

Pentecost
Founders' Day Sunday, 50th Anniversary Celebration

Text: Ephesians 2:19 - 22 (NIV)

¹⁹Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.



Theme: *United by the Spirit*

Fifty years ago this area of the city was very different. It was dotted with farmland and orchards. The first freeways were being built. Fond du Lac Avenue was a major state highway. People, who lived way out here, were in the country. There were no city streets with curbs and sewers. Many of the residents had wells and septic systems.

But there were plans that this area of the city would grow. Because of that, a number of families met on February 15, 1959 at the home of Mr and Mrs. Fred Kappeler under the direction of Pastor Raabe, the mission director of the district, who wanted to start a new congregation near the corner of Fond du Lac Ave. and Silver Spring Dr. Subsequent meetings found a site for the congregation, and the name "Benediction" was chosen. On August 16, 1959, twenty families met at Covenant Lutheran Chapel on Capitol Drive and 76th Street. The congregation was started with 72 baptized members, 40 communicants and 32 children.

As I thought about the beginning of this congregation, there were several things that had a fair amount of risk. There were already several congregations in this area, including St. Peter's, Covenant, Berea, and Christ Memorial. They also had no building, land nor a pastor. I don't believe that a single service was even held before that first meeting. However, the present property was soon purchased. Pastor Wallace Oswald was installed as the first pastor on May 15, 1960. On June 19, 1960 the first service was held in the chapel-parsonage, which is now the education building, with 86 people in attendance. It must have been scary at first, but it is amazing how God blessed this young congregation. By the end of 1961, just two years later, the baptized membership was 405, and plans had to be made for a new church building, which was dedicated on February 19, 1964 with 1,001 people in attendance. By the end of 1964 at the congregation's 5th anniversary, it had grown from 72 members to 1,132.

When we think of all the people who have been members of Benediction of the last 50 years, it is amazing! It has often been said that this is a transient part of Milwaukee. That proved to be true. I meet people all the time, who have fondly said, "I was a member of Benediction at one time." This place is a very special place because the Holy Spirit has united us in Christ.

- I. As I thought about this Founders' Day, it seems to me that this text and the symbol, that was designed for the 10th anniversary describe well what a Christian congregation is.

The structure of our church logo symbolizes the church, which is the fellowship of believers in Christ. As Paul writes, we are rising to become a holy temple to the Lord. We are the church. The church is anchored in the Scriptures, which is on the bottom of the symbol. Paul writes that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. As a congregation we want to be grounded in the Scriptures. That is the foundation on which we rest. What rises out of the Scriptures? It is the cross of Jesus. Paul writes that He is the cornerstone of the church. The message of Christ crucified for us is the central message of the Bible and of our faith. In the midst of the structure are three circles, reminding us that the Holy Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwells among and in His people. A few years ago we adopted a vision statement that we want to be "A Fellowship of Christians, Grounded in the Scriptures and Centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The symbol, the vision statement, and these verses all show well how we are a fellowship as a congregation and that this fellowship is grounded in the Bible and centered on that message of Christ, crucified and risen for us.

On this Founders' Day, we thank God for this fellowship and that message of Christ. Had the founders of this congregation known what challenges would arise, they might have wondered whether they should have ever started this congregation. There were years of financial hardships and difficult decisions. There were times of long pastoral vacancies. There was a time when the congregation declined in numbers as fast as it grew in the beginning. We have seen a lot of turmoil in the last 50 years. Two of our LCMS congregations in this area closed a few years ago. Many of our large LCMS congregations in the city have declined so much in numbers that Benediction is now one of the largest LCMS congregations in the city of Milwaukee. We have seen many beloved stores in the area close, and even the largest mall in the area when Northridge closed. We have also seen a lot of changes within our own congregation. Fifty years ago, how many of our founders ever even heard of the Hmong? No one would have ever thought that we would have been blessed with two Hmong workers, a Hmong worship service, and a successful ESL class and Hmong cultural class. Who would have ever thought that we would be sponsoring a French African congregation or have a parish nurse? There have been a lot of changes over the last 50 years. Some of them have been difficult, but God has found a way to bless this congregation through them all. That was reflected well in the 25th anniversary theme, "God's Blessings through a Silver Lining."

