

St. Silas State of the Congregation Address

Sexagesima A+D 2017 | Rev. Andrew Richard | St. Silas Lutheran Church | North Liberty, IA

The History of St. Silas Lutheran Church

In 2009 conversation began at St. Paul Lutheran Chapel in Iowa City about planting a congregation in North Liberty. Pastor Max Mons has some parishioners who live in North Liberty and who wondered why we didn't have a congregation here. North Liberty had a rapidly growing population: it more than doubled in size from the years 2000 to 2010. And at that time Johnson County as a whole was 62% unchurched. Iowa District East of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod put together a subsidy plan to fund a new congregation in North Liberty, giving a rather generous length of time for it to become self-sustaining. The district also asked St. Paul to serve as the mother congregation: to help the daughter congregation with the practical matters of managing money, becoming a legal entity, and so forth. St. Paul named the daughter congregation St. Silas Lutheran Church (other suggested names had been St. Barnabas and Risen Savior). The district had a promotional video filmed for St. Silas. The video has a very hopeful tenor, cheery music playing in the background, and confident sentiments: North Liberty is “exemplary and fertile ground” where “the fields are ripe for harvest.”

At the completion of my studies at the seminary I was called as assistant pastor to St. Paul Lutheran Chapel for the purpose of founding this new congregation in North Liberty. I was ordained and installed at St. Paul on July 1, 2012, and I quickly began the arduous work of having no idea what I was doing. How does one start a new congregation? Or more fundamentally, what *is* a congregation? Well, a congregation is a community of saints who hear the Gospel and receive the Sacraments from a called and ordained servant of Christ. So what's needed? A pastor, hearers, and a place to meet. Then we can receive the salvation of our Lord Jesus Christ and be a beacon of truth and hope and light in the community of North Liberty. The plan became a simple checklist consisting of three items: get people, get a space, have Divine Service. Early on Pastor Mons and I somewhat jokingly set the date of the first service for the Commemoration of St. Silas: February 10th, 2013.

I spent the first few months of my time visiting other LCMS congregations, presenting on the topic of church planting, guest preaching, and trying to acquire contacts for potential members of the congregation. I had loving pastors and grandmothers sending me contact information for children of children and children of congregations who had moved to North Liberty. I wrote letters and made phone calls. All initial contacts were met with smiling apathy. “I look forward to becoming better strangers,” that was the general response. Families and congregations pushed, I pulled, and we collectively strained our necks while the contacts in North Liberty stiffened theirs.

Well then what? Then God took matters into his own hands. People started contacting *me*, introducing themselves: people I had never heard of. But there they were; some of you were among them! Slowly interest grew and people besides myself committed to founding the congregation.

But where? Sometime, not long after I had moved to North Liberty, Pastor Mitch Otto of Prince of Peace in Coralville asked me to fill in for him at a service that he conducted monthly at the North Liberty Living Center. I filled in and led the service, and the residents there asked me to take one of the slots in their monthly rotation. I did so, and for quite some time on the fourth Friday of each month I led the folks at the Living Center through Responsive Prayer 2 in our hymnal and preached the Gospel to them.

The residents knew I was working on starting a congregation, and one Friday asked how things were going. I told them that we actually had some people together and were looking to start having services soon, but we didn't have a location. "Use our chapel," they said, without missing a beat. "We're not a people of great means," I told them. "We aren't able to pay much." "Oh, you know, just replace the candles if you use them." And that was it. I went to Hobby Lobby, purchased a box of candles, and for less than \$10 we had our first location. If someone had told me, "Find a room in North Liberty that has an altar and a pulpit, that you can rent for less than a dollar a month," I would have informed that insane person that I would have more luck finding a unicorn! But so it was that on February 3rd, 2013 we had our first service, a week before the Commemoration of St. Silas.

For ten months we met in the third floor chapel of the North Liberty Living Center. The residents graciously let us borrow one of the closets in the room, otherwise our weekly load would have been very cumbersome. It was enough to haul the printer and the Ark of the Covenant, which was the name given to the cardboard box that held the communion vessels. It was a good first space, but had its challenges. We certainly don't miss the metal folding chairs, or having to take the elevator down to the first floor to use the bathroom. And the front sliding door that could only be opened from the inside! It wasn't our intention, but the resulting policy was, "If you can't show up to hear the Gospel on time, then you don't get to hear it!" I mean, we couldn't leave someone down there the whole service to man the door. As it was the doorman was frequently deprived of hearing the Absolution. We can be glad now that running a few minutes late doesn't disqualify one from receiving the gifts of Christ.

