

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“God’s Word Is Our Great Heritage”

Rev. David K. Groth

Reformation Sunday – October 31, 2021

50th Anniversary of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

“Your testimonies are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart” (Ps. 119:111).

It’s been fifty years now.

- For fifty years God’s Word has had free course at Good Shepherd. It hasn’t been hindered or restrained. For that, we should say “Thanks be to God!” **Thanks be to God!**
- Over the past fifty years, God has baptized 815 souls into His grace. Let’s say it again: **Thanks be to God!**
- Over the past fifty years, 475 individuals received Christian burial from Good Shepherd, which means their friends and family were consoled with the hope and peace only Jesus can give. **Thanks be to God!**
- Over the past fifty years, 837 adults and eighth graders were instructed and confirmed into the Christian faith. **Thanks be to God!**
- The last one on that list of adult confirmands, by this time next week, will be my wife! **Thanks be to God!**
- Over the past fifty years, 289 couples sought God’s blessings on their marriages. **Thanks be to God!**
- Fifty years of corporate confession and absolution. Fifty years of private confession and absolution and Holy Communion with the sick and the homebound and the imprisoned and the troubled. **Thanks be to God!**
- Fifty years of having the filth of our sin cleansed by the Lord’s blood in His Supper. **Thanks be to God!**
- Fifty years of planting the seed of God’s Word in Sunday School classes and Bible Studies and Confirmation Classes and VBS. **Thanks be to God!**
- Fifty years of coffee and donuts. **Thanks be to God!** Imagine the sum total of calories served downstairs. I have it on good authority that there were also some very fine batches of soup worth all the calories.
- Fifty years of friendships. Fifty years of laughing together, crying together, and just being together. Fifty years of the communion of saints. **Thanks be to God!**
- Fifty years of mercy works in this community and in this nation and in this world. **Thanks be to God!**
- Fifty years of mission work near and far. **Thanks be to God!**
- Fifty years of God pouring out His blessings. **Thanks be to God!**

Who knew God would be so good? Actually, fifty years ago today, about 130 men and women were very confident God would bless His people. On this day fifty years ago, they decided the answer was not in severing from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The answer was not in starting yet another new Lutheran synod. The answer was not in filing a lawsuit in the civil courts. The answer was in planting a new church, always a good way to grow God’s kingdom.

Whenever I read Good Shepherd’s history, it surprises me every time how quickly things happened that first year. On August 30, 1971, St. John’s Lutheran in Watertown voted to sever its affiliation with the LCMS. Two months later, 130 men and women signed the constitution at the Green Bowl. That same day, they chose a name for the church. That same day they made the decision to purchase this 16-acre site. All in one day. That’s confidence in the Lord, which is remarkable especially considering what else was going on in 1971.

Nations were raging, and kingdoms were tottering. In 1971, the New York Times began to publish the Pentagon Papers which proved the U.S. government was lying to the American people about our involvement in Vietnam. Trust in government eroded in a big, and it seems permanent way. 500,000 anti-Vietnam war protestors converged on Washington D.C. and the Nixon administration arrested over 13,000 in just three days. The University of Wisconsin was reeling from the bomb blast at Sterling Hall. In 1971 there were race riots and looting and wanton destruction. In 1971, at a Grateful Dead concert, some 30 young people overdosed on LSD and had to be hospitalized. In 1971 the sexual revolution was in full swing; American families were crumbling; the divorce rate was skyrocketing. In other words, there’s nothing new under the sun today. It all sounds very familiar, very much like 2021.

Fifty years ago this newly formed church decided all that chaos and division and disorder and anger, that’s not who we want to be. That’s not where we come from or where we want to go. That’s neither our heritage nor our future. Fifty years ago, this church decided God’s Word is our great heritage and God’s Word is our future. God’s Word remains trustworthy even when everything else is teetering. God’s Word is our firm foundation in a world of quicksand. God’s Word is living and is life, in a world that is dying and thinks of death as a solution. God’s Word is the rain that waters the parched soil making it bud and flourish.

Baptism is nothing without the Word. The Small Catechism says, “Without God’s Word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the Word of God it is a Baptism, a life-giving water, rich in grace” (SC, p. 297).

The Lord’s Supper is nothing without God’s Word. It’s the Word that pledges and guarantees His flesh and blood for our forgiveness.

Without the Word, faith is nothing. Faith is based on God's Word, not the other way around. Besides, our faith flickers and is fickle, but God's Word is a firm foundation. Luther wrote, "Therefore, we should not boast of our wisdom, strength, or wealth; we should boast of the fact that we have the precious pearl, the dear Word, through which we know our dear Father, and Jesus Christ, whom He has sent. This is our treasure and heritage; it is certain and eternal and better than the goods of all the world" (WLS, p. 1465).

