

Easter 6 – May 9, 2021 MOTHERS DAY  
Text: Acts 10: 34-48  
Theme: Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover

**We need to grow. This place was built to serve a membership of 1500 people and we have less than a third of that. What are we going to do? That is the constant question that the leadership of nearly every Christian church asks. What are we going to do to fill this place up? Maybe, we need more programs that will draw people in. Or maybe we need a new style of worship. Or maybe we need to convert the fellowship hall into a gym for senior citizens. Or maybe we need to open a Christian Day School. About 17 years ago, I came here to visit with the call committee before you called me and that was the kind of thing I heard. We need to grow and we want you to tell us how to make that happen. Well, we haven't grown, have we? In fact, we have continued to decline. We had perhaps slowed the bleeding before Covid, but now even that ground has been lost. What are we going to do?**

**First of all, we need to remember that nothing happens fast in the Church. We're not like a Corvette that can turn on a dime. We're more like the Queen Mary when we turn widely and slowly. And while we have not reclaimed our glory days of the 1950's, we have, as a family, made some changes in the way we minister to and care for people with the Law and the Gospel. Teaching the Law and the Gospel and thereby growing faith is far more important than achieving some arbitrary**

**numeric threshold. Confessing God's Word in truth and purity is far more important than making everyone feel good about themselves, but making everyone feel good is the easiest path toward numeric growth.**

**Churches are often scattered in their approach to ministry. They are a mile wide and an inch deep. They try to offer every program, every activity and every support group anyone could want in hopes of reaching people with the Gospel. But because they are so consumed with managing all of their programs, activities and groups, they never get deep enough to really teach the Gospel. What does it mean to teach the Gospel?**

**Think of people who you know who have become disconnected from the Church or perhaps never were very connected. Some people are baptized and confirmed, married and buried and that's about it. Thank God they are connected as much as they are, but what a sadness that they do not know the joy we know, or the peace we know, and they are missing complete fulfillment in serving God. Think of one of those people in your life. Would a card saying "Jesus loves you" make any real difference for them? Would someone from church calling them up and saying, "Hey, you haven't been in church for ages. What's going on?" help them or hinder them? Maybe there are a few for whom those tactics would be successful but if they are successful, it is probably because God was already working on them from a different angle and**

**whatever you did was just the moment in which God's work came to fruition.**

**Really teaching the Gospel takes a great deal of hard work. Look at St. Peter in our first reading today. You've heard the saying, "don't judge a book by its cover." It means that you have to look more deeply than the cover of the book to know if the book has value. Peter saw Cornelius as an unclean Gentile with whom he should have nothing to do. God sent him a dream that said, "Do not call unclean what I have called clean." Do not judge this book by its cover, Peter. Spend some time to look inside Cornelius and you will find a man with faith, a man who truly wishes to be close to God but does not know how yet. It's going to take some time and patience Peter. It's going to take a great deal of hard work as well.**

**Our calling is to teach the Gospel, not to fill the pews. What we learn is that to teach the Gospel, we first have to build a relationship with someone and that takes time and effort. Only then can you talk about important religious matters. No one is going to let a stranger into the deepest and most private parts of their being. So, if you want to teach the Gospel to someone, start with coffee, or chit chatting on the bleachers while watching kids play sports, or while working out at the gym, and then, work from there. And don't assume that just because you're related to the person, that you have admittance to their religious**

**selves. It is easy to judge the people who are related to us because somehow, we think they should think just like us, but genes effect eye color not faith. Treat those in your household just as gently as you would treat a stranger. Recognize that the religious part of them is completely unique and may have been affected by a host of things of which you are totally unaware and in no way responsible. Build a relationship of trust with them and one day, you may be admitted to their religious selves and have the ability to teach the Gospel to them. And be aware that the Holy Spirit is at work in your actions even more than in your words.**

**Growing in numbers is a wonderful thing, but there is no quick fix that lasts. And, honestly. Growing in numbers is not what we are called to do. We are primarily called to facilitate the growth of the faith of those whom we encounter as we proclaim God's Law and His Gospel to the world around us. That is a difficult task because many people do not want to hear the Law and people who have not been cut by the Law cannot be healed with the Gospel. Sometimes people even get angry at us because we proclaim the Law. But the Law must be proclaimed. Without the Law, the Gospel is just a nice little story about a good teacher who was martyred for his beliefs.**

**This being Mother's Day, it is a good day to talk about Law and Gospel because parents are the first people in a person's life to apply**

**Law and Gospel. How does a mother lovingly correct her child? We all know that just ignoring sin is easier. We have all been the victims of wild children on the airplane or in the grocery store and we wondered where their parents were. They are taking the easy path, ignoring the Law. By the same token we have all seen children reared under authoritarian parenting and we know that style often has its own set of repercussions. They too take the easy path of cutting without healing. The trick is to consistently hold the child to the highest standards of God's Law while consistently loving the child as Jesus loves the child. Will the child rebel? Of course, he will. Don't we all rebel against God's Law? As soon as God says don't eat that fruit, that fruit is all we can think about eating! And yet, he loves us. He loves us so much that He was willing to die on the cross for us so that we would never face the ultimate punishment for our sin. What wouldn't a loving parent sacrifice for their child? We get that from God.**

**God loved us over time. He did not judge us by our covers as Peter was tempted to do with Cornelius. While he always held us to the highest standards of His Law, he never condemned us or exiled us away from Him because of our failures to keep His Law. His refusal to judge us by our covers, and His insistence on allowing us to learn from our failures and mistakes is how we grow. It's how we change our covers to better reflect our creator.**

**We do likewise for others. That is our calling. We continually invite people to be part of us, to know the loving God we know, and we never assume that we have invited them enough. We continually invite people to change their covers to be more like God. Do some think us arrogant for suggesting that there is something wrong with their cover? Yes, of course, but arrogance and confidence are two different things. We are not arrogant because we understand that we had nothing to do with the faith we have. It was a pure gift from God. We are confident that God's way is right and anything that conflicts with God's Law is wrong. Until a person is ready to repent of their sin, they cannot be healed by the Gospel.**

**We are diminished as a family by every single person in this community who we are missing today. They all are crucial parts of the machine and we need them to be as powerful a force in this world as God wants us to be. Find someone who has become disconnected from the family and make it your mission to reconnect them to God's Church proclaiming both Law and Gospel to them. Trust the Holy Spirit to work. It is tempting to soft pedal the Law because God's Law is offensive and we are afraid that people might reject us if we proclaim it. They might. But without God's Law, the Gospel is meaningless. Who needs a savior if there is no real sin? Who needs a savior if Hell is not truly a threat? Why was Jesus damned if it were possible for us to save ourselves?**