



Dear Friends in Christ,

I enjoyed three events in January. First, our LCMC Days of Prayer was a rich experience for me. I found that the more I prayed during those three days, the more my prayers flowed. I certainly need to do something like that more often. One thing I did was pray through the membership directory seeking Gods Holy Spirit to guide my praying for each one of you.

Second, Lindsey Mueller inspired me with her passion for her children in Uganda. What a privilege to have a missionary from our congregation through whom we can touch lives in such powerful ways. I look forward to developing our ministry in Uganda through our partnership with Lindsey and COTN.

Third, our annual congregational meeting was a great way to reflect on what we have accomplished and what we hope to do in the years ahead. I love the Church and I love Peace Lutheran Church in particular. So I enjoy getting together and talking about God's call for our mission in the year ahead.

We live in challenging times. Lots of people believe in God. Although the number of atheists is growing, still by far the majority believe in God. However, there are large numbers of "God-believers" who want nothing to do with the Church. They may or may not be on a membership roll at some Church somewhere, but they really don't feel any need for the Church. They believe in God. They just don't believe that God would use the Church to speak to the world. And they certainly don't believe God would use the Church to speak to them.

They believe that God speaks to them better through creation. They can experience the glory of God more clearly through a sunrise than through a worship service. They can experience the presence of God in the night sky more powerfully than through Bible study.

And that most certainly may be true. I suspect that one of the reasons there are more atheists today is because so many people are cut off from the witness of creation. They spend too much time indoors, in artificial environments, and in front of electronic screens.

Creation does a better job than the Church of speaking of God's power and divine majesty. Romans 1:20 says, "Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made."

Romans 1:20 is a good reason to go camping or to send our children to Christian camps like Carol Joy Holling, Covenant Cedars, or Okoboji Lutheran Bible Camp. That is why the Men of Peace raise funds at their Valentines Pancake Dinner every year to send children to camp.

However, although creation does a better job than the Church in bearing witness to the power and majesty of God, creation does not do such a great job of communicating God's love and mercy. Creation's law is the survival of the fittest. There is no mercy, grace, or salvation there. When it comes to speaking of God's love, the Church does a much better job than creation because the Church is the only one telling the story of Jesus. John 1:17 says: "The Law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

The Church is the only one sharing the story of God's love and grace in Jesus. The church may not always do a good job of telling that story, but there is nobody else telling the story of Jesus for children, for those who've never heard, and for those who know it best who are hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.

Some have been turned off by the Church. Modern American culture has branded Christians as "haters", and unfortunately the Church has not done enough to dispel that label.

The funny thing is that Christians are called judgmental by people who claim the right to judge us, and haters by people who feel free to hate us. Recently a member of Peace was told, "I don't go to church anymore. The Church is full of hypocrites." How should we respond to such a hurtful statement? Maybe one response is to admit that such a charge hurts. Another response is to seek clarification. "Are you saying all church people, including me, are hypocrites? Do you mean a majority are hypocrites? What percentage do you judge to be hypocrites?" Perhaps the best response is to say, "It seems you have been hurt by the Church. As a member of Jesus' Church, I am so sorry. Do you want to talk about it?"

And when someone says, "I can worship God better without the Church", I want to say, "I have always found it much easier to worship with the Church than on my own. Can you tell me how you have been able to worship better on your own?"

Why do I need the Church? Because when left to creation, I miss hearing the promises of God's grace. And when left to myself, I always end up worshiping a god who tells me just what I want to hear. I am grateful for God's gift of the Church and for all of you in particular. Thanks for being the Church for me, for each other, for our community, and for the world.

Yours in Christ, *Phil Nielsen*



Weekend Worship Schedule...

*6:30 PM each
Saturday Evening
10:00 AM each
Sunday Morning*

*Sunday School will
begin at 8:45 a.m.
in the fellowship hall*

Children's Board Books
are available in a basket
in the overflow for use
during worship.

FEB. 2 - Epiphany 4

Sermon "Real Blessings" (Matthew 5)
Holy Communion
"Souper Bowl of Caring" Sunday Offering for Food Pantry

FEB. 9 - Transfiguration

Sermon "Salt and Light" (Matthew 5)
Peace Choir

FEB. 16 - Epiphany 6

Feb. 15 Saturday Night - South Sudan Mission Talk
Sermon "Sin Boldly?" (Matthew 5)
Holy Communion

FEB. 23 - Epiphany 7

Sermon "Radical Righteousness" (Matthew 5)