

Goal: The hearers would abide in Christ and love others.

Next Sunday, 7 of our youth will stand here before you and profess their faith, reaffirming the blessings that God gave them in their baptisms and committing their lives to Christ. When each of them was baptized, he or she became a Christian, born by water and the Spirit. Now, after many years, and 2 years of intense instruction with me, they each will promise to abide in Christ and become part of our Lutheran church. So why the Lutheran church? Is it just because their parents are here? Maybe, but I hope not. We Lutherans are unique from all other Christians, because of what we teach.

As Missouri Synod Lutherans, it's all about grace, God's undeserved love for us. It's all about God's love for the world in Jesus. It's all about Christ crucified, risen, victorious. That's what makes Lutherans so different from other churches. Now, that might not sound earthshaking, but it is. (***"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God."*** (1 John 4: 1 – 2) As Lutherans, we teach the Biblical doctrine of God's love through grace alone, and that makes Lutherans different from other religions.

Every other religion in the world attempts to reach up to God, by suggesting that if you do such and such, God will give you His blessing. The such and such may be bathing in a sacred river or kissing a sacred rock or being baptized in a particular way or opening your heart so that God will... The focus is on what we are doing for God. But Christians, specifically Missouri Synod Lutherans, preach a Gospel that is alien to human reason. We preach the pure Word of God, which says that God loves humanity so much that He became one of us.

Instead of us trying to reach up to God, in love He came down to us, taking upon Himself our flesh and blood and living our life, our struggles, our sorrows, our joys. He came down to us, but He was rejected, mocked, and killed by those He came to save. Yet, it was through His obedience, His death and resurrection, that we experience a unique form of love, much different than anything this world offers. That's why Jesus tells His disciples to, (***"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me...As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love."*** (John 15: 4, 9)

Abiding in God's love to us through Jesus Christ is the key to our life as Lutherans. Abiding in His Word spoken, abiding in the water that is poured according to His Word, abiding together with the bread and wine received in His name. We abide in

His love. ***“This is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4: 10)*** There’s a profound truth in this passage that we need to get a hold of: God loved first and showed us that love by giving His son for the forgiveness of all of our sins, making us His people.

And Jesus says, ***“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.” (John 15: 9)*** Our lives are simply in response to His love. Do you follow the order? First, the Father loved Jesus; then Jesus loved us; and we are told to abide in that love so that God’s love would radiate through our lives as His disciples. John implores us, ***“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. This is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4: 9 – 11)***

God’s love empowers us to love others. Why is this important? Why is it significant? What difference does it make who loved who first? Because understanding this gives us clear insight of who we are as Lutherans. It would be nearly impossible for us to keep the command ***“love one another”*** unless we first understood that we’re God’s adopted children, beloved by Him from before we were born. If we didn’t believe that, we’d find it difficult to find the strength and even the desire to love our friends or our co-workers, much less our enemies!

So how can we love others as God loves us? There was a story about a missionary who went to minister to the patients in a TB ward of a hospital in India. Day after day he attempted to hand out the Psalms and the Gospel of John, but no one would take it. They thought, ***“Another American telling us that his way is the right way!”*** Although he couldn’t speak their language, he spent weeks trying to share with them the scriptures.

Then, he contracted TB himself and was quarantined to the same ward, the same beds, as the people he had been unsuccessfully preaching. He complained at God how his life had been wasted and his efforts were futile to such a stubborn people. He was discouraged, deflated, disappointed, and feeling hopeless. One night, at 2 a.m., he overheard another patient nearby, wrestling with his bedding and sobbing. ***“Great,”*** he thought, ***“now I’m not going to get any sleep either.”*** He did finally fall asleep in anger. The next morning there was a terrible stench in the room. It was obvious the old man in the other bed had soiled himself. He was too weak to get up, so he messed his bed. One of the nurses, who obviously had experienced this too many times, began scolding the old

man and slapped him in the face several times cursing the fact that she had to clean up his mess. The old man just sat there in bed with his arms up, taking the blows.

That night, at 2 a.m. again, the missionary heard shuffling in the bed nearby. Then came the whimpering and sobbing. He knew what it meant. He thought *“isn't someone going to help him?”* So, the missionary got out of bed, went over and wrapped his arms around the old man, picked him up and carried him over to the corner of the room where there was a hole in the floor. The man hugged him tight. After he did his business, the missionary cleaned him up and carried him back to his bed. But the old man never loosened his hold. When the missionary tried to lower the man onto his bed, he wouldn't let go. He held the missionary tight and kissed the top of his head over and over. The missionary finally wrestled him off and hoped that with a quiet room, he could get some sleep. The next morning, the missionary awoke to see a line of patients, all with gifts, wanting that book he was sharing before. Wanting what made him do such a thing.

“The Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” So, Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him... Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.” (Acts 8: 29 – 31, 35) When we live the love God, others will want to know why? Why would you do such a thing? Why do you distribute food early Saturday mornings when others are sleeping? Why do you eat and sleep in the gym with families who are homeless? Why do you visit people who are elderly or sick when they're not even related to you? Why are you so warm and welcoming to those you don't even know? That's what makes Lutherans different.

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4: 7 – 11) That's the type of love we're about. A love of service, of getting dirty, of giving ourselves, so that others may know the Good News about Jesus. Saint Mark Lutheran Church is an ohana that is so filled and surrounded with the love of God that we abide in Him and share it with all. Jesus says, ***“I am the vine and you are the branches...as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.” (John 15: 5, 9)*** Amen.