

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

This week, a friend from the seminary came by Zion with a friend of hers in tow. She wanted to show this person majestic Zion. The friend's friend was from a Baptist background who now goes to one of those big-box nondenominational churches that have little if any artwork. You can imagine, as she stepped into our holy place, you could almost hear the gasp. *"Oh, this is so beautiful."* *"And is that a pipe organ?"* she asked. They don't usually have those either in the nondenominational churches aspiring to be like Rick Warren's Saddleback church or Bill Hybel's Willow Creek church.

You might not be surprised to hear that Zion gets periodic requests to use her holy place for weddings. And when I talk to (usually) the bride about becoming a member of Zion, well, often it's, "we're going to this or that big box church and don't want to change churches." They just don't want to get married there. Not pretty enough — like Zion.

And it's true. Zion is majestic. It is beautiful. It exudes awe and reverence. All this communicates: *"'Surely the LORD is in this place,' ... 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, ... the gate of heaven.'"* The architects designed it with that in mind. Our forebears have left us this wonderful holy space in which to worship the Lord as church—*"O LORD, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells."*

And I would say, *"Amen"* to that. And yet, the Lord is not here because it is an awesome and beautiful place, for the building, properly speaking, is not church; and all of these things, from the magnificent structure to the lovely adornments, are wonderful, and even helpful, but they are not necessary and they do not define the church.

You might remember: Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well *"believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father."* Herod's temple was in Jerusalem, and it was magnificent. But Jesus doesn't yoke true worship to that structure. Rather He goes on, *"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."*

Here's the point: beautiful structure notwithstanding, if what's going on there is not worship in Spirit and truth, then the Lord's glory is not there. Some people equate lively music with the Spirit. Lively music notwithstanding—and by the way no one would accuse Mike of not playing with a lively tempo—that notwithstanding, the words are what's important, and if what is being sung does not comport with God's teaching in Spirit and truth, then those, who are seeking to honor the Father there, are not. They are worshiping in vain with hearts far from God. Some people equate a charismatic preacher who paces back and forth on the

stage screaming and yelling, or maybe who goes out from behind the pulpit mingling among the people as a Spirit-filled preacher. But all that emotive theatrics notwithstanding, if what is preached is devoid of Trinity, of Jesus, of incarnation, of sacrifice and cross, of love and forgiveness, then the Lord is not there present with His grace.

For if the church is not about the building, neither are its marks people with hands upraised and swaying trancelike to the music. Neither, by the way, is the church marked by legalistically applied liturgical rites and ceremonies. It's not the rhetorical flourishes of the preacher that make the church Spirit-filled. No, the church is people, baptized people, gathered around God's pure word and gifts. These are the ones who worship God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — in Spirit and truth. We've been studying this a bit in Adult Bible Class. This the way our Lutheran, Augsburg Confession puts it: *"The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered. For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments."*

Thus, the church prays that the Lord would keep her steadfast in His truth, in His word, in her confession. Thus we will pray shortly, as we sing, *"In these last days of great distress, Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness That we keep pure till life is spent Your holy Word and Sacrament."* And more, *"Restrain, O Lord, the human pride That seeks to thrust Your truth aside Or with some man-made thoughts or things Would dim the words Your Spirit sings."*

But there are some who would point an accusing finger toward us Lutherans for *"teaching as doctrines the commandments of men,"* and for *"[leaving] the commandment of God and [holding] to the tradition of men."* Indeed, some in my first congregation were not so fond of liturgical Lutheran ways nor sturdy Lutheran hymns nor confessional Lutheran doctrine. Although we just sang, *"Lord, help us ever to retain the catechism's doctrine plain, as Luther taught the word of truth in simple style to tender youth,"* they would sometimes accuse me, if I should quote from the catechism or the Augsburg Confession, as I have here today, of teaching the traditions of men as doctrine, supplanting God's holy word.

They bought into the whole, *"No creed but the Bible,"* mantra. My reply was, *"You say you believe the Bible? Good for you! It's God's word to us. So do I. So what do you say the Bible says?"* And that's when you get into confession.

For you see, the creeds—like the Nicene Creed we confessed today—the catechism, the Augsburg Confession, etc., are not the traditions of men that Jesus chides the Pharisees about. Indeed, we Lutherans confess all the Symbols found in the Book of Concord not because they are Luther's word, but because the doctrine found in them comes from the Scriptures, and is in agreement with that one, true measure by which all doctrine is to be judged: God's own word.

There is a difference between God's revelation and our confession—God's revelation is where He pulls back a bit of the curtain that has obscured our eyes since the fall into sin and where He gives us a glimpse of Himself, of His love for us, His will for us. In God's revelation the Eternal Word is revealed, and we get to see His glory full of grace and truth. In Jesus everything is revealed to us that we need to know for our salvation. Then in our confession, we say back to God that we get it, that we're sinners, and Jesus is Savior.

God's revelation —God to us; and our confession—us back to God. We Lutherans certainly do not substitute our confession for God's revelation, nor do we lord our confession over God's word, for then we would be worthy of Jesus' chiding of the Pharisees: you are *"making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down."*

But we do not. Martin Luther is not the Messiah, nor Philip Melanchthon, nor Martin Chemnitz—they are confessors before men, and we may quote them. We don't follow Paul or Cephas or Apollos—they are apostles and teachers, and we quote them, too. But, *"we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."* We preach *"repentance and the forgiveness of sins"* in Jesus' name to the world. We preach as of first importance that Jesus *"was raised from the dead on the third day."*

We preach that *"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."* We preach that Christ still nourishes and cherishes the church with His word and Sacraments. We preach that we who have been baptized and incorporated into Christ also commune with Him in the Holy Supper, participating with His blood as we drink of the cup of blessing, and with His body in the bread that we break.

These are the Spirit and truth things that make for true worshippers of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That we do this in an awesome building is icing on the cake. We could do without beautiful adornments: the stained glass, and statues and crucifixes, and banners. Gathered around Jesus it's still church even without the awesome music, our accomplished organist, instrumentalists and choir, the vestments and paraments. Built on the Rock, therefore, even should these things all be destroyed, steeples falling, spires crumbling, should all this be taken away by powers that seek to destroy the church, the church will stand. With Christ as cornerstone and the apostles and prophets as foundation, the gates of hell will not prevail against the church.

That's not to say that I want to do away with all these things, for rightly used they do aid our worship. For looking at these windows and this statue of Christ, who can miss that Christ is as the center of our worship? All our adornments do

preach Jesus, don't they? And what we pray in the liturgy and what we sing in our hymnody is or conveys God's Holy word. I'm open, in principle, to the notion that there's a better way to present that word, but I've not seen it in fact. Indeed, I can think of no better way to present Christ and His gifts than as we do here; I can think of no better space to present the truths of God, especially His love and mercy, than in a place like Zion.

And so I am humbled as your pastor, to be privileged to preach in a place like this, setting before your eyes the power of God for your salvation: the power and might of His Law, but especially the wonder and grace of the Trinity, of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son Your Savior, of your deliverance from sin and death, of your forgiveness in the Gospel and Sacraments, that we may ever worship the Blessed Holy Trinity in Spirit and truth. God grant that to us.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.