

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

I take seriously St. Paul's Epistle warning: "*if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*" Again he says, "*we ... put no confidence in the flesh.*" Of course, Paul could be pretty braggadocious: "*If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.*" But then he proceeds to say that all of those fleshly qualifications and accomplishments he counts as loss—as rubbish— "*in order that [he] may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of [his] own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith*" (Phil. 3)—and Paul was an apostle. How much more must this be so for your humble servant as I talk to you today about the "*Church [built] on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone*" and the "*messengers [God sends to] preserve [His] people in ... peace and [protect them] from all harm and danger.*"

No doubt Paul would have sounded a hearty "*Amen*" to Jesus' words at the return of the seventy-two in our Gospel lesson: "*Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*" All of your fleshly abilities are good gifts, no doubt, and I'm sure you give thanks to God for them, but the greatest gift that God has given you is your salvation—and that comes in no way by the flesh, by your obedience, or any works of the law. It comes as gift, and it comes through the Church and her messengers.

Today, we hear of many people whom polls identify as the "nones," those who have no religious affiliation. Some are atheists or agnostics, but many still say they believe in god. Others say they are "spiritual but not religious." But these are just different ways of saying that they want nothing to do with the church—with what they might call "organized religion," but in America, that really means the church.

In some ways, one can understand. The elephant in the religious room is the Roman Catholic Church, which has had its scandals in recent years. In an analysis I read recently, the sex abuse scandal in the Roman Church is one of the main reasons for the distrust many have of the church—such rampant evil and a systemic cover-up—and so they reject the church.

And to be sure, the church is filled with sinners, like you and me. And so we err. I don't want to make an excuse for the wickedness that happened in the Roman church; on the other hand, to expect church-goers (including pastors) not to sin is just Pollyanna foolishness. It's no reason to reject the church; indeed, such a thing imperils souls, as Jesus said, "*the one who rejects you [that is, the messengers He sends out] rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.*"

Already in the 3rd century, in dealing with another problem, Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage in North Africa, warned of this, saying: “*there is no salvation outside of the Church*” (Epistle 72, To Jubaianus, Concerning the Baptism of Heretics). This is correct, although not how the Roman Church has come to interpret it. They came to interpret that saying as meaning outside the Roman Catholic Church and outside the subjugation of the Roman pontiff there is no salvation. We reject that utterly, but it is correct that there is no salvation outside the “*one holy Church [that] is the congregation of saints ... in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered,*” as we confess in the Augsburg Confession, for it is in the Church that we get to hear the messengers that the Lord sends out with His message. At first, it was the twelve (in Luke 9), then it was the seventy-two (in our Gospel), and later still it was the whole church (in Acts 1). And by these messengers’ preaching, Christ builds His church, for Paul asks, “*how are they to believe ... without someone preaching,*” and then he says, “*faith comes by hearing ... the word of Christ.*” Jesus too reminds us, “*The one who hears you hears me*”

Yes, God Himself is the builder of the church. He does it first by the confession of Jesus Christ as the Rock, the chief cornerstone, upon which the church is built. Indeed, it is the confession of His name, that Jesus is “*the Christ, the Son of the Living God,*” that is the πέτρα, the Rock, upon which Christ builds His church. He is the stone which Chorazin, and Bethsaida, and Capernaum, as we heard today, and many others rejected.

Indeed, as Jesus continues His way to Jerusalem, the ultimate rejection was about to happen: He would be rejected by “*the builders*” and be raised up on a tree to be crucified. The rulers of the people of Israel and the elders would rise up against their king and put Him to an ignominious death. Yet, though a stone “*despised and rejected by [these] men,*” He became the cornerstone upon which God’s house of living stones, the Church, is built. And we are those stones, though filled with griefs and sorrow; we are those stones though soiled with transgressions and iniquities. Falling on this cornerstone, we are broken and brought to repentance, and we come to realize that His chastisement brings peace, that His wounds give us healing. And not just His cross, but cross and resurrection, for as Peter preached, “*God raised [this Jesus Christ of Nazareth] from the dead.*”

Moreover, it is by this message of Christ crucified and risen and by the peace that it secures that the Church is built. This is the foundational message of the apostles and prophets. It’s “*the pure spiritual milk, [whereby we] grow up into salvation.*” How do we know? Because Peter continues immediately in the next verse saying, “*As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight*

of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood”

We’re used to hearing about the Church as a house built on Christ, as Christ’s body, Jesus being the head, and as the Bride of Christ, the Bridegroom. But here Peter and the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson paint another picture for us, of nursing “*at the consoling breast*” of our Mother the Church, and being filled up; of drinking “*with delight from her glorious abundance*”; of being carried upon her hip and comforted upon her knee. The Church is our Mother feeding us, teaching us, correcting us, consoling us. Thus Cyprian again reminds us that the person “*can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother.*”

Our Lutheran Confessions don’t use the Church as “mother” language, but they’re saying the same thing when they say (FC SD Article II:50): “*Out of His immense goodness and mercy, God provides for the public preaching of His divine eternal Law and His wonderful plan for our redemption, that of the holy, only saving Gospel of His eternal Son, our only Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. By this preaching He gathers an eternal Church for Himself from the human race and works in people’s hearts true repentance, knowledge of sins, and true faith in God’s Son, Jesus Christ. By this means, and in no other way (i.e., through His holy Word, when people hear it preached or read it, and through the holy Sacraments when they are used according to His Word), God desires to call people to eternal salvation. He desires to draw them to Himself and convert, regenerate, and sanctify them.*”

Thus Jesus sent out the twelve, and sent out the seventy-two, and has sent and continues to send out faithful pastors throughout the generations for the sake of His Church, that they might preach the same Jesus Christ “*lifted up from the earth, ... draw[ing] all people to [Himself],*” that people might hear “*Christ crucified*” preached, that boasting in nothing “*except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,*” “*the world [might be] crucified to [them], and [they] to the world.*” Jesus sends His Church out in peace, pronouncing peace and healing through the forgiveness of sins and the arrival of the kingdom of God in Christ Jesus.

Jesus sends pastors out not only to preach peace and preserve God’s people in peace. They are also sent to keep watch over the flock over which the Holy Spirit made them pastors. They are to strive to keep the Church “*free from all harm and danger.*” That means preaching so as to keep the saints “*dry and secure in the holy ark of Christendom.*” And so we have another picture... the Ark that saved Noah and his family from destruction is another picture of the Church. You were brought into this Ark by the waters of Holy Baptism, but you must remain there, for just as

there was no salvation outside of Noah's Ark, so outside the Church there is no salvation.

Therefore, dear saints, as your pastor, I warn you not to be deceived by those who cast aside the church. Rather I exhort you again today to remember your baptisms daily in contrition and repentance. I exhort you to hear God's word of Law and Gospel faithfully, that you may be a house built on a solid foundation. And I exhort you to feed faithfully at the Lord's table that you may be strengthened in your faith, live in peace, be saved in the bow of Christendom's holy Ark, and be comforted on the loving knee of your Mother the Church.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.