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Acts 20:17-35

Christ Alive Series: "Proclaim and Live Faithfully"

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If you've been noticing a lot of new faces around our church, that's good. You're paying attention! This weekend we are welcoming 53 adults as new members of Hope Lutheran, along with 36 children and youth. Pastor Lew and I are really enjoying getting to know all of these newcomers, and I know you will, as well. They're an extremely lively, inquisitive, diverse, community-minded group. So they'll fit right in, won't they?

Will these new members find everything to be perfect here at Hope? No, of course not. We have our challenges and our weaknesses, as a church. And we can't promise that every day here will be filled with thrills and adventures. But when we remain focused on our mission – when we stay true to what our Lord Jesus Christ is calling us to do as a church – then we definitely experience joy, harmony, and growth together.

And that's what we want for our new members, and for our old members, too. If all we had to offer here at Hope was turmoil, suffering, and persecution, I don't think we'd get too many new members to sign on, do you?

Last week we talked about a man named Saul, who signed on to become a Christian. Saul was violently opposed to Christianity, and he thought Christ was a complete fraud. Until the resurrected Lord Jesus appeared to him in a miraculous way, and called him to be a missionary apostle.

But Saul wasn't given an easy job. He wasn't called to a laid-back vocation, and a comfortable lifestyle. In fact, Jesus said of his new convert, "He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the

children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

In other words, “Welcome to the ministry, Saul. Now I’m going to show you how much you’ll have to suffer as a Christian!”

And suffer he did. Saul, also known as Paul, experienced tremendous resistance. He was threatened, vilified, beaten, chased out of several towns, arrested in others, and put on trial – all for doing the work Jesus called him to do. He traveled far and wide, telling people about Jesus, and planting new Christian churches. It was dangerous, difficult, stressful work. Paul didn’t have it easy. But Paul was faithful to his Lord, faithful to his work, faithful to his mission.

Toward the end of his ministry years, Paul hears the Holy Spirit telling him to travel back to Jerusalem. A scary place for Paul. His greatest enemies are there. But that’s where God wants him to be, so Paul gets ready to go. Just before leaving, he holds a meeting with the elders and overseers of the church in Ephesus. These were probably the pastors and lay leaders of the church. We hear his farewell words in our First Lesson today, Acts 20.

Paul says, “I know it’s dangerous, but I’ve got to go. Now I’m leaving you here, and you have an important job to do. Just as I did among you, now you need to proclaim and live the Word and love of Christ **faithfully**.” Paul warns them, “You’re going to face persecutions. Fierce wolves will come in among you. And you’ve got to guard against false teachings, men speaking twisted things. Your ministry isn’t always going to be easy, either, just like mine. So be careful! Be vigilant! Be consistent and be precise with your message! Be faithful!”

On this New Member Weekend at Hope, I think there’s a compelling message for us in Paul’s words. Our church’s

mission statement says: “The people of Hope Lutheran Church proclaim and live the Word and love of Christ.” Paul reminds us today that we need to carry out that mission **faithfully**. Proclaim and live the Word and love of Christ **faithfully**.

And it’s not always going to be easy for us, either. I appreciate Paul’s message today. To be faithful in our mission today is a real challenge, for many reasons.

We live in a culture that is moving so swiftly, changing so quickly, shifting away from any semblance of Christian morals and values. Our culture is careening away from God in all sorts of ways, picking up speed. With all that going on around us, faithful proclamation and living out of the Word and love of Christ is definitely needed; but it’s definitely not getting easier.

Even the Christian climate around us is quickly changing. There’s a strong move away from Biblical authority in most major denominations, and in the hearts of many individual Christians. More and more Christians just don’t take the Bible all that seriously, as a source of spiritual authority. So when it’s time to sort out some of the challenging topics and issues in American society, many Christians and many Christian churches end up just going with the flow. It’s easier to accept and adopt cultural standards, cultural morals, and cultural trends than it is to take seriously and to wrestle with what God has to say.

What about us? Proclaim and live the Word and love of Christ **faithfully**, Paul encourages. That doesn’t mean that we should be, like some Christian churches are, judgmental, strident, exclusionary, constantly on the attack against society. Jesus wasn’t that way. We need to be faithful to our Biblical principles, but to do so in a way that’s faithful to Christ: loving, compassionate, grace-sharing. To be faithful to our mission is to be Christ-like towards others. That

means caring enough about the wayward souls and the unchurched people out there to actually love them, talk to them, embrace them, welcome them, just as Christ did. Christ has love for sinners like us. And he calls his church today to proclaim and live his Word and his love to others ***faithfully***.

I say to you new members of Hope, and to the long-time members, it's not always going to be easy. We need wisdom. We need discernment. We need harmony. We need generosity. We need energy. We need commitment.

Most of all, to do our work ***faithfully***, we need the living Christ to help us. Thank God, because Christ is alive in this place! Christ, empower our witness! Christ, strengthen our fellowship! Christ, deepen our faith! Christ, teach us that it's better to give than to receive! Christ, keep our church focused on your mission! Christ, reconcile our differences, and forgive our shortcomings.

People of Hope, we find what we need in Christ: both as sinners coming into God's holy presence, and as the church, going forth from here to carry out our mission.

May Christ alive help us always to do it ***faithfully***. Amen.