

Mark 9:14-29

150 years is a long time...or not so long, depending on how you look at it. When our church was founded, men with names like Hermann, Karl, Heinrich, and Fritz penned their signatures to the constitution. And today we remember and celebrate what they did. But had their names been Adam, Seth, Enoch, and Methuselah, they would not only still be sitting here with us today, they would be in the prime of their life. When the world was just getting started, 150 years was nothing to celebrate. You could hardly be called an adult until you could place 400 candles on your birthday cake. But when our church was getting started, our founding fathers knew that if there was going to be a sesquicentennial celebration in the year 2009, they would not be around to see it.

But you are. You are the recipients of 150 years of God's grace. During those years 751 sinners were given new life in Christ at our baptismal font. 643 were taught the catechism professing their faith in Jesus. 226 couples stood before God's altar joined as husband and wife in Christ, and 315 members were carried out to that cemetery to be laid to rest in Christ Jesus. 150 years of God's grace is a long time whether your name is Hermann or Adam, Karl or Methuselah.

Now it would have been nice if the appointed Gospel reading for today, the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, had been something that would have fit in well with today's anniversary. Perhaps Jesus' words to Peter, "Upon this rock I build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not overcome it." Or even one of His parables about the Kingdom where He teaches the significance of what it means to be a member of His Church. But alas, today's reading is about a boy possessed by a demon; about the disciples arguing with the scribes; about the boy's father's frustration because Jesus' disciples could not cast the demon out; about Jesus rebuking that father for his lack of faith; and about the boy, after the demon was cast out, looking like a corpse and everyone saying, "he is dead." This is our text for this happy occasion here today.

The more we look at it, however, the more we see how fitting it really is for a day like today. We may be all smiles today, but the truth is that in the past fifteen decades, just like in our text, there were plenty of arguments here, and frustrations, and lack of faith. The pews are full today, but over the last century-and-a-half these pews usually longed to be filled with members on Sunday mornings. Today we greet each other cordially, but in the past 150 years this congregation has seen its share of quarrels and arguments. On this occasion today everything has come together to make for a wonderful celebration, but over the years, the pastor and members have dealt with many frustrations here.

Why? Because when you have a church where Christ is proclaimed, there the devil will dig in his heels to work hard against it. That boy in our text wasn't the only one caught up by Satan. From the very beginning he has also been fighting us every step of the way. And so we, like those in our story in Mark 9 have, in the last 150 years, dealt with many challenges.

Let's keep in mind, however, who our fight is with. The disciples may have thought they were arguing against the scribes. The boy's father may have been frustrated with the disciples. And that's just what Satan wanted, because in truth, he was the one who was fighting against all of them. And he is our enemy still today. Pastors have come and gone here in the last fifteen decades, and there wasn't one (and still isn't) who was popular with all the members. The devil made sure of that. We have our faults and shortcomings and have caused our share of frustrations among the membership.

Members, too, have come and gone here over the years, and at times they left because of hard feelings. Satan knows how to create squabbles in a congregation. But who's fighting who? It's not

the Hermann's, and the Karl's, and the Heinrich's, and the Fritz' fighting against each other. It's the devil who is fighting against all of us. He is the enemy, not all of us.

Let's also keep in mind who it is that fights for us. If Jesus had not stepped into our story in Mark 9, it would have been a truly despairing outcome. But because He entered the picture, all was well. He fought against the demon with just His words. He made the boy well again. This same Jesus is the Christ in Christ Lutheran Church. Without Him, there would be nothing to celebrate today. Had Jesus not been here with us and for us in Word and Sacrament for the last 150 years, the arguments, and frustrations, and lack of faith would have won the day. But as Jesus entered into the story in our text, so He is a part of our story. Though it cost Him everything, Jesus won the battle against Satan on the cross of Calvary. And His victory is your victory. Jesus, for 150 years, has been giving to the members here, in His Word and Sacraments, the victor's spoils--forgiveness, life, and salvation. And these gifts belong to you.

Now if we are able to admit it, there were times in our history when we resembled the boy in our text. He looked like a corpse. Even after Jesus cast the demon out of him, the crowd said, "he is dead." And those same words may have been said about us. For even though Jesus has been casting Satan out every time His Word is preached here, and every time His Sacraments are given, we have often acted as though it meant little or nothing to us. We have lain down like corpses, not filled with the life of Christ; not rejoicing to live to the full, the resurrected life of a Christian. How many times have visitors to our church said...have those in our community said, "They are not really living at Christ Lutheran Church...they are dead?"

But we're not dead just as the boy was not dead. Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up. And so for us, if we are going to really live here at Christ Lutheran Church, it's going to come from Jesus as His words remain in our ears, and our hearts, and our lives. Moving forward with Jesus in the next 150 years even when, one by one, we die and are buried in the ground, they will not stop saying about us, "They really live there at Christ Lutheran Church...even when they die, they live."

In 1982 the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated in Washington D.C. Through much controversy this black granite wall was erected with the names of more than 58,000 soldiers who had died in the war, and 1,200 who were missing in action etched onto it. Every year more than three million visitors come and stand in awe, many shedding tears as they look for the name of their loved one. What is unique about this memorial is that the names are not alphabetical but chronological by when they died, and they do not begin at the left and end at the right of the wall--they begin at the center and move down to the right and pick up on the left side and come back to the center, so that the name of the last soldier who was killed in the war is next to the name of the first soldier who was killed. When visitors reach out and touch the name of their loved one, because of the polished black granite, they see their own face reflected in the rock connecting them to their loved one whose name they are touching.

Dear friends, this is our Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We don't have three million coming up each year to receive Holy Communion at God's altar, but when you come up, you who are living are joined with those who have died. For 150 years all who have died in Christ are here with us still. We may commune from left to right, but in truth we begin at the center; we begin and end with Jesus so that the last one communed is joined not only with the one who communed first, but with all the saints who have gone before us. And as you reach out and touch the bread and wine with your lips and your mouth, you see your own face reflected in the Sacrament, for here in Jesus' flesh and blood the present and the past are joined together.

Here in Christ's body and blood you can see the names of those who are with us still. Names like Hermann, and Karl, and Heinrich, and Fritz, yes, but also Willie, and Edna, Robert, and Vernon, Olga, Mary Katherine, Mops, and Alberta, Clarence, Hodgen, and Raymond, Ruth Ann, Mary Belle, and Lydia, Leona, Hulda, and Leonard, Walter, and Grover, and many more who died in Christ before I came here. All of them forgiven sinners in Christ Jesus as are all of you. Did they have frustrations in life? Yes. Did they have arguments? Did they show lack of faith at times? Yes, just as we all do. But Jesus is at the center. He holds us together. He is their forgiving Savior, and yours, and you are forgiven in Him.

And one day, whether it's next year, or decades from now, or 150 years from now, if this world is still standing, Christians will come up to this War Memorial--because that's what it is: a memorial for all who fight the good fight of faith--and as they reach out to touch the body and blood of Christ, they will see your name there, not alone; not by itself--your name with all the other saints, and your name with Christ, because He is at the center of your church and your life. Amen.