

“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 it.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

In the early centuries of the Christian era, the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (now Istanbul) was one of the great churches in Christendom. When the city fell into the hands of Islamic forces in 1453, the church was turned into a mosque. Later it became a museum, but this once-great cathedral has been restored as a mosque once again.

In many places throughout the world great churches, beautiful cathedrals, and congregations that were once the springboard for the church’s ministry to the world now lie empty, or have been converted for other purposes. Some of those changes came by force, as in Russia, where churches were often turned into everything from swimming pools to granaries to government offices. In other places churches have closed because they did not abide in the Word of the Lord. They did not heed the warnings given to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, where God warns the churches to flee from their tolerance and acceptance of the teachings, attitudes and philosophies of the world that were opposed to God’s truth. Sometimes churches close because of great neighbourhood changes in our cities or in the countryside. Sometimes churches close because the people of the church wander away or even drive each other away.

The past few months have led many people to wonder what is going to happen to the church in the days to come. It has been hard to feel like the congregation we are by the grace of God when there are so many obstacles to our congregating—to actually being together. On the one hand, COVID-19 has provided opportunities for the Church not seen in our lifetime. The uncertainty of these days has led people to think about eternity, and to see their need for the hope we know is found only in Jesus Christ. Yet I also worry that the longer we are kept from, or refrain from, gathering together, the greater the temptation will be to forget God’s command to ***“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”*** (Exodus 20:8, ESV). We may find that the ease of tuning into—or out of—a streaming worship service will be so comfortable to us that we lose sight of the fact that God did not create us to live alone, but in a community: the communion of saints! If we don’t gather as a Church, what will the church be?

Do you remember the Doris Day song, *Que sera, sera*? The song simply says, whatever will be, will be”. The church doesn’t fear that ‘whatever will be, will be’. God has a plan for His church. Our dear Saviour gives us a great promise in our text. Jesus assures us of that He builds His church and that ***the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*** Christ’s Church, that glorious communion of saints, will endure, as the hymn writer states, *“even when steeples are falling.”* (LSB 645, st. 1) Church buildings may be destroyed by fires and floods; they may be converted into other kinds of structures as they were in Russia. There may be those who curtail our freedom and try to keep us from the Word of Life. We may not always be faithful, but our God is faithful and His Church—the communion of saints, the believers in Christ—will always live on.

Oh, how we need that comfort and assurance for our days! The true Church is not some ‘fly-by-night’ organization. The apostles, and prophets before them, did not build the church on the flimsy ground of human opinion or on wishful thinking. The Church is built on Jesus Christ, and on the life-giving truth that Jesus Christ, True God, came into the world to save sinners. One of the main words that Scripture uses to describe the church, and the word that Jesus uses here, is the word, *ekklesia*. That word means ‘called out’. We are called out of the darkness of sin and death and the worldly ways in which we used to live. We are called by the Spirit through the Word and in the Sacraments that we may know and believe that Jesus Christ is our Saviour; that He gave His life in our place on the cross and rose to life so that we may live in Him. In His explanation of the 3rd Article of the Apostles’ Creed, Luther writes: *In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.* (SC, 3rd Article.) How blessed we are to have this wonderful assurance through the grace of God. We are His forgiven people. We are His chosen church. He has called us as His own, that He may bless us now and forever!

The gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church built on the Rock, Jesus Christ. But it often seems that the Church is struggling in the world. When I was young, the vast majority of the people I went to school with were part of a church. In fact, there were only a few that I knew didn’t go to church, like the local Rabbi’s daughter. (But that was okay, because I had a crush on her.) We all received New Testaments from the Gideon Bible Society in grade 5, and there was a special event to mark that day. Nowadays, it is more likely that those who attend church regularly are the odd ones out in the classroom. The Bible has

no place in our schools, we are told. There is an ever-widening separation of church and state. While there is a valid reality to some of that separation, much of the way that is used is designed to keep the Christian Church from having any influence in the world today, as if the teachings of God's Word were some sort of infection to be avoided. The church is often regarded as an evil that keeps man from progressing to a higher level.

