

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our text is from today's Gospel story: “Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.’”

These are truly exciting days to be part of the Ascension family! God has placed before us some great opportunities. And with those opportunities come great challenges.

The community surrounding us has, for the last decade, gone through rapid change. Social, economic, and demographic change. This opens for us wonderful opportunities to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to new people. It also confronts us with the reality of change. Can we remain static and still do effective outreach? How much change do we have to embrace? Will what has served us well in the past work well in the future? When are we in danger of changing so much that we lose our essential identity? These are tough questions.

Our Day School ministry illustrates the reality of these issues. For 56 years our Day School has been an important, effective way for us to carry out our mission of raising Caring Servants of Jesus Christ. Children today are more at risk than ever before, and our Day School ministry is more important than ever. As the community around us changes we have the delightful opportunity to minister to children of an increasing diversity of backgrounds. But as affluence moves further away from our community we face the growing challenge of funding our Day School. The cost of doing this ministry continues to rise while, at the same time, parents in our immediate community have fewer dollars to spend on private education. We are projecting that the current budget year will end in September with a deficit of \$120,000. This deficit is driven largely by the cost of our Day School scholarship program. As we prepare a budget for a new fiscal year to place before our Voters in September, the current projected school enrollment and the anticipated demand for scholarships creates an anticipated deficit in the neighborhood of \$200,000. That's some neighborhood!

Obviously we cannot to continue to operate a Day School for very long with those kinds of numbers. Children need our Day School ministry more than ever. We will need to find new, additional sources of revenue for our scholarship program if our School is to continue the ministry of raising Caring Servants of Jesus Christ.

Ascension Lutheran School: a critically needed ministry. An exciting opportunity. A growing challenge. Part of what makes this an exciting time to be part of the Ascension family.

After our worship this morning we will spend some time talking about another area of ministry that presents exciting opportunities along with growing challenges – our worship life. (I had planned to excuse myself from that conversation so that everyone would feel free to be open and honest in sharing their opinions. As it turns out, family responsibilities necessitated my being absent anyway.)

How do we balance the desire to make our worship lively and dynamic, meet the scheduling needs and preferences of our members, and still open the doors of our church with an effective outreach to the increasingly new community around us? Wow – talk about an exciting challenge. Your prayerful conversation today will have to consider those three concerns – worship dynamics, preferred schedule, and effective outreach.

No matter what decisions we make concerning worship – even if we decide not to decide – there are three important values we need to conserve.

The most important is that we ought to maintain a Lutheran perspective on worship. Lutherans understand worship as the gathering of God's people to receive the gifts of God. In other words, we worship because God wants to pour out the gifts of His grace on His people.

Lutherans have always called their worship the “Divine Service.” And by that we mean that worship is first and foremost God's service to us. We are dead in trespasses and sins until God calls us to life. We are lost in unbelief until God calls us to faith. We are burdened with sin until God declares us forgiven. Sin covers us like filthy rags until God declares us holy and precious in His sight. Faith and forgiveness are God's work in us.

We gather to worship so that God can pour out on us the riches of His grace in Jesus Christ. We respond with an offering of thanks and praise.

In our Gospel story this morning Peter makes the confession that Jesus says is the bed-rock foundation of the Church: You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God! The Church is built on that confession and the Church grows as we share that confession with others. And note where Jesus says Peter got that confession: not from “flesh and blood” but from “my Father in heaven”. It was God's gift to Peter. It was God's work in Peter. A divine service!

Worship is a divine service. We gather to receive God's gifts. No matter how we decide to worship or when we decide to worship, we must preserve the idea that worship is a “divine service”, God's work among us.

That is a Lutheran but not universal understanding of worship. The pagan notion of worship is that worship is something we do to appease God and earn God's favor. We worship to get God to love us more. We worship to motivate God to give us more, to pry a blessing out of God's hand. Sadly, even a lot of Christian churches today think of worship in pagan terms – something we do to make God happier with us and bless us more.

Or many see it as a form of entertainment. The church must offer bigger, better orchestras and more professionally produced audio-visuals to compete with TV, the mall, or six flags. “I really enjoyed that” is the highest compliment you can pay that kind of worship!

Some people see worship primarily as an obligation, something you “have” to do. It's on our to-do list. Let's go, get it over with, and check it off. Keep it short – under an hour – because I have other pressing things on my to-do list. Keep it moving, got more to do. This view of worship is that it is primarily my service to God. And a little should go a long ways.

Which is backwards. Worship is not our service to God. It is God's service to us. No matter when we worship or how we worship, we must preserve the idea that we gather to receive the riches of His grace which God pours out on us in Word and Sacraments.

The second value we need to preserve is that our worship needs to be mission-minded, inviting, opening the doors of the Church to the community around us. God's desire is to pour out his gifts on all people. God shares His gifts with us and we must be ready to share those gifts with others.

The third value we need to preserve is found in the question “what best meets the needs of the people sitting next to me?” In other words – we are in this together. We are a worshipping community. We are a family of faith. In other other words: what I want should be subordinate to what we need. What each of us likes in worship is important. Let's hear it. Let's talk about. But then let's all get behind what's in the best interest of the entire Ascension family and the community that we wish to attract.

I pray for God's riches blessings upon you and that the Spirit will guide your conversation on worship. As we consider the different ways to do the “what” and “when” of worship, let's be sure we remember that in worship God pours out the gifts of His grace on His people. Let us seek to preserve the best of our worship traditions while meeting the scheduling needs of our faith family in a way that puts out a welcome mat to the unchurched.

To God be the glory! Amen.