

The 60th Anniversary of Benediction Lutheran Church

Milwaukee, WI

Anniversary Theme: "In a World of Change, Christ Remains Constant

Text: Hebrews 13:7,8

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.



Theme: "Imitate their Faith"

Last fall we kicked off our anniversary celebration with a pancake breakfast. I preached on this same text and looked at the many changes to our area with the assurance that Christ never changes. Today at the end of our celebration, I would like to take a slightly different track. I would like to look at the changes of the people of Benediction.

I cannot begin to tell you the number of times that I have met someone who said, "I was a member of Benediction at one time." I sometimes think that half of the population of this city over the age of 70 was a member here in the late 60's and early 70's. That was a time of great transition in this part of the city. Many people moved into the apartments and small homes and within a few years bought a bigger home in another part of the city. Throughout the years the people of this congregation have changed a lot. The writer of the Hebrews calls on us to remember them and imitate their faith.

I. A lot of people from this congregation are now in heaven.



If you look at the picture of the original 70 members and their children, I believe that there is only one adult who is still a member of this congregation. She is Betty Hetzer. Even though almost all of the people in the picture were in

their late 20's and early 30's at the time, almost all of them are now in heaven. Even some of the children in the picture are now with our Lord. Over the last 60 years, this congregation has had 325 funerals.

This is dangerous because I can't mention everyone, but here are a few people who come to mind. The first meeting of the congregation took place at the home of Fred and Louise Kappeler. Two men who seemed to be fixtures in everything in this church were Charlie Hetzer and Bill Zuehlsdorf. The first funeral I did at Benediction was for Evie Krause, who served faithfully on the altar guild. The chairman of the Board of Elders for many of my first years at Benediction was Wally Ernst. It is still one of the biggest shocks of my ministry when the Lord took him. I think of Dorothy Hetzel who had 100 Foster babies from LCFS. There were many men who served on the usher staff, including Calvin Dallman, Jim Reed, Bill Flemming, and Jerry Klug. There are the former secretaries of the congregation: Janet Dallman, Shirley Devore, and Becky Kronshagen. When I first came to Benediction, the 60 and Over Club was made up of couples like Ed and Collette Seitz, Church and Wilma Emmerich, and Dallas and Lorraine Phyles. We all loved Barb Strelitzer and admired her faith as she struggled with MS. I could always count on Leesa Bahr to be there when she was scheduled to play, and knew that something was terribly wrong on the Sunday when she didn't show up. I could count on Don Mielke to fix anything. He was always here in a heartbeat, ready to help. The other pastors would give me a hard time when I told them that the chairman of our trustees was blind, but Irv Bostwick did a great job. I think of the pastors who have been laid to rest – Pastor Hellman, Pastor Walschlager, and I was so glad that I got to know Pastor Schedler, who came here as a retired pastor. There was the joy of baptizing Peter Gunsburg, who until that time was by far the oldest person that I ever baptized.

I am going to do something just as dangerous. I didn't mention everyone, but I would like to take a couple minutes to invite you to remember someone. *At this point the members mentioned people who are now in heaven and in a sentence described who they were or what they did at Benediction.*

To close it out, I would like to remember one more person. Daisy Blevins was an elderly African-American woman whom Rose Ohm brought to church. She became a member of Benediction. I once asked her how she became a Lutheran because there are not many Lutheran congregations where she came from in Mississippi. I will never forget her answer. She said that when she lived in Chicago, she "went to a church where they hooted and hollered by never knew why." One Sunday she went to the Lutheran church which was closer. She said, "That Sunday I learned why." The last day of her life, I walked in her hospital room, and she was singing, "Precious Lord, take my Hand." She was a strong influence on my personal faith.

When we think of those people who went before us, they had their imperfections. There were times when they made us laugh. Other times they comforted us. Some time they might have driven us nuts. There were some who were very kind and compassionate. Others didn't have those qualities as part of their personality. But they all trusted in Christ. They trusted in his forgiveness. They clung to Him in their darkest days. They praised Him for all of His blessings. They came to this sanctuary to be refreshed by His Word and Supper. They were examples of faith in Jesus Christ our Savior.

II. Think of the people who are part of this fellowship today.

These are your brothers and sisters in Christ. St. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:2-7, *"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. May every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit; -- just as you were called*

to one hope, when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of us all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it." God has made us one in Christ. We have been baptized into the same name. We gather to hear God's Word. We eat the same meal in Holy Communion. We are a congregation that is very diverse. We don't even have worship in the same languages. We don't eat the same foods. (Kou had to make rice for our lunch today because you can't have a meal without rice.) But we all have the same faith. We all trust that Jesus Christ is our Savior. That faith unites us more than anything that could divide us. There is no stronger bond that you have with anyone in this world than with your brothers and sisters in this place. So Paul calls us on us to keep the unity of the Spirit in how we treat each other and to use the gifts that God has given to us to build up our brothers and sisters in Christ in the faith.

III. Who knows who will be a part of this fellowship in the future?

If there is one thing that you should desire for your children and grandchildren, it is that they will share in your faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior. Pray for them and share the Gospel with them. Encourage them to be a part of a Christian congregation wherever they might live. We don't know what kind of changes will come to this part of the city. If you were to tell the founders of this congregation that in 60 years 200 of the members of this place would be Hmong and Congolese, they would have probably said that you are nuts. There were probably not even 20 Hmong or Congolese people living in Milwaukee in 1959. But God has given us grace to share the Gospel with many of our new neighbors. We pray that whatever changes come to this area, that this congregation will continue to be a beacon that points others to Christ as their Savior.

III. Throughout all of these changes Christ does remain constant.

He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The people of the past lived in the assurance of the forgiveness of sins because of His blood, shed on the cross for them. They gathered around this altar to be assured that Christ gave His body and shed His blood for them. We are comforted by the same Gospel. We hear the same words of Scripture and receive the same meal at this altar. We come here for the same reason that they did, to receive the forgiveness of sins that Christ won for us on the cross. He will be with us as we journey through this life as He was with them. He will bless us, guide us, deliver us from all evil, and one day bring us to the joy of heaven. As He was faithful to them, He will always remain faithful to us.

Today we will spend a lot of time remembering the past. That is a good thing. We can learn a lot from the past. As you do so, remember the faith of those who have gone before us and imitate their faith. You will find that God will be just as gracious and merciful to us as He has been to every generation before us.

Amen.

***Pastor Don Hougard
Benediction Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI
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