True, there is a growing number of people in our community and nation who know nothing of God's Word. How could they? They never hear it. And, if by chance they do hear the Word at a funeral or wedding, it's mostly nonsense to them, because without the Spirit of God it's foolishness. If by chance they do understand it, they may well despise it, for they only hear God's "Thou shalt not"; which no human heart ever welcomes. They rarely hear or assimilate the Gospel, which says "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin."

We, however, are an assembly of people who treasure God's Word. We were not born this way. We are not responsible for this reception of the Lord's Word. It comes only by the Holy Spirit. Were it not for the Spirit's work in us we too would despise the grain and hunger only for the husks and chaff.

God's Word is all we really have. There is nothing else to guide us in life. There is no other support in the hour of death. To spread this Word near and far and to each new generation is exactly what Christ has given this church to do.

Since God's Word is our great heritage, we should hear God's Word and study it with humility and care and, like Mary, treasure these things and ponder them in our hearts.

Don't be like those who became disgusted with the manna in the desert, for without the manna, they would surely have perished. Without God's Word, we too will perish.

Don't be like Eutychus. Remember him? Acts 20:9, "Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead."

Don't be like those who pounce on God's Word with their own clever interpretations. If you don't understand it or like it, Luther said, "then take your hat off to it." (WLS, 1472).

I have here a page from a medieval Bible dating to about 1250. It's recopied onto your bulletin cover, and that is its actual size. This is before the printing press. This is before wood pulp paper. This is all hand-written on vellum. Vellum is a thin layer of young animal skin that has been washed with water, soaked in lime, bleached. The hair has been scraped off. To create tension the skin is attached to a frame and scraping is alternated with wetting and drying. A final finish was achieved by using pumice. Then a sheet was cut to size. After that, it was ready for the scribes who first marked the pages with faint lines to keep things straight and orderly. Then, they carefully copied the text and then it was checked and rechecked for accuracy and then came those who added a little color with painted illuminations. Can you imagine the extraordinary expense of creating a Bible?

Whenever I look at this page, it strikes me that the scribe wrote with such small letters, trying to fit as much onto one page as he possibly could because, again, vellum was so terribly expensive. And yet, look how wide the margins are? Whatever for? Why didn't he stretch the text out into the margins to pack more in? It seems a waste of precious real estate.

I've learned scribes did this to avoid people putting their thumbs on the words in order to turn the page. Scribes didn't want any dirty fingers staining God's Word. That's the reverence they had for Scripture. Better to write in microscript with wide margins than to have God's Word smudged by oily fingers! Friends, that's our heritage! That's the rock from which we've been cut and the quarry from which we were dug.

Because God's Word is our great heritage, we honor it and treasure it and submit ourselves to it, even if it confuses or embarrasses us. Luther said, "I am able to grasp by reason that two and five are seven, and let no one try to tell me otherwise. However, if God were to say, 'No, they are eight', then I should believe this contrary to my reason and feeling. . . For I rely on Him whom I regard as far wiser and far better at counting than I am . . . What He says shall be the truth to me even though all the world speaks otherwise" (WLS, 1473).

One last thing: A number of years ago, something very bad was happening with my golf swing. I had the shanks. I had the yips. I was afflicted with every golf disease known to man, and I couldn't work myself out of it. I finally decided to get a lesson. On the driving range the teaching pro saw me take a few swings, and immediately said, "Ok. First thing I want you to do is slow down your swing." I heard him and hit a few more balls. "Slow down your club speed" he said again. I thought I had. I throttled back some more and hit a few more. The pro was partly amused and partly annoyed. He said, "I feel like I'm pulling on the reins of a runaway horse. Let the club do the work!" he said. "Slow down and let the club do the work!"

Maybe that's where we are today. Let God's Word do the work. We have the precious Word of God. It's our heritage. It's our future. Let us remain steadfast in the Word and let the Word do the work in our own hearts and the hearts of others. It's not our job to be successful. It's our job to be faithful to the Word. It's not really our job as the church to change the laws of the land or the politicians in office. It's our job to get the Word out and let it change hearts instead; the rest will happen organically. It's not our job to manhandle God's Word and pound it into submission so that it's not so offensive to today's culture. It's our job to let the Word be the double-edged sword that it is, and to be ready to share the hope we have in Christ, in season and out, to those who like it and to those who like it not. We let the Word do its work. With His Word, we lift high the cross of Jesus. We show the world the Savior from sin and death. We show our children what a Friend we have in Jesus. We point them to the Good Shepherd who has laid down his life for the sheep.

God's Word is our great heritage. It's all we have. It's all we need. Amen.