, all receive the grace and life that he has given through the cross. This is good news for the messed up church. Even when we are divided, we still belong to Christ. Even when we fail, we are redeemed. Even when we are scandalized, abandoned by people, or utterly destroyed, we are made new again and again. We are the church. Who is the church? [We are the church.] We are God’s people. We are the ones who have been given gifts to be of use to the world around us.

Come Lord Jesus.

Come Holy Spirit.

Amen.