

PENTECOST 17, A – September 27, 2020
SCRIPTURES – 2 Kings 22:3-13; Phil. 2:1-4, 14-18; John 5:31-40

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me.” John 5

How we have been blessed here in God’s house this day! Can you imagine not having God’s words, and the opportunity to hear them and learn them that we have this day? We would quickly and easily we would fall into great sin and error. This happened to the people of Israel, as we hear in our reading from 2 Kings 22. How shocking to hear that, as the temple was being renovated and repaired, the Book of the Law – containing the books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible – was found. Imagine losing the Gospels and not being able to hear the words of and teaching about Jesus. How could Israel have lost God’s words? Well, for nearly 60 years evil kings had brought in false gods and false worship. The true God and Savior of Israel had been ignored; His temple made a place for statues of and altars for other gods and goddesses. Israel set aside, and then lost, God’s Word, and so fell into great sins... until the good King Josiah restored His worship and His true Word was found.

How thankful we should be that we have God’s true Word! Especially because Jesus tells us that it is all – every book of the Bible – about Him. Think about that. As you read and listen to the Bible, Jesus is speaking to you. As you take its words into your mind and heart, Jesus is filling you. And that is what has happened this morning. We are sinful people, sinful not only in our actions but even in our very thoughts and desires. And yet, Jesus, the holy and eternal Son of God, has come to us, filled us, forgiven us and raised us up for holiness of living, and blessed us with His eternal life! We have even received His holy body and blood, which was sacrificed for our sins and then raised from the dead, into our very bodies. How we have been blessed! And it is all through the words of the Bible. This is why we thank God for and support organizations like the Lutheran Bible Translators, for they are working hard to bring the Bible to people who have never had it in their own language. Be generous in giving a gift to LBT, our Mission of the Month!

What blessings the Bible brings! And yet, it also brings trouble. When the apostle Paul brought the message of Christ to the people who lived in the Roman city of Philippi, which was in northern Greece, many turned to believe in Jesus. His peace filled them. They learned to emulate Him in loving and caring for others. And yet, trouble also came. As they no longer joined in the worship of the gods and goddesses whose blessings for the city and its people were being sought, those Christians were seen as dangerous to society. As they no longer joined in the worship of the Emperor they were considered enemies of the state – even though they were respectful and careful to obey the laws. So it can be even for us at times today.

But, what was especially bad was the issue that arose that threatened to divide those Christians in Philippi from one another. You see, food that was used in worship rituals and offerings to false gods was later sold in the market. People served it in meals they shared with their friends and neighbors. Some of the Christians had no problem eating it. Others were bothered by it and offended if it was served to them. Those

Christians, who were already being looked down upon and even threatened by their neighbors, now began talking about and looking down upon one another. Their worship and life together in Christ was being threatened.

And so is ours. Trouble and division is threatening our Synod... our District... and our very own congregation. It is not anything outside of our church that is doing so. It is not the Bible; not different understandings of it. Thanks be to God, we are very united in this! What is threatening us is masks; the face coverings we have been wearing these past months because of the threat of the Coronavirus. Congregations in our Synod – even in CT – have had members leave because of how people wear masks in church. I've had many conversations with members of our own congregation about this. Our life in Christ together, our love and respect for one another, is being threatened. We all need to consider this and talk with one another about it. We must, for our Lord calls us to this. Our reading from Philippians – Paul's words to a congregation whose members were being divided – says:

“If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Ph. 2:1-4)

We are to live for one another! Let us talk about this.

What is required of you when it comes to wearing a mask? Our Governor has issued this mandate:

EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 7NNN, Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz (8/14/20)

Effective immediately, any person in a public place in Connecticut, whether indoors or outdoors, who does not maintain a safe social distance of approximately six feet from every other person shall cover their mouth and nose with a mask or cloth face-covering.

So: you must wear a mask if you are not socially distanced. This is why, since we resumed gathering for worship in late May, it is required that you wear a mask at church.

Can you ever take it off in church; as you can, for instance, at a restaurant? Can you lower it? These questions are what are threatening to divide us. What begins as an intellectual disagreement easily enters the heart, affecting what you think of another and feel about another. One person is assumed to not care... another to be a busybody.

What is the solution? To marshal your studies and cite your experts? Yes, pound your neighbor into submission... and don't be surprised when he hits back with his studies and experts. This will not unite us, but only further divide. How about making rules of our own? We can do so... but rules will not change our hearts and unite us.

Christian people often ask, “*What would Jesus do?*” How about we consider what Paul, the apostle personally chosen by Jesus, said to Christians who were being divided over whether or not certain foods could be eaten?

He didn't give a simple yes or no answer. You might think that would have been better, been clearer; but, it wouldn't have kept people from judging one another in their hearts. Instead, Paul said in Rom. 14:2-4: ***“One person believes he may eat anything, while [another] person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls.”*** You are not your neighbor's judge. God is. You do not know your neighbor's heart and mind. God does. Do not, then, think bad things about your brother or sister in Christ! If you have a concern about a fellow parishioner's mask-wearing, or expectations: don't just grumble about it, or about him. Talk to that person. Share what's on your mind, and learn what is on his. You both might learn something. Our oneness in Christ demands no less.

So: since there's no clear yes or no, right or wrong, you can do what you want, then, as long as you are within the letter of the Governor's mandate? You can wear your mask, or take it off, as you wish, as long as you are over 6' from anyone else? No. ***“Let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother,”*** Paul says (Rom. 14:13). He says to the Corinthians, who were also struggling with whether or not they could eat meat that had been used in idol worship: ***“Take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak... Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”*** (1 Cor. 8:9, 12-13) ***“How can I best care for my fellow Christian?”*** That is the question... not, “How can my fellow Christian best care for me.” And, this must not be our only concern. ***“Do we not have the right to eat and drink?... Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ,”*** Paul says. Our “rights” must never get in the way of people hearing the Gospel!

We are not only living here, folks; we are living for eternity. You are not only sitting near another person, a fellow member of St. Peter's; you are sitting next to Christ! ***“We are the Lord's,”*** Paul says in Rom. 14; so, as you deal with your fellow parishioner you are dealing with the Lord. On Judgment Day, Jesus will say, ***“Whatever you did to the least of my brothers, you did to me.”*** (Mt. 25)

So, whatever you do, ***“do all to the glory of God,”*** St. Paul says. ***“Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.”*** (1 Cor. 10:31-33) Then, ***“you [will] be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life.”*** (Ph. 2) By His Holy Spirit, may the Lord Jesus lead us in shining for Him and honoring our Father in heaven! Amen.