

## What is Our Role?

A long time ago, I was sitting in my office at the church I served in Muskegon when the phone rang. The man on the line was raising money for something – I don't remember what. What I do remember is that he thought that our church should cough up some money because he *knew* that we were just rolling in money because of all those tithes the members bring. I *knew* from that comment that he didn't go to church anywhere. He made me wish, though, that he was right – that we were rolling in money. Why aren't we? Many people have tried to answer that question. But it's not the only question we wrestle with. We could just as easily ask why church attendance in this country has been declining for decades. Obviously, the two things are related. People who don't come to church don't support the church financially. And we could go farther than that. People who don't come to church rarely show up for work days. They don't volunteer to be on boards or committees or to help out with the ministry a congregation does.

We live in a time when it feels like the church in America is in decline. And when you look at our statistics and trends here at Peace, we might feel that's true here. Why is that happening? There are thousands of websites that address those questions – which shows that there are still a whole lot more people who care about these questions than we sometimes realize. The church in America is not dead. Peace Lutheran Church isn't dead either. But I do think that the issues we Christians in America are struggling with are directly related to how we view the church and what we consider to be its role in our lives. What is that role? Well, we saw it this morning, didn't we? We baptized an infant. We introduced little Andrew to the grace of God and made him a part of the people of God. Right after this sermon, we'll receive an adult into communicant membership. Next week, God willing, eleven young people will stand up here and confess their faith in Christ. They will take an oath to die rather than fall away from Jesus.

But will those children have a church when they grow up? Is there a place for the Christian Church in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Yes, as long as we remember what its role is and why it's needed. Why is the church needed? Well, why do you come here, week after week? Is it just a bad habit? I remember my mom saying once, "I *need* church." She talked about feeling bad during the week without it. So, coming to church makes us feel better about our lives. It makes us feel like God is paying attention. But why does it do that? Because it points us to Jesus. Nothing says that God loves us like the good news about Jesus. Nothing says that God is paying attention to our pains and sorrows like hearing about our Savior.

That truth reminds us that if the church is doing its job, it's addressing the most fundamental need in our lives: our sin. Sin gets in the way of God's love for us. We were all born sinners. But part of the delusion of sin is to thinking that we deserve God's love. That's what we naturally believe: God somehow owes us his love because we're such good people. There are two dangers that flow from that. The obvious one is thinking that I'm going to heaven because I'm a good person. The other danger is less obvious, but just as real: if God owes me love because I'm such a good person, what does it mean when my life hurts? What does it mean when I feel guilty about the choices I've made or when I feel unlovable or ugly or unpopular? Does that mean God hates me?

Jesus is the answer to both of those dangers. For as long as sin exists in this world, there will be a place for the church, because people will need to hear about Jesus. You and I need to hear that we are sinners who deserve God's judgment, but Jesus saved us. We need to be reminded that we are so important to God that he chose us before he created the world. He controlled all of history to send Jesus into this world in Bethlehem and then he sacrificed his Son on the cross to pay for all of our sins. Then on Easter, Jesus rose to tell us that we are forgiven. Jesus rose to tell us that we will rise us from the dead and live with him in a perfect world forever. Jesus rose to tell us that will never leave us or forsake us. No matter how much this life hurts, he will always be there beside us. He will give us the strength we need to get through another day. He will hear our prayers and protect us and care for us and bring us home to heaven.

Do you think an institution that says things like that is worth preserving? I do. And so does God. He invented the church so that his children can gather around the word and sacrament and grow in our faith. The church's role is to proclaim that good news to us, to be there with the gospel in every sorrow and every joy of

this life, to pray for each other and support each other and share in all the struggles of life. But what's our role? Well, it's the same, isn't it? Because we are the church. The church isn't the guys that stand up here and talk. The church is the people of God. All the people of God share in the blessings God gives here. We all share in the work God gives us to do here.

We can use three words to describe your role in the church: knowing, growing and going. *Knowing* means knowing the gospel. It's your job and my job to learn about the gospel – to learn to know Jesus better. Every Sunday, I try to help you understand him better, through the sermon and the liturgy and through adult Bible class. We offer Sunday school and during the week we run our elementary school and offer various opportunities to study more, all because the church's role in your life is to help you know Jesus better.