We slowly grew in numbers and it became necessary to seek other arrangements for space. Buying land and building on it would have been *shatteringly* expensive – hundreds of thousands of dollars an acre just for the land! – and so we began looking at storefronts. This one was just down the street from where we currently met, was along the main road through North Liberty, and was not brand new (which meant lower cost of rent). If I recall correctly our first service here was on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 2013. On Sunday January 19th, 2014 we had our dedication service and I was officially installed as the pastor of St. Silas Lutheran Church.

From there we've had our ups and downs, our joys and sorrows. Some Sundays it has seemed, "Yes, this just might work!" Other Sundays there has been little cause for optimism. Nevertheless, there hasn't been a Sunday since we began meeting that we lacked Christ or the Gospel or the Sacrament. If we measure success by Christ's presence then our congregation succeeded years ago.

Our Present Challenges

This brings us to the present day. The initial excitement of being a new mission congregation has largely worn off, which is well and good. The playful young girl named Excitement has great energy and a seemingly endless supply of smiles and good times. But she's an emotional wreck, and ends up with more tears than smiles. She has dreams and hopes in her pretty head, and steadfastly refuses to let reality intrude. Excitement would rather cling to deluded optimism instead of embracing a sober realism. But dear saints, it's better to face facts with Christ than die weeping with Excitement.

I'm not here to peddle false hopes, but to proclaim our true hope in Christ. So let's send Earthly Hope and Little Miss Excitement out of the room for a few minutes and allow Lady Church ponder her situation and the words of her Lord.

We stand in the midst of great obstacles. Some of them are simply facts: neither right nor wrong, neither good nor bad. Some of them are flat out satanic. I'll list our obstacles in something resembling a logical order, though it won't be in order of the two categories I just mentioned.

Challenges Relating to Those Who Are Already Members of LCMS Congregations

Perhaps chief among the simple facts is the nature of "The Corridor" as it's called, the strip of land that spans from Iowa City to Cedar Rapids and encompasses many other communities in between. Within this Corridor many people live in one part, work in another, go to church in another. Our congregation has members from Oxford, Iowa City, Coralville, North Liberty, and Cedar Rapids. Residents of North Liberty go to congregations in Iowa City, Coralville, North Liberty, Tiffin, Solon, Cedar Rapids, and many other places. Rather than the towns and cities of the Corridor being individual communities, the Corridor has largely become one massive conglomeration that unfortunately is losing any real sense of community.

What does this fact mean? We can see its effects clearly without even having to leave this sanctuary. North Liberty is growing, members of LCMS congregations are moving into town, and here we are, right in the middle of their new community. New residents of North Liberty who are seeking an LCMS congregation visit us once, and enjoy themselves – they have nothing against any of us personally, at least not that I'm aware of. But inevitably they end up settling elsewhere. I've tried to follow up and ask people why they didn't stay; I never hear anything back.

I have a theory, though, why this sort of person or family doesn't stay at St. Silas. I'll tell it to you and you can judge whether it's reasonable or not. North Liberty is rapidly changing. Everything is fresh sprouts and newly planted seeds. Individuals and families who are new to town have just been uprooted and planted here themselves, usually for a program at the University or due to a work transfer. They are trying to get their bearings – in the midst of a city that as a whole is trying to get its bearings. I can understand the appeal of wanting something established: a deeply rooted congregation that stands like a mighty oak tree, sheltering generations of children under its branches. I can understand the desire for a permanent church structure, a place that isn't going to be here one minute, gone the next, as so often happens with fresh startups in storefronts.

This theory puts the best construction on the situation. There's another theory that takes into account some of the technological "advancements" of our society. I would venture to guess that some people visit us and don't come back because they don't know how to function within a community. Everywhere people are staring at their devices. I see a husband and wife out on a date, a mother and daughter having lunch, children who should be laughing and running on their walk home from school – and they're all compulsively checking Facebook and texting. "Friending" people has never before led to such destruction of friendship.

There's also a box that many people have in their living rooms, you might have heard of it: it's called a television. It allows you to feel like you're involved in real relationships. The characters come to visit you whenever you like. No matter what you say or do they'll always be there when you want them. You never have to work through an argument or reconcile after a fight. They provide you with a low-maintenance, almost ideal, form of friendship. And it leaves people unable to interact with other real live people. Soon we'll have a new attraction at the circus: "Step right up, step right up! Talk to a human being, face to face. Only five dollars!" People will walk out with bewildered eyes, "What a strange thing that was!"

