

Easter 3, April 26, 2020  
Text: Acts 2:14a, 36-41  
Theme: Baptism is How We Grow

**Every pastor reads these texts from the Acts of the Apostles and prays to God that he might be just like Peter. What an amazing thing to see thousands of people turn to Christ after a sermon. It would be a thrill just to preach to thousands of unbelievers. If we get a 1/2 dozen unbelievers in here in a year, I'm thrilled. So my first question to you is why don't we have more unbelievers in worship? Or to flip it around, what were Peter and the people of God doing to attract thousands of people to listen to the Word so that the Holy Spirit might act?**

**First, they were not doing anything we call innovative or creative in today's world. They were using the old tried and true methods that orators had been using for hundreds of years. Peter lifted up his voice and addressed the crowd. That's it. God did all the heavy lifting.**

**I was on a bus at the LCEF Leadership conference back in November. There was a pastor on the bus talking about all his innovative, creative ideas and how they were growing the kingdom of God. I nearly needed a sick bag from listening to this guy hold forth on how wonderful he was. He said,**

**"You know we took out that area, what's it called? You know that place where the pastor usually stands?" The guy he was talking to didn't know. There was a disembodied voice from the back of the bus,**

**“The chancel?” “Yeah!” said the amazing pastor, “That’s it. We took out the chancel so we could have more room for the band and the back-up singers. That’s what people want to see. They want to jam to the band and watch the singers.” There was much giggling and general mocking of historic worship. I was about to become unhinged and run amuck on a church bus. Then he regaled us with stories of what God was doing, but it was clear that God could only accomplish all of this because of his amazingly innovative ministry.**

**You may have read Martin Marty’s columns over the years in the Chicago papers. At one time he was the pastor of Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit in Elk Grove Village and at that time, it was the fastest growing church in the Missouri Synod. At the same time, Hope Lutheran Church on the south side, was the largest congregation in Synod. Since that time, Hope closed and Holy Spirit has about 60 in worship. Marty was asked what he did for Holy Spirit to grow so fast and he said that he unlocked the door and got out of the way. He knew that the city was emptying in those days and people of European descent were flocking to the suburbs where traditionally European churches filled to overflowing but it was not sustainable growth. That pastor who was touting his innovative ministry that is doing such great things is in one of the top 5 fastest growing cities in the nation. He would have to be actively trying**

**to kill the church for it not to grow with all the Lutherans moving to his city.**

**The important question about growth is not how many new members are you bringing in, but how many baptisms are you doing? Baptism is the way we handle converts. People who were not Christian are made Christian at Holy Baptism. When we baptize we are adding souls to the kingdom of God. Who cares how many people worship in the sanctuary on Sunday or how many programs you are running during the week if you're not baptizing? We proclaim the Word of God and baptize people. Sure, I would love to have a Peter moment where 3,000 people line up for baptism and the ushers have to form a bucket brigade from the sacristy just to keep the font filled. That would be awesome! But a soul is priceless. Every soul is priceless. And we rejoice before the throne of God every single time he gives us the opportunity to baptize another person whether they be infant or adult.**

**As far as what we could be doing better, we need those people who do not have a relationship with God to be invited and brought here where they can have a relationship with God. They can always say no but they all deserve the opportunity to say no. Peter tells them that they are going the wrong direction in life. They ask what to do and he tells them matter-of-factly: repent and be baptized.**

**As much as every church would love the pews to be full and all the weekday programs to be overflowing, all of that only has meaning when baptisms are happening. Without baptisms, at best we are only feeding the flock, which is great, but not nearly as fulfilling as growing the flock. Baptism is not a ceremony. It is a sacrament in which the Holy Spirit enters into a human being and creates the faith that grasps the gift of grace. It is a miracle that supersedes the miracle of birth by far. If you are only born physically, so what? Without faith being created in that new born person, all you have done is added to the population of Hell. The second birth is what matters, the spiritual birth where through water and the Word, the Holy Spirit makes you a child of God. Then, once the person is a child of God, all the worship and teaching matters because we are called to baptize AND teach. Teaching goes with baptism and that is how we grow as Christians and we grow for one purpose, so that we can serve God by proclaiming his love and forgiveness to others so that they might repent and be baptized.**

**Repent and be baptized. We still hear it in the baptismal liturgy. "Do you renounce the devil in all of his works and all of his ways?" The parents and the sponsors, or the baptismal candidate himself if he is old enough, answers "We do so renounce them." That's repentance. That is saying, I am turning around from the path I was on and promising God in front of this congregation that I will walk on his path. Hearing the**

**repentance, we absolve the sinner in baptism. Absolve. Absolution. It comes from the Latin meaning to wash away. We wash away all the sin and in baptism the sinner is gifted with constantly flowing spiritual water that will wash away his sin every day for the rest of his life.**

**That's why Luther says to make the sign of the cross the first thing in the morning before you get out of bed. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It was first said over you in your baptism where you were placed under the name of God Almighty. Remind yourself before you get out of bed of whose name you are under, who you serve, and who your life is to glorify and then go forth and celebrate another day in God's service until your time of service is over and you are called home. That is, when you die.**

**One of the reasons people are so afraid of COVID19 is because people are afraid of death. We have sanitized death in our society to the point that people are afraid of it. People don't have funerals. They have celebrations of life. They keep little children away from dead bodies because it might traumatize them. They tell them that grandma has become an angel and is watching over them as though she is still part of this world and has now been demoted to a security guard at the local Walmart. Death is because of sin. It was never God's plan for us, and it is horrible! There is no celebration in having a soul separated from its body, BUT because of baptism, it is only temporary! Because we have**

**been brought under God's name, our body will be resurrected and we will live forever. That is why we do not fear death. Death is only an end to our time of service here on earth after which WE GO HOME!**

**In about another two years, Neal, my son serving in the United States Navy, will complete 9 years of service to his country and he plans to come home. Now there will be some sadness as he leaves the Navy, the friends he's made, the important work he's done, but the overwhelming feeling will be joy at coming home. It is likewise when a baptized Christian dies. You leave some people behind for a while. You don't always get to complete everything you thought you would. But the overwhelming feeling is joy at going home! A baptized Christian has no fear of death. We embrace death, knowing that only God determines when our time of service is complete, and when it is, we get to go home.**