That leads directly to the next word: *growing*. Not physically growing, but growing in faith. The more we hear about Jesus, the more we come to communion and remember our baptism, the more we confess our sins and hear that they are forgiven, the more we study the Bible – the more our faith grows. So, the more we experience God's grace, the more we have a faith that can face pain and sorrow and hardship here. The more trust we have in our Savior when we see things on the news that disturb us and make us worry about the future. The more we're able to trust that God will provide for us, even if our congregation struggles.

Growing in faith leads to growing in our Christian life. We know better how God wants us to live, and we are more and more committed to living that kind of life. Now, the sinner inside us doesn't want to live a Christian life. He fights it every step of the way. So, as long as we live in this sinful world, we will need to grow in faith. Even after you've been a Christian for 70 or 80 years, you still need to grow. So, there always will be a role for the church in helping you grow. And you have a role, too: you need to make the commitment to God's word that leads to your own spiritual growth. And you need to make the commitment to God's people to be the church for them, to be a force in their lives for their growth in faith.

Growing in our Christian life is really growing in love. That's what the third word is about: *going*. Going means that we don't wait for people to find us. We don't hope that people will stumble across our church some Sunday morning and hear the gospel here. It's our job to take the gospel to them. We go. We also go to each other. We reach out in love when others are hurting. We reach out and call each other to repentance when our brothers and sisters in Christ are sinning. Going is about being representatives of Christ in a sinful world.

And going is, finally, where I'm going to talk about money. And not just money, but stewardship. In catechism class I teach that stewardship is how we use the gifts God gives us. We usually think of three kinds gifts: the time God gives us, the talents and abilities God gives us, and the money God gives us. Now, God decides how much of each one to give to each of us. But then God calls us to generously give back to him. Why? Because that's what makes going possible. We could not have a church if someone wasn't willing to stand in front and lead it. It wouldn't have to be me, but it would have to be someone. We couldn't run our congregation, we couldn't undertake outreach programs and visitation ministries or run our school without members of our church doing all the leadership things and all the support things those ministries need. We couldn't operate here without the offerings that come from the people of God. All those things are part of going. Think of it like this: you want to go on vacation. What has to happen before you actually pile the family into the car and head out to mountains or the ocean? Someone has to make sure that reservations are made and tickets are bought. Someone has to plan where to go and what to see and do and how much it's all going to cost. All that planning is part of going. Someone has to pack the suitcases and make the lists and check the school and work and activity calendars to make sure you can be gone those weeks. All that support work is part of going. Someone has to earn the money to pay for it all. That's part of going, too.

So today, we're going introduce a capital improvement campaign called Raise the Roof. It's going to focus on our facility. But that facility is part of going. It's part of growing. It's part of knowing, because we do all those things here. Raise the Roof is about the ministry that we all need during our lives here on earth. It's about the role that God gives all of us in that ministry.

But there's another way to think of why we will undertake this campaign. What's our motivation? It's not preserving these buildings. It's not fundraising. Those things are means to an end. The real reason to do this was illustrated this morning right at the beginning of our service. God reached down from heaven and he claimed a baby boy. That child that was born in sin, just like every one of us was. That child cannot earn heaven on his own. Left to himself that child could only earn hell. But he became a child of God today. The

Holy Spirit worked through the word connected with the water of holy baptism and he washed that baby's sins away – even the ones he hasn't committed yet! In that water, little Andrew died with Jesus and rose with him again. He was born again of water and the Spirit! God gave him faith. And God will work in his heart all the days of his life so that he can live a new and holy life. God made a covenant with Andrew. He promised that he will be his Father and he will love him and bring him home to heaven. He promised that he will hear his prayers and watch over him and protect him from all evil. All that happened in the sacrament of holy baptism.

And we were all a part of it, because we support this ministry. In God's eyes, you who pray for and give to and help with the ministry of Peace Lutheran Church share in all that God does here. Your hand is on the shell every time I baptize a baby. You reach out and offer the bread and wine every time I officiate at communion. You are there by the bedside of every sick and dying person that I comfort. You are in the classroom every time our teachers open the eyes and the minds of our children. You are part of every attempt we make to share the good news with someone who still needs to learn about Jesus. All of that is your work, because it is the church's work. And you are the church. You are the people of God. You are the blood bought children of your heavenly Father. It is a gift of God to be a part of this ministry. Treasure that opportunity. Share in it as God has blessed you. Amen.