

Sermon on 2. Thessalonians, 15.01.2006

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,

Do you remember? Last Sunday we have become acquainted with the congregation in Thessaloniki. In our still continuing journey through the Biblical books, we had arrived at this oldest letter of the New Testament. Paul has founded this congregation after some difficulties with the congregation of the synagogue and the citizens. Women and heathens of Greek descent form the core of the congregation. Paul praises the congregation for not just believing superficially, but for apparently taking God's Word to heart. He tells the congregation that it has been chosen. Just as individual persons can be taken into service by God, because they are chosen by him, then this also applies to the whole congregation. And we have heard that actually everything goes quite well, and Paul is very satisfied with the things that happen there. Everything sounded alright.

We now take a leap into the future. Only twenty years later, a student of Paul writes this letter to the congregation:

6)Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living disorderly and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. 7)For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, 8)we did not eat any one's bread without paying, but with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. 9)It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct an example to imitate. 10)For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If any one will not work, let him not eat. 11)For we hear that some of you are living disorderly, mere busybodies, not doing any work. 12)Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. 13)Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing. 14)If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. 15)Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. 16)Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with you all!

What is all this? What has happened? There are some who live "disorderly". I have looked up the meaning of "disorderly", because one could think that these people perhaps don't clean up at home or something. That, however, is not meant here. 'Ataktos', this Greek word describes someone living licentious, avoids work and is idle.

They have given in to dawdling. Some in the congregation slave away, try to further the congregational life and others put their hands into their laps – how can that be, particularly in a congregation, where everything had worked out so wonderfully, all were joyful and enthusiastic Christians. Now, upon the suggestion of this letter, one is supposed to avoid others, to part from one another. There is a crisis which one cannot solve any more. There is nothing one can do. Keep away from one another!

How could this happen, how could things go that far?

Here is an attempt for an answer: In the congregation, apparently, everyday life has begun. The first enthusiasm has exhausted itself. After accepting God's Word with joy and with the Holy Spirit, and becoming an example in all of Macedonia and Achaia, as we have heard in the first letter, one is probably glad that this example of laziness does not make headlines. It is probably the case that some people in the congregation have selected part of the Christian message, and in the expectation, that Jesus could return any moment, put their hands into their laps.

In opposition to what Martin Luther has said once, actually not planting an apple tree if the world perished tomorrow, but to live according to the motto: The world perishes tomorrow, so today, I rather put my legs up.

Some people change the message to fit themselves. And the conflict that arises through this is of this nature, that some work and make an effort, accomplish something in the congregation, and the others claim this gratefully, but they do not lift a finger. I cannot go into great detail here concerning the fact that the social conditions were very different from ours today. At that time, one worked indeed to have something to eat. Whoever could and wanted to work, did find work, contrary to today, where firms send people into unemployment for reasons of profit maximization and the 'shareholder values'. In the congregation it is the case that, because of Christian love for the neighbour, one still feels obligated to help all others, and, indeed, also those, who don't do anything, and as a result, have nothing. That is in order, as long as one does not have a lot of people all of a sudden, who always just take, and don't see that they themselves should lend a hand or that something is given back, a thank-you, an action, something, that helps the congregation in some way to fulfill its mission.

There was a time when the cup overflowed. – "Why do we slave away and others do absolutely nothing?" – Apparently, one can only give this advice: Stop now, this cannot go on, part from one another.

What has that to do with us? We are really not disorderly or lazy in the congregation. Among us there is no one who finds an excuse in the message of the return of Christ to do nothing. I have also never heard of any one who goes to the employment office and answers to the question, why he does not work: Who knows, tomorrow the world perishes and then I have worked quite in vain today. One would probably send a person like that to a doctor first!

And yet, dear Congregation, one has to look at this, when, within 20 years, a congregation weakens to this extent. There is certainly something in this, that can be a warning also for us. How can we avoid the same thing happening to us? What goes wrong in Thessaloniki, that we, if we recognize it in time, can avoid?

Going through the letter, one reads things like:

- Your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one for one another is increasing.
- We boast of you for your faith and patience.
- But one also finds out that they are persecuted, that the congregation endures afflictions from the outside and that the Apostles pray that the congregation may be worthy of God's call.
- There is the adversary, and no one should be deceived by him.
- There are warnings that one should hold fast to the teachings, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, it says.
- The Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from evil.

Not everything, then, is bad. But apparently, the conduct of one group is sufficient to bring about difficulties for the total congregation. We do not know how many there are who are disorderly and thereby live at the expense of the congregation, but we know that this has driven a wedge into the congregation. Indeed, not all hold fast to the Word of God and have remained enthusiastic Christians, who are totally convinced that, through God's will, they have a mission in the world and therefore one has to roll up one's sleeves.

