

BUILD UP

1 Corinthians 14:12-20

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

February 6, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 14, verses 12 through 20. It continues the epistle readings from the previous three weeks as Paul has been discussing congregational life. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From 1 Corinthians 14, beginning at verse 12, we read in Jesus' name.

¹² So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

¹³ Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. ¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. ¹⁶ Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷ For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. ¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹ Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

²⁰ Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

What is the purpose of worship? That's the primary question we will be dealing with this morning. What is the purpose of worship?

There are a few different ways we could answer that question. We could say that worship is about receiving God's gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. We could say that worship is about Word and Sacrament. We could say that worship is when our Lord Jesus comes to serve us. We could say that worship is repentance. That is, confessing our sin and receiving forgiveness. These are all true, and not at all contradictory. And based on this text, we could also say that the purpose of worship is to build up the congregation through the Word of God. This is also true, and not at all contradictory with the other purposes mentioned. All of these purposes are, in a way, synonymous. Today we will focus on this truth: *The purpose of worship is to build up the congregation through the Word of God.*

This comes right out of the text we just read. Paul says in verse 12, "Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church."

The word *church* literally means "an assembly" or "a congregation." In English, the word *church* has kind of been religified so that we might just think of the Church, with a capital "C,"

to mean all Christians everywhere and everywhen. Or we might think of a church as a building. These are both kind of true. The Church, with a capital “C,” does include all Christians of all times and places. And churches need buildings so that we can gather together. Without a building, we would be really cold right now. But in the New Testament, the word that we translate as “church” (ἐκκλησία) wasn’t really a religious word at first. It was a common word that meant “an assembly” or “a congregation.” Whenever you see the word “church” in the Bible, you can substitute the words “assembly” or “congregation” instead. It means the same thing.

So our Lutheran confessions define it this way: “The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered.”

And our own smaller church body, the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, says this in our founding document: “According to the Word of God, the congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth.” That is our first fundamental principle. And when you think about it, that’s a really bold statement. “According to the Word of God, the congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth.” When we say “the congregation,” that means *this* congregation. This congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth. That’s shocking, because one would think the Kingdom of God would come in power, but this congregation is virtually unknown to the rest of the world, and even in this community. We are weak and insignificant by every measure the world uses. In the eyes of the world, men like Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin are powerful. The whole world is watching to see what they will say or do next. But we have the audacity to say that this congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Of course, we don’t mean that it is only this congregation. But, in fact, every congregation where “the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered” is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth. This is true in congregations all over the world, all at the same time. And we’re not saying that the collective of all of these congregations is the right form of the Kingdom of God. The sum of congregations does not add up to the Kingdom of God. We’re saying that each and every congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Now why do we say this? Why do we think this is true? One reason is because the apostle Paul calls the congregation “the body of Christ” (12:27), and Jesus Christ is the king. Wherever the king is, that is where the kingdom is. When the body is gathered, the king is present, and that’s the kingdom. Another way to look at it is that the congregation is where the Word of God is preached and the Sacraments are administered. Those sacraments are Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. And the Sacraments are simply the promises of God’s Word attached to physical elements. The power always comes from the Word of God. Jesus uses the Word of God, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper to rule over his Kingdom. This is his kingdom of grace. Through these means, he forgives sins and rescues us from death and the power of the devil. The power of the congregation is the Word and Sacraments. These instruments bring to us the gifts Jesus won by his death and resurrection. So they rescue us from death and give us eternal life. This is a power that all the armies of the world do not possess. But every Christian congregation possesses this power. And when we gather together as a congregation, we use these Word and Sacraments to build up the congregation.

For the last four weeks, we’ve been singing this doctrine.

We are God’s house of living stones,
Builded for His habitation;
He thro’ baptismal grace us owns,

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Heirs of His wondrous salvation;
Were we but two His name to tell,
Yet He would deign with us to dwell,
With all His grace and His favor.

We've even been singing about the reason we have buildings:

Still we our earthly temples rear,
That we may herald His praises;
They are the homes where He draws near
And little children embraces,
Beautiful things in them are said,
God there with us His cov'nant made,
Making us heirs of His kingdom. ("Built on the Rock, the Church Doth Stand,"
Ambassador Hymnal, 294)

That's the value of this building, and that's the great value of this congregation: Jesus draws near to embrace us as God's children. He makes his covenant of grace with us. He makes us heirs of his Kingdom. So the purpose of worship is to build up the congregation through the Word of God.

