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The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Outdoor Service at St. John's Lutheran Church

Sermon
John 20:30-31

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

It's always a little different worshipping outside isn't it. It's not bad different, it's just different. We kind of get used to having a ceiling over our heads and a carpet on the floor and a real pulpit and a real altar. It's nice today, but it wouldn't be so since if it was 95 and humid and we certainly wouldn't want to be out here in January!

Worshipping outside wouldn't have seemed so different for the first Christians. They didn't have churches back then so their choices were limited. Worshipping on grass or sand was pretty normal. Sometimes they gathered in another believer's home. When they were running from persecutors they worshiped in caves. If they were arrested, they worshiped in prisons.

It doesn't really make much difference where we worship, does it. Going to church is going to church whether it's in a building made of bricks or a tent made of tarps, whether it's in a cathedral or a dungeon. Christians go to church and the place of worship isn't what attracts them. People go to church for a lot of reasons. Some people go to church because church is where they meet old friends or where they can meet new friends. Some people go to church because it seems like the right thing to do or because they want to do something good for God. And some people go to church because, well, they always go to church. Going to church gets to be a habit.

Of course, some people don't go to church and the place of worship isn't what keeps them away. People stay away for a lot of reasons. Some people have been burned by a dishonest or uncaring minister or insulted by another church member. Some people just don't get anything out of church—same old boring stuff every Sunday. Some people have more important things to do. And some people stay away from church because, well, they don't go to church. Skipping church gets to be a habit.

Remember this from when you were a little kid: "Here's the church, here's the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people." Cute; makes you smile. It works for a three-year old, but it doesn't really tell the whole story. Is church just about steeples and doors and people or is there more? What is Christian worship really all about? What's it for? That's what we want to talk about this morning. I'm going to answer that question with this passage from chapter 20 of St. John's Gospel. At the end of his biography of Jesus, John wrote: **Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.** So...

Here's the church; here's the steeple. Open the doors and...
Let's see what we find inside.

300 years passed after Jesus ascended before Christians started to build churches. But from the very beginning, even without churches, they always gathered for worship. The Bible tells us that the Christians **devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.** What the apostles taught was what Jesus had said and done during his time on earth. From the start, the focus of worship was always on Jesus. The apostles eventually died, but the New Testament writings appeared little by little and they focused on the same truths: what Jesus had said and what he had done. So Jesus was the focus of worship.

Things changed over the centuries. Some people built churches to be fortresses for armies, some constructed palaces for bishops, some built theaters to impress and arouse worshipers. The Bible wasn't always obvious and neither was Jesus. The Reformation brought a lot of people back to reality. Martin Luther wrote, "When the Word of God is not preached, you should neither pray nor sing nor come together." We agree. We believe that the Bible is the Word of God. We believe that the Bible, from beginning to end, is all about Jesus. So here's the church; here's the steeple. Open the doors and see... **Christ in the Scriptures.** That's why we go to church and that's why we worship. That's exactly what St. John wrote: **These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.**

When Jesus isn't in focus, the focus turns back on us and that's not a pretty sight. What I'm going to say now doesn't seem to be a nice thing to say on a beautiful July day with visitors here, but I have to say it because the Bible says it. We are all guilty of sinning and we are all destined to be punished. The Bible doesn't pull any punches about sin and hell, but we know this even without the Bible. Deep down we know that we don't do everything God wants us to do and that we do things God doesn't want us to do. And deep down we know there's a price to pay. Some people deny this, some people ignore it, some people laugh about it. But deep down we know what the Bible says is true: **The soul that sins shall die.**

That's exactly why worship is all about Jesus. Jesus solved the problem of sin and Jesus removed the threat of punishment. He lived without sinning and he placed his perfect record on our account. He took our place and endured the punishment we had coming. Because of Jesus, God forgives and forgets. God forgives us for sinning and he forgets about the punishment. From Genesis to Revelation this is what the Bible teaches: God sent his Son to take away the sins of the world—and he took away your sins, too.

If church is just about opinions or politics, if church does nothing more than excite us or instruct us, if church has no lasting solutions for real problems, what's the point of going? There is no point in going, period--and that's why more and more people aren't going. They're staying home from church these days and they have good reasons: Here is the church; here is the steeple. Open the doors and see...**nothing that matters.**

In the readings from the Bible and the sermon, in the hymns and the prayers, in the confession of sins and the confession of faith, church is all about Jesus. Opinions and politics and theatrics have no place. Church identifies real problems that Jesus solves because he loves us. That's good news and we call that good news the gospel. The gospel of Jesus is the center and core of Christian worship. It's the reason we come to church.

Of course, most of us have heard these stories about Jesus for as long as we can remember and the stories really do get told over and over again. But the good news about Jesus is a lot more than information. The gospel is power. It's kind of like this. I take a vitamin every day because I know it's good for me. I swallow it with water, it slides down my throat, and I never feel it again. That's how the gospel works. We hear the good news—there's no fanfare or fireworks—but in a quiet miracle that we don't understand the good news leads us to believe it. The gospel overcomes our doubt and our skepticism and even our disagreement. The gospel leads us to trust and believe that Jesus really and truly is our Savior and our Lord. Here is the church; here is the steeple. Open the doors and see...**the power of the gospel that leads us to faith.**

This faith in Jesus is what connects us to God. St. John wrote: **These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.** That's what Jesus gives us: life with God. A forgiven life, a contented life, a confident life, a hopeful life, a happy life, and a heaven-bound life. Faith provides blessings that money and pleasure can't give us; faith provides blessings that sickness and trouble can't take away.

Church does more than teach us facts; church proclaims truth that leads us to faith. And that's why we go to church; that's why we come to worship. That's why we come to church as often as we can. You don't take one vitamin tablet and throw the bottle away. It's the same with church. We come to church to recharge and rejuvenate our faith. The devil works hard to keep us from church. He'd just as soon our faith sputter and stall and shut down. He's had his way with a lot of people, even people we know and love. That's why church and the good news about Jesus which worship proclaims needs to be a priority in our own lives and it needs to be an invitation we share with others.

Here is the church; here is the steeple. Open the doors and see...all the people. People who listen to Jesus words, people who learn about Jesus' love, people who long for Jesus' blessings, people who have life with God. Be one of those people and your life with God will never end. Amen.