

Should we be Doing Cartwheels in the Aisles?

Do you want to hear the good news or the bad news? Today is our annual Christian Education Sunday. We always observe this Sunday right at the beginning of the new school year, so, “Do you want to hear the good news or the bad news?” might sound a little ominous. But you know what? I have very little bad news to share with you today. Of course, we do have some challenges. But most of the problems we’re facing at the beginning of this new school year, at least, are the kinds of problems you’d like to have: what are we going to do with all the students we have in our school? This year, by the grace of God, we have the largest enrollment in our school’s history. So we have to deal with the fact that some of our classrooms are packed pretty tight and our teachers have to hustle to get everything done. How should we react when most of the bad news is really good news? How can we show our gratitude to God and our joy in the Lord? My friends, **should we be doing cartwheels in the aisles?**

I.

OK, maybe not. Some of us probably aren’t appropriately dressed for cartwheels and others of us – like me – would wind up in the hospital if we tried. But metaphorically, at least, let’s do some cartwheels. Let’s rejoice in the good things God has done for us. **God has given us tremendous growth!**

We started this year with 111 students enrolled in kindergarten through 8th grade. Our enrollment is up by 14 students this year. The real blessing is that this isn’t a fluke. I can only speak to the six years that I’ve been your pastor. Six years ago we had 74 students in school. God has caused our school to grow by 37 students in that time. That’s 50% growth in six years. Do you remember six years ago when we were seriously asking whether we should reduce our faculty? We decided then to hold our breath and trust in God and wait and see what he would do. And he chose to bless our efforts with dramatic growth. This year, we have five students from the Spanish mission downtown as part of a pilot program to share Christian education with the families that are joining that church. What a great opportunity for us to share in that work! Get ready to do those cartwheels!

But that’s not all. We are expecting a big jump in our Sunday school. We had another huge year at our VBS this summer. And our preschool, which in this congregation is one of our most effective outreach arms, is almost full. We have 29 total students. We have exactly three spots left! That, of course, promises continued growth to our school and it also opens up all kinds of opportunities to share the gospel with people that still need to understand it. I’m still trying just to make contact with them all.

Now when it comes to our high school, HVL, we might feel that the news isn’t so good. Their enrollment is 76, which is down from last year and is lower than what we expected. That is definitely a concern. But at least 16 of those kids, more than 20%, are from Peace. And we’re going to graduate 16 8th graders this spring, and we hope to see a big boost to our enrollment at HVL next year. We have the added blessing that four faculty members from HVL and their families are members here at Peace. Their commitment to serving the Lord only enriches us here. So HVL does face challenges, and through them, we face those challenges. But our God is good and we do have reasons for hope.

Bringing up HVL, however, does bring up one of the biggest challenges we face: finances. We’ve been wrestling with money related issues for as long as I’ve been your pastor. We are still eight quarters behind on paying our called worker pensions. That’s over \$28,000 dollars and it’s just wrong for us to stress the entire synod’s retirement fund with our failure to pay. In addition, we are not supporting HVL the way we should be. That needs to improve. We are not supporting the synod’s work of reaching out with the gospel and of training future pastors and teachers the way we should be. That must change. The problem is not the school. It’s more than generating the revenue we ask it to. The problem is our Sunday morning offering and we as the people of God gathered in this congregation need to make a commitment to give as God has blessed us. But even with the challenges and the shortfalls, God is blessing us in this area. The increase in students should mean a substantial increase in revenue. While we are still way behind on our debts, the shortfall is less than half what it was six years ago.

But an even more important point is simply this: for as long as we do ministry in a sinful world, we will have problems. The devil is never going to leave us alone. Our unbelieving society will always make our work

harder. Our own sinful natures will get in the way. We will be lazy sometimes. We will blame others sometimes. We will bog down in stupid arguments and hurt each other's feelings sometimes. That will not change until the Lord returns. So, our situation could be so much worse than it actually is. Our problem is money, not enrollment. We aren't agonizing over whether we should keep our school open or about which teacher to cut. We aren't wrestling with another pastoral resignation or the need to discipline a teacher. We don't have doctrinal problems in our congregation. We aren't on the verge of a split in our membership. We don't have people stealing from the offering plate. God hasn't allowed our facility to burn down. God has spared us from endless real problems that torment real congregations. Yes, the money is a real problem and we need to seriously address it. But, my brothers and sisters in Christ, we aren't in heaven yet. We are always going to have hard problems. And right now, we can point to enormous blessings from our Lord and Savior.