So Paul also talks about the value of the Word of God in this passage. We might not notice this at first glance. Instead, we might get sidetracked by questions about the gift of tongues. In chapter 14 Paul sets limits on the use of tongues in worship. He insists that everything spoken in worship should be understandable. Why? Because the clear teaching of God's Word in intelligible speech builds up the body of Christ.

The gift of tongues probably seems foreign to most of us, pun intended. It might be something you've never even heard of before. Christian churches today have differing views on the gift of tongues. And the reason for disagreement, almost completely has to do with different interpretations of this chapter. Most of those who claim the gift of tongues say that it is, at least usually, an unknown heavenly language. They would call it "the tongue of angels" (13:1). The idea is that the spirit within a Christian knows this heavenly language, but their mind does not understand it. So they start speaking in a language that no one on earth understands, unless the Holy Spirit gives someone the supernatural ability to interpret it. It might happen just once, it might happen sporadically, or they might say that a person has a gift to do this whenever they want. The spirit within them speaks to God in a language their mind does not understand.

Some people do this in their private prayers. Whether they are genuine or faking it, I don't know. Some congregations do this during their worship services. Whether they are genuine or faking it, I don't know. Some congregations do this in an orderly manner, as Paul instructs later in chapter 14. One person at a time will speak in a tongue. Then another person will interpret. Then there are other congregations where it is utter chaos. One person will start speaking in a tongue, then others will start in as well, and pretty soon all you hear is a room full of gibberish. These are the kind of gatherings where the preacher walks down the aisle, puts his hand up to peoples' foreheads, and they fall down and start rolling around. That's where the term "holy rollers" comes from. Then there are usually a couple people running around with flags; I'm not sure why.

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With those who practice this in an orderly manner, I think it is wise to suspend judgment. With those who practice it in a disorderly manner, there's no need to. The apostle Paul specifically forbids such practice (14:27-28, 33, 40).

I've known Christians who claim to speak in tongues. And I asked them about it. It was kind of a nervous, awkward question. "So, umm, how does that tongues thing work?" And they said that, at first, they did not speak in tongues when someone laid hands on them. It was supposed to happen then, but it didn't. So they kept waiting for it to happen, but it didn't happen until they tried to do it, and then they discovered they could. I said, "Okay." Then they said, "You should try it." I said, "If the Holy Spirit wants me to do it, he can make it happen." Then we talked about something else.

Some of these Christians also say that speaking in tongues is the initial sign of salvation. That is, if you are actually saved, you will, necessarily, speak in tongues. This is clearly false, because the apostle Paul spoke of the gift of tongues being given to some, and other gifts being given to others (12:10).

There is quite a bit of diversity among those who claim the gift of tongues. But the common denominator among them is the belief that tongues is usually, if not always, an unknown heavenly language.

On the other side are those who say, "No, when the gift of tongues is spoken of in the New Testament, it's talking about actual languages known on earth, but not necessarily to the speaker." This view was at least close to unanimous in Christianity until the 1800s, and it still is the majority view.

This is what happened on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. That was the first instance of tongues in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit came upon the small group of Christians, and they began speaking in foreign tongues. Foreigners who were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost were amazed because they heard them declaring the mighty works of God in their own native languages (Acts 2:4-13). So this first manifestation of tongues was not an unknown heavenly language, but real earthly languages, several of them. In this way, the manifestation of tongues was a sign to outsiders. This is what Paul says about tongues a little later in 1 Corinthians 14: "Tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers" (14:22). If you go to people outside your congregation, who speak a different language, and you preach the Gospel to them in their tongue, that's great. But if they wander into our congregation, and we're all speaking to one another in other languages, they're going to think we're crazy, and they would probably be right.

The other big thing to recognize about the gift of tongues is that, in the book of Acts, every manifestation of tongues is a sign that God had accepted Gentiles, that is, non-Jews, into his kingdom. At Pentecost, the Christians declared the mighty works of God in the languages of the Gentiles. And then there are a few instances later in the book when Gentiles come to faith in Jesus Christ, and they speak in tongues. This was a sign to Jewish Christians who were reluctant to accept Gentiles into the Church.

