

Sermon on 1. Thessalonians 1, 4-7 +3,9-13, 08.01.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Dear Congregation,

how does one measure the worth of a Church Congregation? Have you ever asked yourself this question? What is the worth of the Martin Luther Congregation?

How do we determine its worth? Is it our possessions, the value of the building, for instance, which appears in the insurance documents? If that were the determining factor, we would be millionaires, for the Church, the property and the parsonage have constantly increased in value; therefore, as far as this is concerned, we are well off.

However, is this the right standard? Is it our financial fortune? Our donation amount? Or that which we give others to support them?

Is our worth to be measured by what people in and outside of our congregation think of us? Our worth of sympathy for others? Is our worth to be measured by the contentment of our congregational members or by what we do for the people around us? Is the worth of the congregation determined by how much we support the Synod or by whether we accept universal Church challenges?

You may already ask yourself in all this, what the sense of this question is supposed to be? Why do I speak about the value of our congregation here? What about it?

Dear Congregation, this morning we have a sermon text which actually wants to plumb the meaning of a congregation. It is about a congregation which Paul himself has founded. It is the congregation of Thessalonians. This town is still in existence today, it is the second-largest city in Greece today, with more than 1 million inhabitants. I have been there once, however, only at the airport, and I can tell you, that Thessaloniki possesses one of the shortest runways in Europe, and, on flying in there, one learns to pray involuntarily.

Paul has gone there and, according to the Acts of the Apostles 17, tries to win Jews for the Christian faith in the Synagogue. That did not work out, however, because only a few Jews were there who could be convinced, instead, some heathen-Christians followed them, these were Greeks. That, however, led to an uproar, and in the end Timothy traveled to that region and kept him up to date with what was happening. Paul is, therefore, well informed. This letter is also the oldest piece of scripture of the New Testament. The letter is written in the year 50 by Paul's own hand. It captures the relationship with congregation, but also speaks about – here it comes – what determines the worth of a congregation. I read to you two paragraphs. One from chapter 1 and one from chapter 3:

Text:

4 For we know, brethren beloved of God, that he has chosen you; 5 for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction; you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit; :7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

9 For what thanksgiving can we render to God for you, for all the joy which we feel for your sakes before our God; 10 praying earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?11 Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you;:12 and may the

Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another, and to all men, even as we do to you; 13 so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Amen.

This congregation is an example, yet, they have neither money, nor – probably – a building. And although, as we learn from Acts 17: “not a few of the leading women” belonged to this congregation, this must not misconstrue the fact that people in the city had a skeptical view of this congregation. However, hereby is also expressed that, as so often, it is the women who form the backbone of the Christian congregation. Many men could consider this as an example.

The congregation distinguishes itself neither by collecting many donations nor by having a great influence on society. They do not advertise, for that did not exist at the time. They have no parsonage and no permanent employees – not even a permanent Pastor, for Silas and Timothy have to observe, of course, other duties, too.

What is it then that Paul praises? And why is the congregation an example for others – also for us? – First of all, this has to do with something the congregation itself cannot help: They are chosen. I want to explain that in this way:

I know that is important to many of you, that I, as Pastor, not only carry out a job, but, that I am someone who – thank God! – can say about himself: I am chosen for this mission. And when one truly thinks about this, it is not something that distinguishes me or that I have earned, but it has to do with God who has intended me for something which I have not recognized for a long time, actually, I did not want it, did not think that I could ever do it. In spite of this, he led me along this road because he – not I – HE had something in mind for me. It is not necessarily always exactly the same, when someone is chosen, this is the story of Stefan Wolf. For others it is a certain moment in life, that gives them full assurance that they want to become a Pastor. Some have always had the desire to work in this profession, but whatever it is, it has to do with the fact that the profession of a Pastor is an answer to God’s appointment. I also claim that, when it is about Pastors, this can be felt. One can recognize whether someone merely works in a profession or whether he is chosen. This does not mean that one has always success, or that everything is always easy, or a Pastor is always burning with fervour, or always finds joy in his work. One notices, however, whether the well-being of the congregation, the desire to live according to God’s calling, stands above the personal interest or the personal motivation – just think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer – or one’s own life. This is surely an extreme case, yet, it has to do with the calling and the attitude towards faith.

