

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be unto you from Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior and God our Heavenly Father. Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

**[Introduction]**

[1] The Lutheran Church is a dying church.

[2] Now that may sound sobering to you,  
but on this, Palm Sunday,  
it’s worth pondering for a few minutes.

[3] We are a dying church.

[4] Several articles have been written, and the truth seems sobering.  
The LCMS and the ELCA are losing members – FAST.

[5] Some have projected that if it continued at the current rate,  
it will leave the ELCA dead by 2046  
and the LCMS gone a few years after that.

AND Some have said that we won’t have any pastors either.  
At the current rate of retirement,  
half of our pastors will be gone in just 15 years.

FUTHERMORE Some have projected that as many as 20% of members  
will not return to weekly worship after COVID.

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[6] News of our own church’s potential demise is sobering.

Yet that’s not the real reason I say we are a dying church.

No, the real reason I say this

Because as children of our Heavenly Father we are not afraid to die.

We can make a joke in the face of death.

Because we are a member of a dying church.

AND Membership in a dying church has its privileges, its power, you see.

That power, that privilege, we know as

the forgiveness of sins, salvation, and life everlasting.

**[Dying Church]**

The privileges of membership in a dying church far, far outweigh the drawbacks!

Oh, I know, we worry sometimes about the numbers.

We fret over the lost opportunities

that come from declining numbers and resources.

But we follow a Lord who calls us to die with him.

We follow the Master, who pulls eternal life from the grave  
like a rabbit out of a hat

and who invites us all to share his joy  
by taking up the cross ourselves.

[7-8] Jesus once had a crowd of over five thousand flocking to him  
after he fed them miraculously in the wilderness.

But after telling them the real food and drink was his flesh and blood,  
he watched that crowd dwindle to twelve.

Did he fret over that? Did he fear?

Did he change his message or his manner? No.

He simply asked if the twelve wanted to go away also,

and he gave Peter the opportunity to say, “Lord, to whom shall we go?

You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68).

[9-10] Jesus had a crowd of people on a Sunday morning,  
and they were excited to see him.

They raised their palms and shouted, “Hosanna!”

Let’s do that. Raise your Palms and shout “Hosanna” three times.

They shouted, “Hosanna!” because they knew Jesus could save them.

But where were they, when the crowd shouted, “Crucify him!”

[11] Another crowd gathers in the wee hours of the morning,  
by moonlight a great crowd with swords and clubs.

[12] They came to fetch Jesus and kill him.

They were led by Judas, who betrays the Lord with a kiss.

Peter lashes out with his sword,

but Jesus tells him to put it away,

and then Jesus heals the poor servant

whose ear was cut off.

[13] Jesus said the Scriptures said there would be a day like this.

SO! Let it come, for the Scriptures must be fulfilled.

The dying that will take place on this day

will not be a bad thing, but a good thing—

it will be life for a dying world and a dying church.

[*Reduced to One*]

[14] You would never betray Jesus, would you?

I know you would never want to.

But he is betrayed with our kisses again and again!

We betray him with a kiss

when we try to keep him from leading us into his dying church.

We betray him

when we tell people not to take up the cross and follow him  
but to take up principles for victorious living or financial management  
or child raising, and to use Jesus as a springboard to successful living.

We betray Jesus

when we say so many nice things about him  
and make him the leader of our movements and pet causes,  
which are designed to give prestige and power  
to those who follow us on our way.

Oh, yes—the “good-bye” kiss is never far from our lips.

And don’t get me wrong, we mean well by it!

[15] You see,

After the kiss, all the disciples forsook him and fled.

And we’ve been there too, haven’t we?

When the chips are down and the numbers are dwindling, when things look bad,  
it’s easy to slip quietly out the back door.

“Sorry, Jesus. It just wasn’t meant to be, you and me.”

[16] There is so much denial and death in Holy Week!

[17] Peter denies Jesus, because who wants to be part of a dying church?

[18] Caiaphas and Pilate condemn him  
because a dying Messiah is not for them.

[19] The crowd chooses Barabbas because he, at least,  
resists dying.

Jesus just gives in.

So they mock him, crown him with thorns, and lead him away.

Simon is the only one who carries the cross,  
and that’s only because they make him. It wasn’t his choice.

And after more mockery of the dying King,  
his own Father forsakes him,

so that he dies in torment, all alone.

[*Growing Church*]

[20] A dying church. A church of one.

But it’s strange.

[21] At the moment of his death, the Lord finds a friend.

The centurion sees him dying,  
and in this death he sees a victory over death and hell.

Filled with awe, he confesses,

“Truly this was the Son of God!” (v 54).

And then there were two.

From that moment on, a dying church grows.  
Some of the soldiers get pulled in,  
then the women,  
then the Twelve,  
then a few thousand at Pentecost, then—ah, you see where I am going.

[22] The point is that I got pulled into this dying church,  
and you did too—the day you were baptized, the day you were confirmed.

When you stood before the altar of God and confessed your faith  
and vowed to not fall away from the faith, even unto death.

That is what you are doing today...

*Tyler Bell, Nick Caylor, Connor Cross, Karsten Ghabel, Claire Hartwig,  
Molly Krogh, Rachel Matel, Addyson McKillip, and Grant Wilson*

You are vowing allegiance to Jesus Christ,  
to the cross,  
to being a dying person in a dying church.

[23]  
*We are a dying church. We always have been. By God's grace, we always will be!*

You get pulled in anew every time the word of the cross goes in your ears  
and meets with faith.

You get pulled along by the body and blood of the crucified,  
put in your mouth here and now.

And while the dying is difficult in itself, even bad, the results are fantastic!

[24] *"Dying with Jesus Christ, you live eternally."* hmmm. Seven words!  
Because he conquers death, all who share in his death conquer death too.

I am a member of a dying church,  
the Church of Jesus Christ and him crucified,  
the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Membership in a dying church has its privileges, its power—for you and for me.  
It brings the peace that surpasses understanding  
and guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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So we... Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvelous deeds among the people. AMEN! (Psalm 96:3)

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