And so it is that many people simply prefer to go unnoticed, to get lost in the crowd. And then like decent human beings you have the nerve to greet them, to look them in the eye and strike up a conversation. Thank God, there's no getting lost in the crowd here. But for that reason, I daresay, some never return.

There's a yet more unfortunate theory, and that is: Many people seek the wrong things from a congregation. "Do you have a youth group, a preschool, a daycare? Do you have small groups in which I can study theologically suspect materials and espouse *my* thoughts on how the words of Jesus make *me* feel? Do you have contemporary worship? Do you have a place where I can dump my children so I can listen in peace to the sermon series 'How to be Salt in a Pepper World'? Will you celebrate my sins and refrain from using offensive words like 'repentance' and 'Jesus'? Will you manipulate my emotions and make me feel good about myself?" Now some of these things are neither here nor there, some of them undermine the very foundation of what it means to be the Church. But they all overlook the one thing needful: the faithful proclamation of the Word of Jesus.

It's likely that all these theories are at play, but whatever the case there's no massive influx of people coming from other LCMS congregations who like the idea of a new mission congregation. Belonging to a mission congregation requires sacrifice: giving up amenities and programs, crossing generational lines to find community because there's no one else your age, having to reconcile with people instead of hiding from them in a sea of faces. I would argue that there's actually great benefit in belonging to a small congregation: we learn to interact cross-generationally, we learn to reconcile, we learn what is truly the one thing needful. I thank God that you have all been willing to make a sacrifice to be part of this congregation. It is no small thing. And for that reason it's something that few are willing to do.

Now we have had a couple of families who came to us from other another congregation, stayed for a time, and then transferred back to the congregation whence they came. I don't want you to have the wrong idea about them. For years they went to church with their extended families, for years they slowly formed a base of good Christian friends. And they gave it all up because they wanted to be part of their local LCMS congregation. They didn't see family as often, they didn't talk to their friends as they used to. They kept up with people, but in large part it just reminded them of what they had left behind. These families didn't run as soon as they started missing people. They stuck it out. And it became torture. I don't fault them for returning to their families and friends. And mark this well: their departure from us will *not* be the cause of our door closing if ever the time comes when the door must close. Faithful husbands and fathers who take their wife and children to service every Sunday are *not* the enemy of the Church. I'm grateful for the time we had with them, I miss them, I selfishly wish they would have stayed. But I'm also happy for them, and we can rejoice that we continue to partake with them of the one bread and one cup of our Lord's body and blood.

Now among the people who move to town from our sister congregations across the state and country, there's another subgroup that I must note. North Liberty is a young community. The median age of a North Liberty resident in 2010 was 29.2 years old. North Liberty has become a popular spot for millenials, as they're called, who are settling down and starting families. And a majority of this particular generation has devoted itself to living as if there were no God.

We've had such young men and women walk through our doors, usually escorted by their parents. The child has lived in North Liberty for months, and has not had the slightest inclination to find the local LCMS congregation. Mom and Dad come to visit on a Sunday and suddenly here they are on our doorstep. The young person has been baptized, confirmed, knows the liturgy and hymns. But it has all become nostalgia, the things of days gone by. "Would you like a followup visit?" I ask as they make for

the door. “No thank you, that won’t be necessary,” they reply with a smile. “Do you have a congregation you’re attending regularly?” I inquire. “No.” And then they’re gone. Many the ghost of a once-upon-a-time saint has glided out our door into oblivion with a smile on its face. It breaks our hearts to see such unbelief and apostasy. It also makes us glad for the faithful young people in our midst. Their generation tempts them to hell, and they’ll have none of it. The millennials who confess, “Jesus Christ is Lord” are a particularly precious gem in these gray times.

Challenges Relating to the Community of North Liberty

Now up to this point we’ve covered people who are coming from LCMS congregations to North Liberty. We wish they would come join us, but we aren’t simply looking to reshuffle the Lutheran deck and deal out parishioners to one more player. Ultimately the purpose of having a mission congregation in North Liberty is to bring the Gospel to the people of North Liberty.

