

What Is the Value of the Church?

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday after Trinity Sunday

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 14:1-12, 23-25



Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. ² For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. ³ On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ⁴ The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. ⁵ Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up. ⁶ Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how

will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation of knowledge of prophecy or teaching? ⁷ If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? ⁸ And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, ¹¹ but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. ¹² So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.... ²³ If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵ the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

Everything in the world has a price. A roll that I buy at the bakery has a price of about 15 to 25 cents, depending on which type of roll I want. But if I ask people who don't have enough to eat, they know that their whole future depends on this one roll. In a similar manner, you can set a different value on almost everything, depending on who you ask. The following little story is about this idea: a doctor by the name of Henry was invited by his friend to dinner. Coincidentally, this friend almost choked at this same meal.

For a fishbone got stuck in his throat. Fortunately, the good Doctor Henry was there. He forcefully hugged his friend while he pushed his hand very firmly on the ribcage, so that the fishbone could get out. After Henry's friend could breathe again, he was eternally grateful and wanted to pay his friend now for this medical assistance. And there he asked him what he would owe for this medical intervention. Henry Heimlich immediately answered: Please give me as much money as you would have given me when you thought that you would choke and die because of the fishbone. Since then, this procedure, which one also learns in a first aid class, is called "Heimlich's Maneuver." I think it's also worthwhile to ask the question of value in Church. What is the Church worth to me? What is the Church worth to me 5 minutes before Jesus comes again? And what is the Church worth to me if I'm not in the mood to wake up on a rainy day or after a long party? I can best understand the worth of Church if I know what I'm getting. We seem to forget that all that time. Or we change the church so that only the external framework remains, and the substance or the most important thing is missing. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wants the congregation in Corinth to remember what is of most value in the Church. For precisely in this question, the Corinthians had an entirely false understanding. This congregation had actually put the unimportant things first, as if these things were the most important. Similarly, the Corinthians did everything wrong on many points. They favored the rich. And even in the Divine Service itself, they placed spiritual gifts that impressed ahead of everything else. The Divine Service became a great production. The consequence was that congregation members downright pushed their way to the front during worship so that they could show off their spiritual gifts! Similarly, they could also show off their wealth. There were literal competitions of who could be the best Christian! And like with all competitions, there was a winner and a loser. There were people in the congregation who were honored and some that were despised. The message of Jesus was no longer recognizable in this congregation. It was hardly recognizable as a church anymore, and therefore outsiders couldn't understand what the whole thing was supposed to be about. Jesus had regarded completely different things as important: He had made the least great and the great small. And he explained over and over again that we Christians should serve one another in love and not fight with one another, nor should we compete with one another. He did that so that it would be clear that we Christians all live only by the the grace of God. It doesn't make any difference what language we speak. It doesn't make any difference how rich or poor we are. It doesn't make any difference from which country I come. We are all one in Christ. That's why in the Christian church, there may never be better or worse Christians. There also may not be a list ranking who did the best things and who didn't. That's why Paul also had to clarify which gifts in the congregation are important and which gifts are less important. In the 13th chapter, which was written shortly before our text, Paul showed what the greatest and most important gift of the church is. That is love. Paul devotes an entire chapter for this love and promotes it. Love is patient and kind. It does not envy or boast. The apostle Paul describes these things and shows us and the Corinthians that love should be the most important characteristic of us Christians. When Paul speaks like this about love, then he always means foremost the love of God to us. Only those who are loved can pass this love on. Love begins with God. Yes, in the Divine Service, it's only all about God. If God is not there, the most important thing is missing. If God is not there in our Divine Service, I might as well go to the soccer club or another club. It is God who meets us in the Divine Service. And everything that we do must be understood under this objective. When we talk about the shape of our God. Or when we talk about the language of our Divine Service or when we talk about the style of music, then we must constantly ask this question: Why do we do this and how do our actions fulfill the purpose of meeting God in the Divine Service? And when we meet this God in the Divine Service, then I know

that He not only meets me but all the others around me. Old and young people. People of many different languages. People with many different backgrounds. One perhaps just became a Christian recently. Another was already a Christian since birth. One may struggle with a sin from which it is difficult to be free. Someone else is sick again and doesn't know how his or her life will go on. Our church is composed of so many people. Every Sunday, they find themselves here together. And it is good that God distributes the gifts so differently among us Christians. It matches the colorful variety that God thought of already at Creation. Our congregation is not just a vase with single-colored flowers, rather we have many very differently colored flowers. And only in the variety and in the colorful togetherness does the bouquet look beautiful. That's why when I go to the Divine Service, I also look to my neighbor and wonder how he or she is doing. I pay attention to whether he or she understands everything that goes on in the Divine Service. And my concern is not allowed to just stop at the church doors, but must also be carried on and radiated in everyday life.

In our sermon text today, the apostle Paul promotes the understanding of the message of God. The congregation in Corinth had fixated themselves so much on the language of the angels that they had forgotten its content. They had fixated themselves on the amazing spiritual event with thinking about what was even spoken and what the meaning is. The mistake of the Corinthians can happen to us all. What belongs to our Divine Service and what is its value? It is still this: God is there! God speaks with us! And He meets us in the flesh through Christ. We receive Him physically at Communion together with all other Christians. Time and again, I bow to God's Word and listen to Him. And from this speaking of God, God Himself opens my heart so that I can also open my ears to other people. Listening to God, listening to one another. That is value that really can't be measured or judged. Amen.