Now since we're not still dealing with the question of whether or not Gentiles can be saved, it's easy to understand why the manifestation of tongues might occur very often. We also don't really know how common it was in the New Testament. We know of a few instances. It could have occurred several more times, or it might just be the recorded instances along with the chaos in Corinth. We don't really know. But to the Corinthians, Paul urges them to desire other gifts, ones that are intelligible and will serve to build up the congregation, because the congregation is built up when the Word of God is taught in an understandable way. But he also says, "Do not

forbid speaking in tongues” (14:39). Paul’s concern is simply that the teaching of God’s Word should be understandable, and “all things should be done decently and in order” (14:40).

So how does this apply to us? Maybe the specific teaching on tongues will never apply to us. Who knows? We don’t forbid it, but we also don’t go looking for it. But suppose it started happening. What would we do? It might go something like this. Someone would speak in a language they don’t actually know, like Spanish. If we have someone here who knows Spanish and can interpret what they are saying, we would let them continue. Then we would hear the interpretation and go on with the rest of the service. But if there isn’t anyone here who understands Spanish, we would ask the person to stop, because no one would know what he’s saying.

The broader application of this text is simply that the preaching and teaching of God’s Word should be understandable. It seems that some of these folks in Corinth we’re trying to show off. And there’s no place for showing off in the body of Christ. Preachers do this sometimes. I’m probably guilty of it. If you catch me doing it, call me out on it. Have you ever heard someone speaking, and you say to yourself, *I have no idea what this guy’s talking about, but he sounds really smart?* When that happens, he’s probably just showing off. More often the mark of a really intelligent person is that they can take things that the rest of us don’t really understand, and they can explain them in a way that makes sense. One commentator said it this way: “It is better to be useful than brilliant” (F.W. Robertson, 201). And so we want our worship service to be orderly and understandable, so that it will build up the congregation.

Sometimes Christians today associate a loss of control with the work of the Holy Spirit. The idea is that the Holy Spirit overcomes us and we lose control of ourselves. That’s usually the idea behind speaking in tongues or falling down and rolling around. Most of us probably don’t see that very often, if at all. But sometimes we buy into this idea in other ways. It’s become pretty common in modern praise music to sing about losing control of ourselves when the Holy Spirit takes over. Or a preacher might not put much preparation into his sermon, so he doesn’t really know what he’s going to say. Then he speaks from the heart or the Holy Spirit takes over. In each of these instances, we associate a loss of control with the work of the Holy Spirit. But this is really opposite to the way Scripture describes the work of the Holy Spirit. In this chapter, Paul urges self-control, discernment, and good order. And in Galatians 5 he identifies self-control as a fruit of the Spirit.

So the work of the Holy Spirit might not be those things that seem really flashy or exciting. In your homes it’s praying together before meals, reading Scripture together, or singing hymns. It’s the habitual discipline of these things over long periods of time that causes growth and maturity in the faith. And in our worship together, it’s the same things. Whether or not something extraordinary happens doesn’t really matter. We grow in the faith together, and we are built up as a congregation as we receive the Word of God together. And it’s not just when you’re listening to the sermon or the Scripture readings, but it’s also when we confess the faith together, when we pray together, and when we sing the faith together. It can even continue after the service ends, when you’re visiting together, not necessarily when you’re talking about the game last night, but when we talk more about the Scripture readings, or even when you share the joys or challenges you’re experiencing in life and where you see God at work in those things, or when you pray for one another. We can preach the Word of God to one another in our ordinary conversations.

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And, of course, when we receive the Lord's Supper together, we are being built up together. The body of Christ that was crucified for us and the blood of Christ that was shed for our sin is given to us. It's not a private "you and Jesus" moment. Jesus is also serving your brothers and sisters next to you. We're receiving forgiveness together. This binds us together and builds us up together.

All of this is how the congregation is built up. The purpose of worship is to build up the congregation through the Word of God. The Word of God declares to us who we are before God. It declares to you that you are a child of God. It declares to you that Jesus Christ has redeemed you by his blood. He has suffered for your sin, and God forgives you. This Word of God is attached to the waters of Baptism, through which God adopts you as his child. Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit calls us together as the body of Christ. Jesus promises to be with us when we are gathered in his name around his Word and Sacraments. The Word of God creates this fellowship, and it builds us up into a house for God to dwell in. This is the purpose of worship: to build up this congregation of redeemed saints. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.