

Acts 16:16-34

16 One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. 17 While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you[d] a way of salvation." 18 She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

19 But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. 20 When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21 and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23 After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24 Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. 27 When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 The jailer[e] called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 They spoke the word of the Lord[f] to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34 He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Psalm 97

- 1 The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!
- 2 Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
- 3 Fire goes before him,
and consumes his adversaries on every side.
- 4 His lightnings light up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
- 5 The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
before the Lord of all the earth.
- 6 The heavens proclaim his righteousness;
and all the peoples behold his glory.
- 7 All worshipers of images are put to shame,
those who make their boast in worthless idols;

all gods bow down before him.
8 Zion hears and is glad,
and the towns[a] of Judah rejoice,
because of your judgments, O God.
9 For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.
10 The Lord loves those who hate[b] evil;
he guards the lives of his faithful;
he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.
11 Light dawns[c] for the righteous,
and joy for the upright in heart.
12 Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous,
and give thanks to his holy name!

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

12 "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

14 Blessed are those who wash their robes,[g] so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

16 "It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."

17 The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."
And let everyone who hears say, "Come."
And let everyone who is thirsty come.
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; 19 if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

20 The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

John 17:20-26

20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,[f] so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that

the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

25 "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Christ Lutheran Church: A fellowship living and sharing the love of God through worship, service, wellness, and hospitality.

Last summer, together we discerned this was a statement that summarized well God's mission amongst us and through us here in the New River Valley. We spent time as a council considering it and praying over it. We spent time as a congregation revising it and approving it. This is our agreed-upon identity, based in God's grace to us. Yet, over the past year, we've not spent much time talking through this, explaining what we mean by this, or putting together images and examples and applications of this mission statement. So, over the next few weeks, we'll take some time to consider the content of this statement in

detail. First, though, to ensure that we remember who we are and what we're called to be here at CLC, we'll begin each sermon time repeating this mission, beginning to memorize it, internalize it, so that God's mission becomes our mission. Let's say this together:

Christ Lutheran Church: A **fellowship** living and sharing the love of God through worship, service, wellness, and hospitality.

Today, we begin at the beginning. It's a very good place to start, I've heard, and we begin with fellowship. We're a fellowship. A ship of fellows. Fortunately, you don't have to be a fella to be a fellow. We're not a gender-exclusive or a community meant to exclude anybody. We're an inclusive, welcoming community of people from all sorts of places and spaces, with varied backgrounds and unique pieces of our persons. But that generic smile and

open-armed stance doesn't necessarily make us a fellowship. What does a fellowship look like?

Perhaps we need to ask another question first. What does the word fellowship even mean? For academics, a fellowship is a type of financial scholarship that allows someone to serve as a peer in higher education. Academic fellowship typically connect you with a wider community interested in researching a particular field or accomplishing a particular goal. For instance, Augsburg College recently developed a program called the Theology and Vocation Fellows that gathers pastors from around the country that are committed to helping young adults find God's involvement not just in their careers, but their entire lives. These fellows gather many times a year to encourage one another in their ministry, to strengthen their work amongst young adults, and to share that wisdom with the wider church. In other words, these kind of **fellowships gather**

people around a mutual interest that seeks to strengthen both the people who gather and the work that they do. As a fellowship, perhaps we too are gathered around a mutual interest – the love of Christ – to strengthen one another and our common work in living and sharing that love.

As a nerd, when the word fellowship comes up I also can't avoid the thought of The Lord of the Rings. A very diverse fellowship gathered with the purpose of defeating the evil that threatened the life and vibrancy of their land. A dwarf, an elf, four hobbits, two men, and a wizard – talk about a diverse group – bring varied skills and needs to this community that eventually destroys the terror of Saruman, Sauron, and the One Ring, a sort of evil anti-Trinity that wanted destruction and subservience rather than life, growth, and freedom. In other words, **fellowships of faith gather very different people to fight for the good in the face of opposition.** And yes, we're great a divergent group of

people, but we converge, we unify, we find fellowship together as we work for God's good will.