But through all the changes that we have weathered, two things have remained consistent, our commitment to this fellowship and to the proclamation of Christ crucified for us. God has blessed us with two buildings. This structure is probably one of the most unique churches in the city of Milwaukee. It was designed by the same architect, Donald Grieb, who designed the Domes. But our commitment is not really to this piece of ground or this building. It is to those who are brothers and sisters in Christ with us in this fellowship. Paul writes that we are members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. This has been a special place for 50 years because of the Christian love and care that has been shown to one another. The other thing that has remained constant is what actually comes first. God has blessed this congregation with pastors, Sunday School teachers, and Bible class leaders who have taught the Scriptures and centered their message on the Gospel of Christ. The devil, the world, and our sinful nature have often tried to stop that message from being proclaimed and heard in this place. There have been times when we have made other things more important than the hearing of God's Word and the administration of His Sacraments. We have sometimes put our focus in the wrong places, on our hopes, dreams, and wants, rather than God's Word. But then in God's mercy the message of Christ crucified resonated

in our hearts again. We rejoiced in His forgiveness. We found peace in His presence, and hope in His promise of eternal life. We realized that the message of Christ is what we are about. That message is what binds us together as Christians. It forgives our sins and makes us into brothers and sisters in Christ.

II. It is through that message of Christ, that the Holy Spirit unites us and makes us one.

Today is Pentecost, and I haven't even mentioned the Holy Spirit. However, I have been talking about His work this entire sermon. The Holy Spirit is the one who builds Christ's Church. He has built this congregation over the past 50 years. Paul writes that the Holy Spirit constructs the church in Christ to be a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who used the Gospel in this place to build this congregation and our Lord's Church. The Spirit gave the founders of this congregation many gifts, but I would guess that they would be the first people to say that they didn't know what they were doing in the beginning. In the last several years, I would also be the first to confess that I didn't know what we were doing when we started things like the Hmong ministry. There have been many times when we didn't know what we were doing, times when we made mistakes, and even times when we sinned, but God's Spirit blessed and built this congregation.

How did He do it? It was in a very simple way. He built this congregation through the Gospel of Christ in the Word and Sacraments. In Romans 1:16 Paul calls the Gospel the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. When children and adults were brought to this baptismal font, the Holy Spirit was giving them a washing of rebirth and renewal. Over the past 50 years, we have had about 1,100 baptisms. We have gathered to hear the Gospel preached from this pulpit. We have brought our children to Sunday School and confirmation. We have attended Bible classes. Through that word, God has pointed us to Christ as our Savior. We have come to this altar to kneel to receive the Lord's Supper. Here we received the Lord's body and blood for our forgiveness and confessed our unity with each other in Christ. Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ have gone before us into glory. The place where we are closest to those who are feasting with the Lord in heaven is when we partake of this foretaste of the feast to come. Through His Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens faith that Jesus Christ is my Savior, and He also unites us into a fellowship in Christ, that we love and care for each other as Christ gave Himself for us. It is the Holy Spirit that has built this fellowship and united us in Christ over the past 50 years.

As we look over that list of the twenty founding families, we realize that many of those who founded this congregation are no longer with us on this earth. The Lord has called many of those 72 souls into His eternal glory. On this day we give God thanks for those 72 people, that God blessed them with the faith and foresight to begin the congregation in this place, that we could also be a part of this fellowship called "Benediction Lutheran Church. We thank God for all who have been a part of this fellowship and for the message of Christ that has been proclaimed. We pray that it will continue to be proclaimed among us, that we may be united in Christ now and for all eternity. Amen.

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