This leads us to consider the community around us. North Liberty has been growing at a rapid pace for over a decade now. Indeed, it was this unbelievable growth that prompted some to suggest a new congregation in North Liberty. And, unfortunately, this unbelievable growth is great food for unbelief. What I mean is this: Picture a poor community. The sky looms gray overhead, and the threat of rain hangs in the air. The buildings are run down. The streets are covered with trash. The people live hand to mouth. Men wonder when they’ll work next. Children wonder when they’ll eat next. Theft is common. High levels of anxiety lead to violent outbursts of words and fists, divorce, despair. People partake of various recreations involving needles or screens, anything to dull the pain and distract the mind. How hard would it be, I ask you, to convince such people that there is something wrong with the world? How hard would it be to demonstrate that we are poor, miserable sinners? That we are dependent and not our own? The circumstances of life have been preaching the judgment of the Law to such people for years, so that when they actually hear the Law it brings clarity, even as it brings repentance and prepares them for the Gospel.

Opportunity for mercy work abounds in such a community, “mercy work” meaning care for the physical needs of others. Many look at the Church sideways, with suspicion, wondering what our actual motives are. But in the face of mercy the world marvels at true love: love that loves for the sake of the beloved, and not the cheap imitation of love that can only “love” the self. This true love is nothing other than the love of Christ, which he shows to us for our good, and works in us for the good of others. The world is drawn to the Church by such love, and finds in the Church not only mercy for the body, but mercy for the soul: the medicine of the Gospel. Thus Christ justifies the Church before God through the Gospel, and Christ justifies the Church before the world through mercy.

So you see that physical needs are good for helping people to recognize that they have spiritual needs. The physical needs of a community also present a door for Christ’s love. Mercy work and the proclamation of the Gospel go hand in hand. And as they do, whole communities are raised from the dead while people receive eternal life.

Now picture a slightly different community. The sun shines brightly. The grass is green and meticulously maintained. Perhaps it’s made of plastic. The streets are clean and their lines freshly painted. The buildings are new, and unstained by time and weather. There’s a grand opening almost every week: restaurants, businesses, marketplaces. The homes are pristine: adorned with stonework and brickwork, boasting three-car garages, complete with decks and patios. The people look happy. They’re not. Their mini-mansions are devoid of life, their work is unfulfilling. They buy, and own, and grow discontented, and buy more. The god Mammon rules over such a town. It makes promises,

“Stick with me, bow down to me, seek me and I will care for you.” Mammon seems to be a fine god, when it’s there. Eventually it won’t be, and then the community will look more like the first one I described. But even when Mammon *is* there it brings along an emptiness with it. The belly is full, the body well-clothed, the hands busy at work, the family size increasing – and the soul is flat and blank and dead.

People continue to worship Mammon because outwardly all seems well. Mammon cannot bring life to the soul, but it can make people forget that they *have* souls. Trade in the car, upgrade the phone, buy a new gadget, eat out, and suddenly it seems not to matter if the soul is dead. Who needs a soul when you have Mammon?

This second community I’ve just described is North Liberty. The circumstances of life lead people to reject God and his Law, rather than to see the fallenness of the world. The Church’s existence seems completely unjustified in the sight of such a community. And in the midst of this place, here we stand. We compete with Mammon, sports, and entertainment. We compete with the busy schedules of people who are afraid that if they stop moving they might have to contemplate the meaning of life or the end of it. But in reality, we don’t compete at all. We’re called the Church Militant, but it’s not because there’s a decisive battle left to fight. Christ has conquered sin and death and the devil by the blood of his cross and by his resurrection from the dead. We look at the world and we don’t see people bowing down to strong, living gods. We see people bowing down to inanimate creations and the corpses of the great enemies slain by Christ. We feel pity and compassion for such people. We want to go out and show them the love of Christ and give them the great gift of God’s Word.

We have gone out, both in the form of canvassing and in our vocations. I’ll explain this in more detail. Our congregation has already had one canvassing event with Ongoing Ambassadors for Christ (O AFC for short). We went door to door in pairs and conducted a religious survey: asking people if they were raised in the church, had a Bible, and so forth. The final question is: Do you know where you’re going when you die? Now showing up on a stranger’s front porch unannounced and dropping a question like that might well deserve the shock or hostility that follows. I was not the least bit surprised that we had no new faces the following Sunday. Nevertheless, the hostility was more than any question merited.

