

Baptism

Although the vast majority of Christians in the world – Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans – do not remember their own Baptisms, that does not detract from the reality that Baptism is still one of the central acts of the Christian faith.

In Baptism God claims us as His own children, the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts and washes away all our sin, original and actual, and make us members of God's family and His Church.

Martin Luther, the founder of our denomination, was convinced of the importance of Baptism. For Him it was not an isolated and soon-forgotten once-in-a-lifetime act: it was a daily power for living the Christian life. He said that it would be well for every Christian, upon arising each morning to make the sign of the cross to remind themselves of their Baptism, and, in times of stress, Luther would remind Himself, "But I am baptized!"

Let us resolve in 2012 to give thanks for our Baptism and to continue the life of faithful, sanctified living that was begun the moment those sacred words were uttered as water was placed upon our heads: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Confirmation

The Rite of Confirmation provides an opportunity for an individual to publicly profess their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior, and to affirm their belief in the Scriptures as the inspired, inerrant Word of God and in the doctrines of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod as a true exposition of God's Word. It follows a course of instruction: in the case of 6th, 7th and 8th graders 3 years of once a week instruction, first in Sunday School and then 2 years with me. In the case of adults 10 intensive weekly sessions.

Confirmation lifts up the reality that for the Christian the profession of one's faith is necessary if we are to be true to Christ's Great Commission. Consecrated living, works of charity and self-sacrifice, kindness and love shown to the neighbor are all part of the Christian life, but until we speak the words to our neighbor, "I do this because I believe in Jesus," they will never know our motivation. More important, they will never know Jesus.

Let us resolve in 2012 that as we strive to live more consecrated lives, we will also tell others why, as Jesus says, "acknowledging Him before men, so that He will acknowledge us before His Father."

Membership

“I don’t have to be a member of a church to be a Christian.” How often have you heard that opinion voiced?

Well, yes, actually you do. At the very least, you must be a member of the Holy Christian Church. That is the invisible church, the church universal, the Church Militant. It is composed of all true believers in Jesus as their Savior, and only God knows who the members are. But all true Christians are members, so, yeah, you do have to be a member of a church to be a Christian.

And that Holy Christian Church manifests itself, makes itself known in the visible church. What is the visible church? Martin Luther said it this way: “Wherever the Gospel is preached in its purity and the Sacraments are administered according the God’s Word, there is the Church.”

While an argument may be made that a person doesn’t have to be on the rolls of a particular congregation to be a Christian, it is equally true that God wants His people to be affiliated with a local worshipping body of believers. How else do you live out the Scriptural injunctions to “build one another up with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” and “not neglect the gathering together” and, above all, celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion?

Grace was blessed with receiving 54 people into its fellowship this year: 15 by Baptism, 12 by adult Confirmation, 5 by Reaffirmation

of Faith, 12 by Transfer from other Lutheran congregations, and 10 as minor children of adult members.

What a blessing!

Some, however, had to be removed from membership because of geographical moves and some because of inactivity.

To neglect the fellowship that God provides in a congregation, and to turn one's back on the work God calls us to do together as a congregation is a tragedy.

Sadly, the definition of "regular worship" has changed rather drastically over the past 15 years or so. It used to mean "every Sunday or almost every Sunday". Now many people call themselves regular worshippers if they worship once or twice a month.

That is not the standard or the ideal toward which God calls us, nor is it the level of devotion He desires from His people.

Let us resolve in 2012 to be in church every Sunday possible, and to be more involved in the life, ministries, and fellowship of Grace.

Marriage

It is a sad reality of life in the new millennium that marriage has taken some serious hits. This most foundational building block of society, long held in high regard even by virtually all people, has fallen into low regard by far too many in our society.

If statistical norms for the recent past hold in 2012, fully one half of children will be born this year to unwed mothers, with no reasonable expectation that a father will be around for a significant part of their lives. When that happens not as a result of accident or death, but by deliberate decision, that is not only unfair to children, constituting what I believe to be neglect, but it is dangerous to society.

After life and relationship with Him, marriage was God's next gift to humanity. It is precious to Him, more precious and sacred, I believe, than we understand or are capable of understanding.

But the norm today has become for people to live together without benefit of God's blessing in holy matrimony.

And, increasingly, we see marriages ending at a distressing rate, even marriages of long duration.

Even within stable marriages, husbands and wives often do not work at showing the self-sacrificial love that Paul speaks about in Ephesians, putting the needs and well-being of their spouse ahead of their own.

Let us resolve in 2012 to hold marriage in the high regard in which God holds it, and, as Luther says it in the meaning to the 6th Commandment, each love and honor their spouse

Funerals

To paraphrase the opening monologue of Star Trek: “Death, the final frontier....”

This truly is the voyage of, well, everyone. It is something toward which we can all look forward. Unless Jesus comes back within our lifetime, we will all pass through the gate of death.

But, because of Jesus, that is exactly what we will do: we will pass through the gate of death. We will not smash headlong into a wall. We will not simply wink out of existence.

We will be escorted by our Savior through the valley of the shadow of death into the rooms which He has prepared for all who trust in Him alone for their eternal life.

Some of you have lost loved ones this past year. In the midst of your very real and understandable grief this light shines: those who have died in faith in Jesus are not lost; they are found, they are with Him forever and all who trust in Him will be reunited one day around His heavenly throne.

Let us resolve in 2012 to hold the light of that hope high so that that we may live fully each day in the expectation of that life in heaven, and so that others who do not know of Jesus promise may have that hope which it alone offers.