Recently, I have heard the admittedly harsh judgement that there are only two kinds of Pastors: Those who think only of themselves and those, who first think of their congregation. If this is so and in what way, you as the congregation have to judge.

I have chosen this example of calling, as I think that this, which concerns the calling, is not only meant for the Pastors but also for the congregation. There are differences here, too. It can be felt, whether a congregation regards itself as irresistible or whether a congregation merely tries to determine God’s plans and realize them.

Meant is here what is called ‘credibility’. When I see Benny Hinn on Television, I doubt this credibility, because the feeling creeps up on me permanently that the individual is indeed no longer important, that for a long time it is not about asking oneself critically, what the mission of these evangelistic organizations can be, but that it is only about figures: about money and about the numbers of viewers.

To understand this even more clearly, let us look at the sermon text again: The congregation shall, before everything else, be clear on this, that it is loved *by God and chosen*. How can one determine this?

Through what it says here, that “*our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction... You... having received the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit; :7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.*

A congregation that is chosen and called, does not acknowledge God merely superficially. A called and chosen congregation is seriously interested in the Bible. A called and chosen congregation does not hammer out empty religious phrases that have no meaning or rotates around itself. A chosen and called congregation experiences that God's word gives strength, determines its decisions, gives security, joy, comfort in hard times. It experiences that this word is alive in the congregation through the Holy Spirit, that Sunday School, confirmation instruction, deaconry and Bible study are, indeed, not merely programs of duty, but form the backbone of congregational life. It is about a congregation being enthusiastic about God, that the Church Service is the centre of congregational and personal life, and that one can hardly wait for the moment, until one can gather again with others under God's Word, that one finds joy in Gods' Word and holds fast to it, even though sometimes life does not look so rosy.

What does that have to do with us? I better clear this up, otherwise people have the impression that I am dissatisfied with something. I find joy in this congregation, this I want to say beforehand. Especially through the anniversary or Christmas and the recent Church Services, I have felt how proud I am of this congregation. This pride has nothing to do with the fact that much, not everything, was a success or that many people came. It has something to do with total strangers telling me: We feel the warmth that is present, when we come into this Church, that people speak to us and receive us in a friendly manner. For me, this is an example, which makes it clear that it is not just about us, but that we have understood, that God opens his doors also through this congregation and that he wants every person. As we are messengers of Jesus Christ, we are indeed responsible for people feeling welcome, that people develop a feeling here, that they come home.

I am glad, that in time, we have also engaged more and more in conversations and found out how much we can enrich each other through our faith, through our praying for others, through questions and answers.

What makes me feel glad about the congregation in Thessaloniki is the naturalness of their faith. It does not appear tense or put on, but self-evident and confident. But at the same time, they certainly take the advice of the Apostle seriously, that they should keep growing in faith.

10 praying earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? 11 Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you; 12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another, and to all men...

If we are honest, we know that in this respect also, there is still something left for us to do. There is much, that we do not know about faith and the Bible. Among us, too, there is still, in view of love among ourselves and towards everyone, potential for growth. Do you not think so? I want us to take this truly seriously, recognize it as our mission, and not merely say yes, yes and then forget it again quickly. I think that during this year we must – we, not only I, direct the congregational work so that the imparting of faith, as we understand it in our Lutheran tradition, be put into the centre to a higher degree than until now. All else must serve as an aid to this, must be a frame, so that we can devote ourselves with calmness and intensity to God's Word. I must continue preaching about this point next Sunday, as there is not enough time today. What we should learn today is, that our role model must be a congregation as the one in Thessaloniki. A congregation that has substance, because in the people one can detect faith, love and the joy in God's Word. A congregation, which is certain in regards to its mission, that cares for others and practices love. But foremost a congregation which rejoices in the fact that God has chosen it and loves it. From this point on, everything else will follow. Amen.

And the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.