

Text: Isaiah 56:1,6-8. Pentecost 13.

**September 3, 2017.**

Grace and peace are yours through our Savior Jesus, who continues gathering people to him. Amen.

I had the privilege to attend our synod convention this year. I'll be honest, a lot of it was sit, eat, repeat. But here's what made it worth it. I met Pastor Kebede Yigezu from Ethiopia. Pastor Yigezu left a church body in Ethiopia because this church body was no longer teaching God's Word. And in a five minute conversation he got very in depth on the specific teachings that were contrary to God's Word. Terms and teachings you would only cover at Seminary. The church body he left had 8.2 Million members. 8.2 million. Do you know how many people gathered with Pastor Yigezu to keep on teaching the truth? 56. No 56 thousand or even 56 hundred. Just 56. Good thing, because it takes 50 people in Ethiopia to have a church that is recognized by the government or else you can't gather. You can't build a place of worship. You can't train pastors. But those 56 people today are 387. And while those 387 are scattered across Ethiopia, they are gathering groups all over the country. Many of those 387 are being trained as pastors to gather more and more people to learn the truth of God's Word. How cool is that?

Our synod not only declared fellowship with Pastor Yigezu and the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia, but with two church bodies in East Asia. You can't say or print where these church bodies actually are. When the presentation was made to welcome these church bodies into fellowship, the video cameras had to be turned off and the livestream shut down because you can't put this on the internet. One of my college roommates is a missionary in one of these church bodies. I took a picture of him and some of the pastors who have been trained and put the name of the country in a Facebook post. My friend nicely asked me to delete the post and remove the name of the country, because there could be big trouble, massive persecution and he could be removed at any minute. Yet my friend and the Christians in this country keep on preaching the Gospel. They keep on gathering people, sometimes by the hundreds and thousands. God's going to keep gathering. God's going to keep gathering. God's going to keep gathering. Did you notice that theme in our readings today? Did you catch that repetition of foreigners from around the world will hear the good news, will be gathered and God's going to keep gathering?

The LORD begins with a simple declaration. Maintain justice and do what is right. Is that always easy with foreigners? They dress different. They act different. I can't understand their language. What are they really saying? What will I find out if I get to know my neighbor? Maybe he's a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Muslim. Maybe I should just keep to myself. Maybe it's better if I just gather with people like me, people I already know, people who are already Christians. You don't have to go to Charlottesville to think you're better than other people. There's a sinful nature alive in me that thinks just that.

But look at what Jesus did for sinful people, just like us. He brought his salvation close at hand. He died for you! Jesus died for your sins! Jesus brought himself close to you, right to this earth. Jesus brought his death close at hand, on a cross. Jesus brings his salvation to you, right here, again and again in his Word. Jesus brings his salvation close at hand, into your hands, as he gives you his body and blood. That's how close at hand his salvation is.

Jesus reveals his righteousness. Righteousness is being right with God. Jesus wrapped you up in his righteousness when he baptized you. You are wrapped up holy and pure and clean and righteous. Yeah, that's righteous! Can you see a little pattern here? Jesus lived to reveal his righteousness to you. Jesus died to bring his salvation close at hand. Jesus rose to prove you are righteous and saved in God's eyes. And did you notice something else? It's all given, free of charge. God gave you righteousness in baptism, for free. You didn't work for it. You probably were baptized when you were too young to do anything but cry. God gave you salvation in Jesus' body and blood. You didn't earn it. Forgiveness is God's free

present to you. It's so cool that we get to give away for free what God has given us for free: righteousness, salvation, to all people. God gives away to gather and God's going to keep gathering. Look at the people God's going to keep gathering. Foreigners. At that time, it was shocking stuff. Foreigners? Foreigners? Those people who are not of the chosen nation of Israel? Those people who eat pork and work on Saturday? Come on! Are we surprised today? Those people who are not part of our chosen nation? Those people who work on Sunday? Don't you know we go to church on Sunday? Maybe we are surprised at spiritual foreigners. But God wants to gather all people. God doesn't play favorites. Maybe we are just as surprised at literal foreigners. But those examples I shared at the beginning of the sermon are just a couple of examples of foreigners who are coming to us. Almost every month, our church body is approached not just by people, but whole church bodies who want training in God's Word. 60,000 people in Vietnam. Tens of thousands of people being trained via the internet in Latin America. Hundreds of thousands of people who like our synod's Facebook page in Spanish-speaking countries and listen to devotions. Yes! Hundreds of thousands of people. God's going to keep gathering. And he's going to keep using us. To serve him and worship him. These words for serve and worship are both really cool. The word for serve talks about visible and voluntary service. We might use the word minister. The minister is someone who's visible, but still someone who is serving. The minister is putting others ahead of himself to serve a greater purpose: gathering God's people. Worship talks about public service yes, but service that might appear more menial, service that is humble, more in support of the more visible ministry. Yet when that service is offered to God, that service brings glory to our God who gathers. Think of our weekly worship. Yes, there is one guy very visibly up front. Yet every person here is giving worship and service and glory to our God who gathers. I think we could agree that if three people were gathered here we would be glad that those three people gathered to worship God. But we would be more glad if there were 33. And we'd be overjoyed if there were 333, right?