Do we appreciate them? God gives us so much and in love, he even decides which challenges we have to face. He sends every difficulty that comes into our lives to purify our faith and to teach us to trust in him. Our financial challenges remind us that we could do nothing without him and his blessing. But do we see it that way? In the Old Testament, when Job lost all his wealth and all his children and his body was covered with painful boils, his wife taunted him for his faith. And Job asked, "**Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?**" It's not sinful to wrestle with the challenges that are before us. But it is sinful to act as though there are no blessings. It is sinful to resent the difficulties and be negative about them and tear down each other's faith, just as it is sinful to contribute to those difficulties by failing to support the work God has given us to do. Both of those reactions are really ingratitude. Either we are ungrateful for all the blessings God has given us and we only complain, or we are ungrateful for the blessings God has given us and we do not faithfully contribute to his work. Are we guilty of that ingratitude?

Only you and God can speak to your own attitude. But I know that I personally struggle with ingratitude every day. It's part of having a sinful nature. And I would bet that I'm not the only one here. Are you guilty of that sin? Should God just throw up his hands when he looks at you and say, "Enough! Get out of my sight and spend eternity in hell!"? Don't all sinners deserve that? But the miracle of God is his grace. Even though he should give up on us, he doesn't. He sent Jesus to die for us, even though he knew that we wouldn't always appreciate it. Jesus lived a life of perfect gratitude to God. He rejoiced in every one of his blessings. He saw the challenges as his Father's way of working in his life and accepted every trouble as a gift of God. His perfect heart replaces our sinful hearts and minds and attitudes in God's record. God calls us perfect in joy and perfect in gratitude because Jesus was and because Jesus died and paid for our sin and ingratitude. Jesus suffered the death and the hell that you and I deserve because again and again, we fail to perceive the depths of God's love and again and again we fail to rejoice in all that he sends, both the easy things and the hard ones. Jesus paid for that sin and then he rose and announced that there's nothing left to pay for. God has forgiven us all. He has wiped away all record of our moaning and complaining and all record of our failure to support and participate. Jesus has set us free from all that sin forever.

That is the greatest blessing of all. To pass that blessing on to the next generation, he has given us Christian education. At Peace, that means our school, our preschool, our high school, our Sunday school, our Bible studies. It means the synod's efforts to train pastors and teachers in order to send them to places we can't go. And in love, God calls us all to be a part of that work. To teach our own children to know the Lord. To support the work our church does in all its educational efforts, even if we no longer have children in those schools. To contribute as God has blessed us and to give thanks for his blessings, even as we confront the challenges. To build each other up in the gospel and encourage one another to do God's work. My friends, let's commit ourselves today to that work!

II.

We have so much to be grateful for. And in my list earlier, I just scratched the surface. So let me summarize it all with this simple expression: **God has given us the pure gospel. Should we be doing cartwheels in the aisles?**

The answer is yes because we should be rejoicing in God's grace. I do have one worry about all those numbers, however: pride. In the Old Testament, King David allowed his military success to go to his head and he counted how vast his armies could be. God punished him for his pride. I hope that listing all those numbers doesn't make me or you guilty of that same sin. Rather than sinful pride, see those opportunities, and the challenges that go with them, as gifts of God. We didn't make this happen. I certainly didn't make this happen.

Our teachers, as dedicated as they are, didn't make this happen. The Holy Spirit brought us those 111 elementary students, those 29 preschoolers and those 76 high schoolers. Every one of them is an opportunity for us to serve the Lord.

And God has given us a tremendous blessing in the called workers he's sent us. The Bible places the primary responsibility for teaching children to know the Lord at home. The father has the primary responsibility and the mother is next in line. Peace Lutheran school and preschool and Sunday school, Huron Valley Lutheran High School – these institutions exist to help and support you parents. But nothing can take the place of the work you do at home.

But as contradictory as it may sound, God does call pastors and teachers to do this work of Christian education. Every single one of them is a gift of his love – even the ones we don't like particularly. Through the workers God has given us, he has given us the gospel in its truth and purity. That is such a rare gift in the Christian church today. There are so many churches that reduce the gospel to stuff we are supposed to do. There are so many ways that the devil gets his fingers into our teaching. It is a miracle that we have faithful pastors and teachers in our schools. Give thanks to God that every day that your children are here or at HVL, they hear about their Savior, they are disciplined according God's law and his gospel, they are built up for a life of faith. All those people are called by God to help you do your work.

He wouldn't have to send any of them. But he did because he loves us. And he gave us and our children faith. That's what this work is really about. These schools exist first and foremost to build up that faith. Yes, we hope to do a good job preparing them for college. We hope to set them on the road to finding good jobs and supporting their families. But above all else, we want to keep them on the road to heaven. We want to cement and strengthen the faith God has given them. God is working here through the gospel every day to make that happen. Let's rejoice about that. **Should we be doing cartwheels in the aisles?** My conservative Lutheran heart isn't quite ready to encourage you to literally do that. But if you want to do one in the parking lot, I'm OK with that. Whether you literally do a cartwheel or not, celebrate God's grace in your heart and show thankfulness in your support for those gifts. Amen.