The devil has been at work, but he is also at work in the church! The devil leads the hearts of people to despise the truth and to forsake the church. The devil also attacks the church from within through controversy, strife and false teachings. We know that too well, when we saw the concerns with our CEF, and the sad and shameful ways in which our attitudes and actions towards one another created animosity, bitterness, and hatred. The devil rejoiced, because the communion of saints was at odds with one another. An error, albeit a big error, has caused people to distrust everything about the church. We've also seen that happen with false teachings, when there are those who suggest for their own glory that the Word of God is not the Word of God, but the word of men. Paul tells us: ***"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions"*** (2 Timothy 4:3, ESV) Add to these things the scandals related to sexual abuse charges against clergy or church leaders; financial scandals, and leaders who very evidently are seeking to serve themselves and not the Lord. The gates of hell are open, and at times it seems that the church wants to fall right through them.

In the face of all this, dear people loved by God, never forget Jesus' promise in our text: ***on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*** The church that we see in this world is not perfect. We have our problems. We have issues. The hymn before the sermon today declared: *"Though with a scornful wonder The world sees her oppressed, By schisms rent asunder, By heresies distressed, Yet saints their watch are keeping; Their cry goes up, "How long?" And soon the night of weeping Shall be the morn of song."* (LSB 644, st. 3) Not one person in the Church—not a single one—is perfect. The church is the spiritual hospital for sinners; for the fallen and broken and lost. It brings together people who would not necessarily come together for any other purpose. Yet in our weakness and imperfection we have one thing that changes everything—and that is the forgiveness and grace we have through the Saviour who died and rose for us.

I am not suggesting that we be content with our weaknesses, with our failures and our imperfections. How can we be, when we are something new and wonderful in Jesus Christ? Paul reminds us: ***"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."*** (2 Corinthians 5:14–15, ESV) But the failures don't define the church. Faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who came to save us from our sin and the death we all deserve is what defines the church. That leads us to see one another in a different way. We see brothers and sisters. We see sinners, just like we are. We see fellow members of the communion of saints. We reach out with forgiveness for one another, not judgement. We seek to restore, not destroy. We come to the Rock of our Salvation—to the dying and rising Saviour—to find the forgiveness we need, and the power and grace to forgive, even as we have been forgiven.

In mythology, there is a bird known as the phoenix. The phoenix was thought to live hundreds of years, only to die in flame and obtain new life by arising from the ashes. The phoenix gained new popularity thanks to the fact that Dumbledore had a pet phoenix named Fawkes in the Harry Potter books. Early in the church's history there were those who used the phoenix as an illustration of the resurrection, and you will see the symbol of the phoenix in churches and in Christian art. While the phoenix is a mythical bird, there is nothing mythical about the resurrection. There is nothing mythical about the fact that the church sometimes seems to rise out of the ashes, too. We rise to be God's people, even in a world that may despise and hate us. Jesus says to us: ***"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."*** (Matthew 5:11, ESV) God will preserve His church, when it is hated by the world. God will preserve His Church, even in the face of our disagreements and struggles. His church rises from the failures that cause the hurts and pains that plague us, because we come to the life-giving promise of God's love in the dying Saviour, Jesus Christ. He preserves His Church! He helps us go on, no matter what the world, the times or the devil may do.

An old commercial says: "Imagine being able to visit yourself in the future." Wouldn't it be nice to know what the future holds for the church? Well, we can't visit ourselves in the future. We can't go ahead to see what else the world will bring upon the church. But we can be sure of this: God will never forsake His church. His church cannot be removed from this world except by His command. There is a verse to the hymn, *The Church's One Foundation* that wasn't included in our *Lutheran Service Book*. That verse says: *The Church shall never perish! Her dear Lord, to defend, To guide, sustain, and cherish, Is with her to the end. Though there be those that hate her; False sons within her pale, Against both foe and traitor She ever shall prevail.* (TLH 473, st. 3) The Church will prevail. The gates of hell cannot overpower it. So let the church roll on! Let the Word of God be heard, even when people resist it. Let it go forth in these COVID days! We will stand steadfast and firm in the conviction

that God is with us and because He is our God, we shall triumph in glory with Him. Amen.