The more people God gathers, the greater our joy. God wants to give us joy in this house of worship. Did you catch that phrase? I will give them joy in my house of prayer. God wants this place to be a place we come with joy! God wants us to have a skip in our step and skip in our heart to be here! This is the best hour of the week! This is my greatest joy to gather and worship. We can keep that attitude of joy if we remember how joy is spelled. Some of you know where I'm going. Bear with me. Joy is spelled J. O. Y. J. O. Y. Jesus first. Others second. Yourself last. You will find the greatest joy in this house of prayer when Jesus is first, when you come first and foremost to worship Jesus, to hear his Word to receive his body and blood. Wow! When else do you get to do that. Then put others second. Maybe you'd like the time to be a little earlier. Well, maybe others don't. And you can now go to Verona for an earlier service. Maybe you like to enjoy God's gift of sleep. Well, think of others. And now you can go to Monroe at 10.30. You see, worship is not about you. Worship is about Jesus. Worship is about encouraging your brothers and sisters. Worship is about gathering more and more people into God's house. God's going to keep on gathering. And we will find the greatest joy when we put Jesus first, others second and yourself last.

That's when sacrifices bring glory to God. This attitude of joy is what brings offerings to God, offerings he accepts from joyful hearts. Offerings that bring him praise. Offerings that might come from strange places. His house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. All nations. The word for nation that is used here, often refers just to the nation of Israel, to God's chosen people. But you see, God is saying, "My house is not just for Israel. My house is not just for a few. My house is for all. I want all people to pray and praise and give thanks." God is going to keep on gathering people from all places, from all nations. God's house is for all.

God is going to keep on gathering. Three times, God uses the word gather in our closing verse. God tells us, right up front, this is a solemn, serious and joyful declaration. He is the God who gathers. He will gather still others, besides the ones already gathered. Now sometimes God gathers people from far away, like Ethiopia and the places I can't mention. But God also wants to gather people nearby. God wants to gather your neighbors next door just as much as he wants to gather people from far away. And do you know how God usually gathers? He usually uses a friend, a neighbor, someone from gymnastics or karate, or your bowhunting club, or the person who works in the next cubicle. Someone who started studying the Bible at our church told me, "I wasn't sure about being part of a church. They are usually so strict. But I know her and if this church is good enough for her, it's good enough for me."

This gathering through friends is the theme of Isaiah and it's the theme of the Bible. And the reason for what we are doing right now. Why did we become a multi-site congregation? Two reasons: to reach the lost and to strengthen the saints. Reach the lost and strengthen the saints. You might be very anxious about this new venture. And maybe by anxious you mean nervous. Pastor's going to be spread too thin. That wouldn't be all bad. Who's going to greet guests? Pastor's going to have to speed to make it here in time. Who are these people in Monroe? Why are we going to be one church with people 30 miles away in Verona? Will we matter? Will I matter? Are they trying to take over our church? Maybe when you heard anxious you thought, "Yeah, I can't wait to get at this! We can gather more people working together! We can energize our members with a broader base of support. We can be a real force in our community to reach more people with the best news of all. This isn't the end, it's just the beginning of expanding God's kingdom to more people, more places." Yeah, there are anxious fears. Don't worry. I won't speed. Yes, there will be days I will wish I could clone myself. And hey, sin reaches further north than Monroe and further south than Verona. But brothers and sisters, the mission we have that unites us is far, far, far greater than any geography or history that divides us. The chance to gather more people is worth tons of gasoline. God will give us strength to keep preaching the Word, to keep gathering people from not just Verona and Monroe, but Orfordville, Orangeville, Belleville, Blanchardville. God's going to keep gathering from everyville, so we will be in heavenville. Thanks be to God! He lets us be a part of this gathering. Amen.