Now, we're not academics gathered for research, but we do gather for our mutual interest in ways that should strengthen our common work together. And we're not wizards, or elves, or dwarves, or hobbits, but we are very different people gathered to fight for the good in the face of all that opposes God's goodness. As a fellowship here at CLC, we're called to do life together in ways that strengthen us as individuals and as an assembly, as well as empower us to carry God's blessings to our community.

What does that look like for us? I think that Jesus' words in today's Gospel really enlighten the importance of unity to this process. Jesus prays that we may be one, as Jesus and the Father are one, that we may become completely one, so that the world may know that God loves the world and sent Jesus to prove that love. That sounds a lot like the first

part of our mission statement: a fellowship living and sharing the love of God.

Jesus prays for unity, and unity is an essential aspect of fellowship. We can't be a fellowship that's mutually beneficial if we're constantly divided against one another. We can't be a fellowship that's working toward a common goal if we're always more concerned with ourselves than others. We can't be a fellowship that's showing God's goodness in Jesus if we let our individualities separate us from one another. Jesus prays that we'll be united as he's united with the rest of the Trinity. One in purpose and in constant, selfless relationship. That's a fellowship.

This means that, as a fellowship, we're called to walk through the journeys of life together. On days like Mother's Day, we're called to both to celebrate and to suffer together. What I mean by that is we come together and celebrate the witness of the mothers, whether biological or

adoptive or surrogate or godparent, who've blessed us as reflections of God's mothering grace. At the same time, we also lament for those children who've grown up in abusive relationships from their mothers, for those couples who can't conceive the children they want or those who've lost children long before their time. This is how we live as a fellowship together across the differences of life.

While we're called to walk alongside one another in these kind of situations, to seek unity in everything, we must remember that unity doesn't mean sameness. Fellowship is about unity, not uniformity. We see that in Jesus' prayer to the Father that the church would be one as Jesus and the Father are one. They are united, but they surely aren't uniform. They both suffer the work of the cross. The Father suffers the loss of a child, and Jesus suffers death, but both are committed to offer grace through that act. That's unity, not uniformity. They both glory in the resurrection. Jesus

experiences it firsthand, the Father celebrates it, and the Holy Spirit makes it happen, yet all commit to that new life expanding to all creation. That's unity, not uniformity.

Fellowships work together toward common goals, but we don't all do the same things at the same times.

In fact, part of the beauty of unity, and of our fellowship here, is that only God could be responsible for the kind of unity we see in the church, that we're united and not the same. God's created so many of us in so many different images. We have different abilities as musicians and artists, some administrators and financial people, some good at painting and mulching and others good at cooking and cleaning. We're blue collar, white collar, clerical collar and no collar. We're different in gender and ethnicity, in age and in sexual identity and preference. We come with different abilities, with each of our bodies and minds able to do different things and experience the world in different

ways, and in all ways, none is more important than the other because we're all, each one of us, equal bearers and sharers of God's image, bound together by the love of Christ. This fellowship is anything but uniform! We're not the same, yet we're united as a fellowship called to live and share that love of Christ.

Jesus prays that we will be one so that the whole world might know of God's love. That's the vitality, the importance, the necessity of fellowship amongst us. We can't know the love of God if we don't live God's love united together. We can't share the love of God with others if we can't give the love of God to one another. As a fellowship, we must live together united with one another. We can't do anything else in our mission statement, not even truly know the love of God, much less live or share it, unless we're in fellowship with one another. To that end, I challenge you to get to know one another a bit more in the

coming weeks. Ask questions that you don't know of one another to help understand why we are who we are. Who are you named for? What's your favorite thing to do when you find some free time? Why do you choose to be a part of this fellowship? What are you passionate about? What is life-giving for you? Let's come together, uniting and embracing our differences so that we each get stronger in living and sharing the love of God. Amen.