Dear Congregation,

It is clear to everyone of us, that in a congregation also nothing comes from nothing! I want to devote a moment to what we must pay attention that, let's say at the 75th anniversary, we are not in the same position as the congregation in Thessaloniki.

I think, in the last years, we have experienced that God has given us much joy in our congregational life. It is also the case, that the congregation has grown in numbers. We could and had to do much work on the building. We have also experienced that God places decisions before us, we had to ask ourselves, whether we go the extra mile, engage ourselves in places which we had not considered before. Brazil, the approach of the City of Toronto, to expand the day care, all things which required a special effort.

Time and again, the feeling crept up on me in the past years, whether we can handle everything that we did. I have seen very often that always the same people worked endlessly, had to be there again and again to further projects and to resolve conflicts. Everything that we do, has to do with work, with engagement.

What happens, when there are always just the same people? I have had conversations with people who have told me very clearly: I can do it no longer, I don't want to any longer, I have to cut back, I have to think of myself sometimes, and I have said: I understand this. Think of yourself, be egotistical for once. People have than had a break from congregational work, which was good for them. And after a while, some of them have engaged themselves again and have helped.

I have, of course, asked myself during these phases, which, after the Church window project, happened more frequently, how we solve this problem. It will never happen that we have nothing more to do in a congregation. An active congregation has always work, and in a congregation, where everything goes well, new projects always come along, one is always asked from the outside, whether one can take part. In our congregation, there is still no Seniors' Home, which meets our expectations, and still no permanent youth work. There is still much left to do. But who does it?

One first silver lining on the horizon was the anniversary. There were, for the first time in all this time so many helpers, that one had to think about where to place them. We have needed them all. And hopefully we have also learned, that it would not have worked out so well without every single one of them.

How does one stabilize congregational life in a way so that one has always enough support, and that not one day those who are active say: That is it, I cannot go on?

In a congregation, as in any other group of people, to, engagement does not happen by exerting enough pressure, then people will at last give in. What would it bring, dear Congregation, if someone takes part with gnashing teeth, just because we have persuaded him? After all, it ought to radiate to the outside that we find joy in what we do.

The principle of our work in the congregation is the principle of solidarity. And that does not start with working here, donating, and taking part. The root of Church affiliated congregational solidarity lies in our faith and in our being addressed by God. It is about our attitude, which, indeed, should not be same as in an association or club.

Why are we here? Because we find it is nice, because we like to be with others, because the Church is so beautiful? – We are here, because God has something in mind for us. – I also experience here among us still very often, that people tell me at great length, what they would like to have changed. It is important for me that we do this and that and that you ought to remember that you do this in that way. Do something for the elderly, do something for the young, preach in German, preach in English, no, at any rate, do not change anything on Christmas Eve, oh, this was the best Christmas that we have had till now. It is nice to have so many advisors. It would be even nicer to have just as many active co-workers.

Listen, it does not bother me that or what people tell me. What bothers me is the attitude which many of us have, which is like going to a concert: I pay the ticket and am entitled to two hours of program. In a Church congregation there are no consumers. Service – return service is the wrong approach. This is, however, human, but not God's plan.

The best and shortest, what a congregation ought to be and what every Christian can contribute, is written in the catechism, with which I grew up:

There it says:

What do you believe concerning the holy Christian church?

That the Son of God from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves to himself by his Spirit and word, out of the whole human race, a church chosen to everlasting life, agreeing in true faith; and that I am and for ever shall remain, a living member thereof.

What do you understand by the communion of saints?

First, that all and every one, who believes, being members of Christ, are in common, partakers of him, and of all his riches and gifts; secondly, that every one must know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts, for the advantage and salvation of other members.

You are not a consumer. You do not pay a membership fee, and that's it. I am, as a member of this congregation, someone, who has a part in Christ bringing people together into a congregation. He is acting and I am a living member of this group, which he gathers, defends and preserves. We have part in what he does for us. We have neither right nor claim to this. We should not just simply expect this but be thankful for it. And this is my duty, as it says here, to use my gifts readily and cheerfully for the advantage of other members. I liked the old translation, where it said, that one needs to consider oneself guilty to use one's gifts. And this is the Biblical concept.

James 4, 17: Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. And that means: Whoever does not engage himself, is guilty before God. And even in this letter, in spite of the laziness of the others, it says: *13) Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing.*

This is the pivotal and anchor point. This is the question which is put to each and every one of us: Do we contribute what we can contribute? Are we doing what we can, so that GOD can fulfill his work in this world through this congregation? What can I contribute? Just think about this until next Sunday. Then, I will also give you a few suggestions concerning this. Amen.

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