

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Not All the Powers of Hell”

Rev. David K. Groth

August 23, 2020

“On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mt. 16:18).

“I will build my church” Jesus promised. At first glance it just doesn’t seem like it’s unfolding that way.

When I was first ordained in the early 1990’s, it was the expectation (spoken or not) that if numerical growth was not happening in congregations and denominations, there must be something wrong with the leadership. It put enormous pressure on church leaders, especially pastors. Grow the church or move on, maybe even into a different vocation.

There was a lot of pressure from within and without to change worship styles, and church structure, add lots of programming for singles and the elderly and for kids, improve the parking lots and signage. But for all the efforts, church growth initiatives really have not delivered the results that were promising. Even before COVID Christianity was experiencing significant numerical decline across the country. This is true across congregations and denominations, across worship styles, and programming. Commitment of church members, as measured, for example, by worship attendance is declining.

As a result, the nature of the pressure today has changed. Earlier, if the church was not growing, it automatically meant there was a problem with the quality of the ministry. Today, the pressure on many churches is just to find a way to survive.

Enter COVID-19. How will this impact the church in the future? Anybody’s guess, but I worry about it. I worry about the habit of not coming to church becoming engrained. I worry that without the Lord’s Supper and Bible Study and the fellowship of the saints, folks will gradually drift away. Jesus said, “I will build my church,” but it seems at first glance that the promise of Jesus is being put to the test.

On the other hand, I know the Church is growing, just not in ways we usually like to measure things. First, it is growing *because* of the great challenges it faces. In Romans 5 Paul says, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame.” If you take Paul’s words to be true, then the Church is growing right now not in numerical growth, but in grit and character. James writes, “Count it all joy . . . when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (1:2). That is, these challenges and trials are producing fruit in us in ways that the easy life cannot . . . also in ways that cannot be measured by mere worship attendance. Maybe you find yourself praying more, or checking in on an elderly neighbor, or teaching your young children and grandchildren to trust in Jesus when they are anxious and confused.

Trials have a way of turning us back to God. After all, who needs the protection of the Good Shepherd when you’re feeling young, strong, and handsome? But when your body is

falling apart at the seams, or you suddenly find yourself familiar with the term comorbidities, then staying close to Jesus as your Shepherd seems like a really good idea.

Who needs the thick walls of a Refuge and Fortress when there's peace in the land? But how good it is to be in the Mighty Fortress who is our God when poisonous arrows are flying on social media, and there are rioters in the streets and the country is so divided and there's already talk of rigged elections. How good it is to have a Mighty Fortress to flee to when kingdoms are tottering. Through these trials and anxieties, the Lord is growing His Church but not in ways we usually measure.

The church is growing in yet another way: numerically. I'm not talking just about the rapid growth of the Church in Asia or Africa. I'm talking about the total number of believers in Christ throughout all times and all places, the saints of God on earth and saints of God in heaven. That number is ever-increasing. When a believing Christian at Good Shepherd dies, that member is lost to us, but is not lost to the true Church of God. When a Christian in North Korea suddenly disappears, that member is lost to local underground church, but not to the true Church. The number of saints of God on earth and in heaven continues to grow.

I'm also confident the church will stand because of the promise of Jesus in this text: "Not even the gates of Hell shall prevail against it." It's a figure of speech which means not all the powers of hell nor all the foul and wicked doctrines ever dreamed up by man, not all those things that cause a person to enter hell, not all the forces opposed to Christ can triumph over God's Church, those whom the Holy Spirit has gathered to Christ in faith.

Remember, Jesus descended into Hell, and Hell did not prevail against Him. When the devil wanted nothing more than to prevent the resurrection, still Christ rose from the dead. The church is His body on earth, and you are members of it. Hell can no more vanquish the church than it could vanquish the resurrected Jesus Christ.

History gives us plenty of examples of times when this promise was tested, and every time Jesus delivered on the promise. When the forces of the Roman Empire were organized to eliminate the church, still the Church survived, even thrived during that period of fierce persecution. When schisms and false doctrine threatened to shred the Church to pieces, (in the Early Church, in the Middle Ages, also today), still the Church survives. When communism attempted to eradicate it, the Church survived. The Church has survived plagues far worse than this one. And though this one is presenting challenges, yet here we are! Whether in person, online, or through the mail, the Word of God is still being proclaimed, the sacraments still administered from this altar, our people are still engaged in acts of mercy. The very existence of Good Shepherd is the latest evidence that Jesus is keeping His promise.

So much is uncertain right now. So much is up in the air. Will the Packers really play this year? Will schools and universities be able to open? How long will this thing last? The old expression used to be, "Nothing is certain but death and taxes." However, there is certainty in Christ and in His promises. One of those promises is the Church will stand. It will survive all the forces opposed to Christ. God will preserve His people until the day He returns.

So, though no one knows what the future will look like, we do know this: the Church will be part of it, doing what the Church does. The Church will be there for your children and grandchildren. The Word will be preached. People will be freed from their sins through the sacraments. Hearts will be strengthened and encouraged. The mercy of God will be shared. And not all the powers of hell will prevail against God's Church. Amen.