We had another canvass called Planting Gospel Seeds While Serving Human Needs. Rather than trying to confess the Gospel right there on the doorstep, the goal of the canvass was to learn about the needs of the community. Ultimately the goal is to find opportunities for mercy work, and perhaps even involve those who helped identify the needs. A couple of things surprised me during this canvass and the smaller canvasses that followed. First, most people in North Liberty have no idea what the needs are. If they identified a need it was something like the “need” for a dog park. Second, most people do not know their neighbors. With no shame they admitted that they go to work, come home, and don’t talk to the people around them. And third, many no longer think of their houses as homes of hospitality, but as impregnable fortresses where they are not to be disturbed. We rang some doorbells and were made to feel that we had committed a grievous and audacious crime. As the 21st century version of the old saying goes, “Mi casa, *mi* casa.”

But ultimately canvassing isn’t what brings people to church anyway. People come to church because someone whom they know has extended to them a personal invitation. And this makes sense. Jesus didn’t drop a Gospel tract on the world’s doorstep and move on. Rather he took our life as his own life. He identified himself with us and entered into fellowship with us to such extent that he took on our very flesh and became man. As the writer of Hebrews put it, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who

has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Heb. 2:14-15). Jesus cares for the needs of our bodies. He cares for the needs of our souls. He is no temporary or fair-weather friend, but bore our burdens as his own and died on the cross so that we might live.

And this is what Christians do in their vocations. As husbands, wives, parents, children, employers, employees, neighbors, and fellow members of Christ we get to know those around us in our various callings. We listen, we sympathize, we care, we help, we give of ourselves for their sake. And as opportunity presents itself, we simply invite to church. This isn't a formal program, there are no statistics to report, this is just what Christians do. And I'm aware of the fact that many of you have been doing it. You care about people, you make yourselves part of the lives of others. You're there like a rock in a storm, offering yourselves as a refuge and anchor to your families, friends, and neighbors. They know you care, and you invite them to church. Yet in spite of continued invitation, they don't come. We would cry out with the Lord in Isaiah 5, “What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done it?” (Is. 5:4).

But this is assuming that you can get close with people in the first place. An unfortunate side effect of the world's busy schedule and its preoccupation with cyber-networking is that there's no room for flesh and blood people. You would get to know someone, but they don't have time for you. You would be a listening ear, but they would rather post status updates to no one in particular on Facebook. You would gladly hear people's needs and care for them, but they're too proud to admit any problems and too self-reliant to accept any help. The inhabitants of the world wish to be independent and autonomous. The result is that instead of friendship, love, and community, we have a bunch of single atoms colliding into each other at random and seeking to have the upper hand as they bounce and hurtle on into oblivion.

What Does This Mean?

What do all of these challenges mean for us as a congregation? Well, there's always the chance of a miraculous turnaround. Who knows, perhaps there's yet some soil that Christ will make good by his Word. We can always hope. But we shouldn't give ourselves over to blind optimism. Here's what we've seen: Those seeking an LCMS congregation don't want us. The community doesn't want us. Those we invite consistently decline. If we were the apostles and had been sent everywhere, at this point it would not be out of place to shake the dust from our feet and move on. But we haven't been sent everywhere. Jesus has placed us *here*. For better or worse we are part of the community of North Liberty, till death us do part. And it might come to that. Our door might close, you might be scattered to other congregations, I might be driven from my house and sent across the country. I'm not mincing words. Miss Excitement would be in tears right now. But not you. You're the Church. And you have a real hope.

The Hope

In Matthew 16 Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter confessed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus answered, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her.” Here Jesus gives us great comfort. He assures us that *he* is the one who builds his Church, not us. We don't have to catch people with the snares of advertising or gimmicks or programs. The Church need not exchange her wedding gown for a skimpy cocktail dress. It's not ours to attract and allure and entice. That's what the

world does. What does the Church do? She confesses. That's all. She confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And on the rock of that confession Jesus builds.

The Church did not come upon this confession herself. As Jesus says, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Even the confession on which Jesus builds his Church is a gift received. The entire mission of the Church has its origin in a life of reception. You've heard our congregation's mission statement. It is "to receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation through Jesus Christ, our Lord." To receive. What a puny verb. But what else have we been given to do? To confess? Yes, but it's a confession *received*. To love? Yes, but it's a love *received*. It's not that the only thing the Church does is receive. It's that if she ceases to receive, then all is lost. Therefore if everything depends on our receiving, then more properly speaking everything depends on Christ giving.

