

Preachers and Listeners, Pastors and Congregations, both are God's Creation and Possession

Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Trinity: August 30, 2020

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 3:9-15



⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and



someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Preachers and listeners, pastors and congregations, both are God's creation and possession. For both, everything depends on building upon God's foundation of salvation, on being established on the eternal foundation: Jesus Christ! Judgement day will make it clear if Jesus Christ was our everything or if we also built foundations on matters and hopes that were outside of Christ. In this way, one could try to summarize what the Apostle Paul writes, as it relates to us.

What sounds proud is not meant as being proud at all. You must hear to the tone of humility and gratitude that runs through everything that seems to be pride: "According to the grace of God given to me, Like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation." I was given the gift of being the first to bring the message of the Gospel to Corinth! God's guidance chose me for this. And God's grace gave me the wisdom and the strength to adapt myself to the Jews and Greeks as was necessary and permissible and yet to witness clearly, articulately, and effectively where and how eternal salvation can be found: in Jesus Christ alone! Through faith alone in Him! There is no arrogance in the other sentence in which Paul joins forces with all the prophets who preached in Corinth at the time and with all the apostles and ministers of Christianity: "we are God's fellow workers!" We, who preach the Gospel are involved in God's work of salvation. We are active in sharing the forgiveness of sins, life, and blessings! This is not showing off or the posture of an enlarged ego saying: we are the kind of people God can use! Or even: God is officially dependent on us! Without us, everything that He is doing would break down! On the contrary: "We are God's fellow workers!" The apostle says that with grateful astonishment. God wanted us! Understand that if you can! We were and are basically not useful, but Jesus Christ took hold of us, called us into His service, and made us useful. He has called, blessed, and sent us! To God alone be the glory! This also defined for all the other Apostles the awareness of their office. And only in this way, according to the apostolic archetype and model, can pastors today properly understand and navigate their office. They reflect on Christ's Call that was enacted on them at their ordination to the Holy

Ministry. That comforts and strengthens them when they want to give in to despair. We daily call upon the One who called us and we ask: Lord, make us obedient, faithful, and strong to remain in and under Your Word! And we give thanks: Yes, Lord, we thank you that we may serve You in Your Church. We thank You that You don't leave us alone in the wonderful responsibility of providing Your people with Your Word and Sacrament! The congregation is not there for the sake of the pastor, it's much rather the opposite: the pastors are there for the sake of the congregation! And both together for the Lord! Everything is God's creation and possession!

There are two images that the apostle uses to describe the character and dignity of Christ's Church: God's field and God's building. He could have also said: the planting, God's garden, and God's temple. In any case it is always God's! Through His fellow workers, the Lord is active in the field and effective in building. The Word of reconciliation is spoken through the mouth of humans. Holy Baptism is administered, and the Bread of Life is distributed by human hands. And yet it remains the Word of the Lord, the washing of rebirth, established by the Lord and filled with power, and it remains the table of the Lord with the body and blood of the Son of God in the blessed bread and wine!

So the church, that lives by these gifts of God, is entirely the creation and possession of the Lord! When a congregation has realized this, it becomes free from fearful and worrying introspection. Are things looking up? Are things looking bad? Are things moving forwards? Or are they moving backwards? Do we have a future? Do not have none? That should be the worry of the One to whom we belong! Our concern should be that His Word dwells richly among us and to pass it on invitingly. Then the Lord will stand by His work and increase His possession. He will never leave us or forsake us, and not because He would be concerned about good statistics for us, but because His holy love doesn't rest or stop. It doesn't allow for breaks. It wants to continue the circle and add people who want to feed and live upon the abundance of His house.

God's field, God's building! Dear brothers and sisters. Therein is also this: we have not made ourselves Christians, and we don't remain Christians because we have by nature a special sense and taste for all things Christian. That would be nonsense. The people outside of the Church see it something like this: those who come together in the Church are people, who are somehow very religious, kindred spirits, who are drawn to one another, Jesus Christ fans. But if that was the only thing to hold us together, we would have long ago diverged from one another as very different people. What keeps us together with HIM and at the same time together as a congregation, is that our Lord acted on us when we were not yet able to think about ourselves, value ourselves, and place ourselves somewhere: He made each of us His own through Holy Baptism. Planted as new Christ-plants in God's holy field, added as living stones into the divine structure of Christ's Church.

As I said: the apostle speaks of Christ's Church using two community terms: God's field and God's building! He could also have spoken about many plants and many stones, which would not be wrong because in Baptism, Christ makes each individual His own, and in the faith He gives us, no one can stand in for another. Faith is a very personal thing. But our Lord has never placed the many baptized and believers in a relationship with just Himself, isolated from one another, left alone in the Christian life. By binding people to Himself, He includes them from the start also in a community, together in His Church. Yes, everyone is baptized on their own head, called by their own distinct name, enlightened to faith in their own heart. And yet, it is not first through their own special decision but rather from the ground up and from the very beginning they belong to the fellowship of faith and love, to the Body of Christ, to the

Church whose Head and Lord is Jesus Christ. All good gifts and power flow to us from Him, the Head of the body, and with these we strengthen, support, serve, love, and encourage one another.

God doesn't make those of us who are in Christ into a faceless crowd in which the individual disappears, but neither does He make us into a loose-knit group of loners whose interest in one another is left to choice and chance. We belong to Christ the Lord and are His Church. There, no one believes, wanders, lives, or dies alone in the fog. Everything happens in the hand of Christ the Lord and in the caring and intercessory fellowship of the Church.

Above all there is the wonderful and important sentence: "For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ!" God Himself has laid this foundation from which all salvation proceeds, and upon which alone the Church is built and exists, to the perfection of the kingdom of God. Christ alone is the Redeemer and Savior. Whoever abandons this foundation is lost! Pastors, as preachers and spiritual caregivers, must always keep this in mind and be guided by it. It all comes down to making the Savior and Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, great and beloved by the congregation! And that we all concentrate fully on Him, our Savior and Lord, and to not want to know anything regarding matters of faith and our salvation from any other source! For He, and only He, is "to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption." (1 Cor. 1:30)

Jesus Christ must permeate and dominate all our searching in the Scriptures and all our preaching. And a congregation may demand of its pastor: preach Him to us and not a thousand other things! Help us to stand firmly on the eternal foundation of God. The day of Judgement will make it clear if Jesus Christ was our everything or if we let topics, works and hopes outside of Christ be mixed into our preaching and our faith.

God, protect us from any alienation and distortion of the Gospel! He binds us, as preacher and congregation, as fellowship and as individuals, firmly and exclusively to His dear Son! He makes us all skilled and willing to pass on our pure faith in Christ to all people. Amen.