And what has Christ given? He has breathed into our nostrils the breath of life. He has given us his good creation. We set aside those gifts and listened to the devil's hissing in the Garden of Eden. But Christ wasn't done giving. He gave a promise, a promise to save. He gave a sacrifice to clothe Adam and Eve with garments of skins and cover their shame. But in this Christ wasn't done giving. These were but a shadow of things to come, a shadow of a human person to come. Christ gave up his eternal glory and the holy habitation of the Most High and condescended to earth in human flesh. Christ gave himself into our service: bearing our illnesses in his body, lifting up our sins onto his flesh. Christ gave his life – and this is the life of God himself we're talking about here – Christ gave his life into death. "One will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die," St. Paul writes in Romans 5. "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Christ gave his life for us on the cross. And Christ has given us life by his resurrection. This life is not just mortal life as we had known it previously. But he has given us *his* life, *eternal* life. The Church might take up her cross and follow in Jesus' footsteps up Mount Golgotha, but just as death and hell could not hold her Lord, neither can death and hell hold her. The Church may suffer, she may be put down for a time. But she always rises. Christ did. So for her it cannot be otherwise. This is the great comfort of the phrase, "the gates of hell will not prevail against her."

Does that mean that our congregation is invincible? That we shall never have to close our door, come what may? Not quite. In the Scriptures the Church is pictured in two ways. On the one hand the Church is like the one ark of Noah: the sole vessel that survived the flood of God's wrath and preserved its passengers. That one ark of the Church shall never be destroyed. By faith in Christ you belong to that one ark of the Church. On the other hand the Church is pictured as a fleet of boats. This comes up in Mark 4 just before Jesus calms the storm: "And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him." You don't belong to the Church by sitting on your couch at home, but by belonging to a local congregation. Or in other words, you belong to the one ark of the Church by embarking in one of the boats in Jesus' fleet.

Now unfortunately many of these little boats, that is, individual congregations, have sprung leaks and the waters of the world's ideals and agendas seep through the wooden floor. Instead of bailing, many congregations enjoy having wet feet. They lay aside the net of the Gospel, let the world's impure salt corrode it, and devote themselves to making bigger leaks: ordaining women, celebrating various sins, turning the Divine Service into an entertainment venue, a house of sale, a den of robbers. And when a congregation reaches this point the world does not rave against it. Such congregations appear to be surrounded by a great calm, with clear skies, with success. And why would the world waste its time trying to capsize such a boat when the sailors are making every effort to drown themselves and rise in mutiny against Jesus?

There are other congregations in Jesus' navy. When the ocean tempests rage these congregations undergird the ship with ropes, face the wind like men, and defy the waves. In the midst of the storm they keep the Gospel net clean of false doctrine, and faithfully cast it into the waters. They hoist the sails and mock the gales. The devilish Poseidon waves his trident and hurls curses. And laughing at him the saints sing a shanty that would entice the very sirens to join them.

These boats are little and the faithful are few. Of all the vessels that traverse the surface of the deep, they seem the least likely to survive. The devil does not overlook them because of their small stature, but fixates on them because of their faithfulness. He makes the deep boil like a pot. He raises whitecaps and makes the sea like the hoary head of some ancient man.

And you're in such a boat. Make no mistake, the devil is plotting to break up the ship, to close that door. We might not feel his direct attack as a congregation. The ancient serpent is being sly as he slithers along the waterways. He catechizes the schools of fish in his ways, makes the inhabitants of our pond paranoid of nets and allergic to the Gospel. He makes sure that scales cover not only their bodies, but also their eyes and their hearts. The devil lets us go our way, lets us cast our net in what seems to be vanity. There is no great catch here. Thus we go our way, and the devil clings like a barnacle to his fishes, seeking to starve us to death.

But the devil has made a rather silly error in his conniving. We aren't lowering our nets to get fish for our own sake. We proclaim the Gospel to the fish for the fishes' sake to save them from the satanic Leviathan. Goodness devil, really? You think we're going to float along saying, "We need people in order to survive"? As if we get people in the boat so that we can fillet them, bread them, and serve them with chips and tartar?

Dear saints, mark this well: We don't go fishing out of concern for *our* life. We go fishing out of concern for the life of the world. We don't invite people to church so that we can survive. We invite people to church so that they will be saved. Our life isn't in our numbers. Our life is in Christ. That doesn't mean our little boat is going to make it to the farther shore, but there's no reason you can't. We sail in a fleet, and other boats are in sight. If our door must close then it will be like St. Paul's shipwreck in Acts 27. He said to the sailors, "Take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship."

Whatever happens, nothing can sink the whole fleet. Nothing can sink the one ark of the Church. By faith in Jesus you belong to that one ark, as much as you belong to this little local manifestation of it. And that one ark is *Jesus'* ark. He commands the winds and the sea and they must obey him. He is the Jonah who threw himself overboard to give us peace, who turned death's stomach so that all go in will come out, who came walking back to the boat on the face of the angry waters and is with us. Jesus is the captain who walked the plank and is captain still.

With such a glorious image before us of the Church sailing on with Christ at her helm, I now ask: what do you have to fear? The world? Let the world do what it will. The Word of the one who created the world still holds sway. But what do you have to fear? Losing our little boat? Christ has other boats, and he will not let you die a castaway. We must not grieve for ourselves in such circumstances. Rather we weep with Jesus, who says to our city, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not" (Mt. 23:37). Jerusalem may reject the Word of the Lord, but there's always a Nineveh that repents in sackcloth and ashes. The Word may be rejected in a place. A certain zone of the sea may be left unattended by the Gospel net and given over to Satan that the fish may learn not to blaspheme. Christ may take his Gospel elsewhere, but he will

not leave you without the Gospel. You have my word that if our hearty crew should have to disband, I will do everything in my power to see you safely to another boat.

So what do you have to fear? The only thing the Church has ever had to fear, and that is offending against her Lord. We dare not get desperate and alter the nets, we dare not look to our own hands and begin letting in water under the pretense of attracting fish. The Gospel catches fish, not our ploys. We occupy ourselves with being faithful sailors, avoiding mutiny, and taking refuge in Christ.

What We Have Been Given to Do

And what does this faithful life in the boat look like? What have we been given to do? I'll list ten things. The first thing we're given to do is be in the boat. Simply coming to church is the greatest thing you can do, both for yourselves and for the sake of the congregation as a whole. This is the place where we receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That means this is the place from which everything flows. This is where faith is strengthened. This is where love is born.

Second, maintain the pure confession of Christ. To use the boating imagery again, this means keeping the net clean. Make sure that no false teaching bites through it, make sure that the world's seaweed does not tangle it, make sure that the vicious salt of unbelief does not compromise it. This means knowing the Small Catechism well, which is nothing other than knowing the fundamental teachings of the Scriptures well. If you hear a lie in this place, call it out. If we begin to do something out of fear and panic, call it out. The pure confession of Christ means truth and peace. Where there are lies and anxiety then the greatest need is to return to that pure confession of Christ.

Third, care for each other. Paul writes in Romans 12, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (Rom. 12:12). God has composed this body, "that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (Rom. 12:25-26). It gives me great joy to see the happy pockets of conversation that form immediately following the service. It reminds me of a family after Thanksgiving supper. Some wash the dishes and chat. Others sit and talk about deep personal matters: pains and losses, and joys. Still others contemplate music or philosophy, and debate and jest. The children laugh and play. And the generations come together. The children are not afraid of the grownups, nor are the grownups awkward around the children. The best part is that we didn't decide, "This is the way the congregation should be." It just happened. And what else would we expect? We appear to be one body because we are: Christ has made us such by giving us his one body. You're already quite good at getting to know one another and caring for one another. I would urge you to continue down this path. I would also encourage you to visit each other in your homes and simply sit, talk, listen, care, pray.

Fourth, reconcile with each other. Sometimes the sides of the fishing boat can feel a little tight: someone rubs you the wrong way, speaks a careless word to you, commits a small sin against you which you cannot stop thinking about. The specks in the eyes of others loom large, never mind the lumberyard protruding from your own face. When tensions begin to grow, the solution is not to step out for some fresh air. You step out of the boat, you drown. This is common sense. Yet it seems that even more common are people who run instead of reconcile. Remember the words of Jesus, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone" (Mt. 18:15). Remember how many times you must forgive the sins of others when they sin against you, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven" (Mt. 18:22). Remember that you owed the King ten thousand talents and by his blood and grace he forgave it all; the small debts of your fellow servants are nothing

compared with that. Remember that the Church is only for sinners, and thus you're likely to meet some here. Remember most of all that Jesus could have shown himself to be in the right and given us his wrath, but instead he chose to be wronged in order to give us peace.

Fifth, seek the lost members of our congregation. This is not very appealing, because it means a confrontation. We ask, "Where have you been?" And people may respond with temporary regret, hostility, or genuine repentance. People can respond as they will. The simple fact is, we care about them. There is no salvation outside of the Church, and there's no being part of the Church without being part of a faithful local congregation. You cut yourself off from the Divine Service, it's like cutting yourself off from food: eventually faith will starve to death. These are life and death stakes, and we're talking about people who realized and confessed this at one point. "Do you intend to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord's Supper faithfully?" "Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?" These are questions from the rite for receiving members into the congregation. You all gave the same answer, "I do, by the grace of God." Our wandering members gave that answer as well. So make a phone call, set up time to visit face to face, and simply say, "I'm worried about you." If someone listens to you, excellent. We'll be glad for their sake to have them back at church. If someone wants to throw your genuine love and care back in your face, then praise Christ: you are being conformed to his image and likeness.

Sixth, greet visitors. You do this well already, and I'm glad that we don't have to have official greeters. Being hospitable has simply become second nature for you. I noted previously that many people don't want to be greeted and have face to face conversations and be noticed. Too bad for them! This is the Church, and we're going to care about the people who walk through our door. So greet on!

Seventh, pray. Pray for yourselves, that Jesus would grant you steadfastness in the faith, especially as you see his Word so greatly despised by the world. Pray for me, that Jesus would keep me faithful in proclaiming his Word. Pray for one another, that Jesus would guard and keep us in his flock, and pray for specific needs as you become aware of them. Pray for our community, "that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ," as Paul writes in Colossians 4:3. Pray for the Church as a whole, that Jesus would keep her faithful and true as he is faithful and true.

Eighth, invite people to church. This doesn't have to be high pressure. Think of people you already know. You care about them. You listen to them. If they have a need, you're happy to meet it. You don't merely care about them with the ulterior motive of sucking them into church. You care about them because they're made in the image of God as you are and Christ died for them as for you. Sometimes people are willing to let you care for their bodies, and you do. But you care about more than that. You care about their souls. You know that whatever you do for their bodies won't matter in the end if they don't trust Jesus. So you care about them, you listen to them, and you wait patiently. Eventually everyone comes across a need of the soul. God has so ordered mankind that we cannot completely escape the testimony of conscience or the anxious burdens that have no physical cure. And when those needs arise, you simply invite. You say something like, "I know what you're going through. And do you know what really helps when I feel this way? Going to church. Why don't you come with me on Sunday." This isn't going to break a friendship or end a relationship. If someone wants to persist in unbelief and think you're a little funny for being religious, they'll still know you care, and they'll want you to keep caring.

Ninth, give financially. Contributing toward the offerings of the Church is a good way to acknowledge God as the giver of all your goods and give thanks to him. It's a good way to curb your natural tendency to trust Mammon. It provides you with a pastor and a place to meet for services. Thus God

turns the offering right around and uses it to benefit you. As part of a mission congregation, you can look at the offering in yet another way. Not only does God take the offering and use it to give you a pastor and a church building. God also uses the offering as a gift to the community of North Liberty. He keeps our door open. He maintains an outpost of the Gospel in a place that so desperately needs it. In this way the offering is also an act of love for your neighbors. You don't want the Gospel to be taken away from them.

Tenth, consider where you will go if our doors close. I can recommend to you other LCMS congregations that are in the Corridor. Acknowledge the possibility that St. Silas Lutheran Church may not always exist, and make sure you are not caught without the Gospel. But in the meantime, commit to this place: take off your hat, hang up your coat, call it home.

The Last Day

And what's the last word? The last word is a word of the Last Day. In this age we see the Church oppressed, walking behind Jesus like Simon of Cyrene and bearing the cross. But a day is coming when this valley of sorrow will be no more, when the Church will not only be regarded before God as spotless and glorious, but will actually be spotless and glorious in the eyes of all. "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied," as St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:19. In that case, "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" (Is. 22:13, Lk. 12:19). But Christ has been raised from the dead. On the dying breath of this life follows the sweet air of eternal life. On the Last Day comes the resurrection, the final judgment, and the Church's vindication. On that Day comes the ingathering of the saints from the four corners of the earth into the promised land. So let us take eat, take drink, and be merry, for we shall never die, and tomorrow can worry about itself. It is only a "little while" that we do not see Jesus, as he says in John 16:16. "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the tribulation, for joy that a man was born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (Jn. 16:20-22). Jesus says, "Yes, I am coming quickly" (Rev. 22:20). And we say, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20).