

## Necessary Virtues

2Peter 1:2-11

Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

I don't know how much parachurch literature all of you read. I imagine that some of you read at least some parachurch literature. *Portals of Prayer* is an easy example of parachurch literature. It is literature that is not produced by an individual congregation, but is produced by a group of congregations usually coordinating in these things that Americans incorrectly call denominations.

Some of you have other devotional materials that you read. Some of them are from Concordia Publishing House and some are not. Some are devotional in their goals and some are advisory in their goals. In other words some parachurch literature advises you and how you can be a better Christian and how your congregation can be a better church.

A popular word that is used these days by parachurch literature is the "healthy congregation." Everyone wants a healthy congregation. God forbid you join a congregation that is unhealthy or worse dying. This literature makes it sound like the goal of every congregation should be to be healthy. And there is nothing wrong with belonging or being a healthy congregation. The problem sometimes comes up that the parachurch literature does not and cannot agree on what it means to be a "healthy congregation."

But we can take a simple idea of what the word should mean. A healthy congregation is one that does not have many internal disputes. This side of everlasting life there are going to be internal disputes within any organization composed of sinners, but a healthy congregation knows what to do when a dispute arises in order to resolve the dispute in a God pleasing way. In this way they do not have many disputes. They do not allow disputes to go on for years and years nor do they allow disputes within the congregation to disrupt their decision making process.

Healthy congregations are acquainted with their confession of faith. In other words they know what they believe. Most of them have some articulation of what they believe. This keeps people and pastors from saying any old thing that they like thereby making the congregation beholden to the latest thinking of the most influential members or worse arguing over what should be believed thereby causing a dispute that is unnecessary.

Healthy congregations make decisions regarding joint activity with confidence and love toward the weak.

I think that in a nutshell that is what the parachurch literature is getting at when they say "healthy" congregation. There are probably some exceptions after all there is a lot of parachurch literature and I do not make a habit of reading it very often. In fact to get me to read it the District President often has to require it or strongly imply that it is required.

But that is not so bad. A congregation should understand and be able to articulate its own confession of faith. A congregation should be able to take a stand on that confession. A congregation should know how to handle disputes in a God pleasing way. After all disputes

will arise in the congregation from time to time. Such resolution of disputes should enable the congregation to more adequately show the love of the members for each other and thus display the love of Christ to the world.

In common parlance then healthy congregations are congregations that know how to handle disputes in a God pleasing way. That then is going to be the subject of this year's Lent series. There will be series of chancel dramas on Wednesday nights to illustrate the point of each lesson. The lessons that we will cover in the coming Wednesday nights will cover only the foundation of conflict resolution. That means that I will not be giving you step by step actions to take when a dispute arises between you and another member of the congregation. Instead I will be giving the God given foundation for what to do when a dispute arises. Knowing what to do will do you no good until you know the basis for doing it. And I have found as a pastor that when you folks know the basis for doing something, you need very little instruction on what to do. Most of the time you are smart enough to figure that out on your own. So in the coming weeks the foundation for reconciliation of people in dispute will be given. In this way we will have the foundation for a healthy congregation.

For the present on this Ash Wednesday I would point out that any discussion of healthy congregations has to talk about the actions of the membership toward one another. Healthy congregations cannot simply talk about reconciliation and peace making between the members and not do it. To do so is hypocrisy and lawlessness. Thus we must implement action within the congregation toward a healthy one. But if I am going to give you the foundation for the actions that you will take, then let us begin the foundation which God sets forth for us in 2Peter, chapter 1.

God gives us a list of virtues. All of these virtues are necessary for a healthy congregation. The first virtue that God puts forward is faith. Faith is foundational to everything that we are. Without faith there is only sin. With faith everything is sanctified by the Lord Jesus. Therefore any healthy congregation cannot proceed with healthy living unless she has faith as we will see. Along with faith God puts forward excellence.

The excellence to which God refers is His own excellence. His excellence is that which makes Him excellent. God is not excellent merely because He is the only God. God is excellent in the things that He does. His excellence is demonstrated chiefly in His saving actions taken through His Son, Jesus Christ.

In addition to excellence God puts forward knowledge. In order to understand that Jesus Christ does in fact bring about the excellencies of God we must understand Jesus Christ. In order to understand Jesus Christ, we must increase our knowledge of the apostolic and prophetic testimony. Without a good understanding of the Bible there is not going to be much understanding of Jesus Christ. And without a good understanding of Jesus Christ, the excellencies of God will remain unknown. And if the excellencies of God remain unknown how can they be deployed in the congregation for the sake of its health?

In addition to knowledge God puts forward self control. Self control will naturally arise as one becomes more acquainted with God. The more you read the Bible the more it will change how you think. If you desire self control, read the Bible a lot. That will increase your knowledge of God and his excellencies which will in turn increase your self control

Self control is vital to a healthy congregation. A congregation cannot well handle her own internal disputes unless the members exercise self control. If the members do whatever they want to do, in their sinful flesh they will do those things that make sense to them. But those things will be motivated by the fear of other gods and the love of other gods and trust in other gods and when that happens conflict within a congregation becomes worse. The members must be able not to do what they would really like to do in order to maintain a healthy congregation.

In addition to self control God puts forward steadfast endurance. The members of the congregation cannot merely have self control for a while. They must have it all of the time. They cannot merely have self control on some issues and not on others. They cannot merely take a stand on their confession of faith some of the time and not all of the time. Therefore when a congregation practices self control over a long period of time, they develop steadfast endurance. They learn to stand up for their confession of faith over time. They learn to put aside their own self for the sake of others and do so over a long period of time. In this way the congregation maintains her stability over a long period of time.

In addition to self control God puts forward godliness. When self control blossoms into steadfast endurance the result is godliness. Here the knowledge of the excellencies of God is so important. Jesus Christ has revealed to us the excellencies of God. He has made the invisible God visible. By so doing He has revealed God's excellencies. By making those things visible we are now able to live like God. When we live like God we become godly. Living like God always results in healthy congregations.

In addition to godliness God puts forward brotherly love. Brotherly love is obviously necessary for a health congregation. No one is going to resolve their disputes with fellow members of the congregation unless they love the fellow members of their congregation. They must love the brotherhood otherwise all is lost. Such brotherly love will motivate the previous virtues even as brotherly love results from the previous virtues.

In addition to brotherly love God puts forward self sacrificing love. And this is necessary because when you practice self control and lay aside what you would want to do for the sake of your brother or for the sake of the whole congregation. This laying aside of yourself is exactly what Jesus did when He died for us on the cross and is therefore the excellencies of God. This love results in a healthy congregation no matter what her other circumstances regarding her budget or her average attendance at Divine Service may be.

Now in order to bring about these virtues for the sake of healthy congregation a knowledge of God is required, especially a knowledge of His excellencies. That is where this year's Lent series is going to go. It is an exploration of the excellencies of God. As such it will give you the motive and foundation for living at peace with one another, but it will not yet be

practical. One cannot be practical and jump right to application without first understanding why we do what we do. Thus I will not give you seven steps toward a healthier congregation in the next few weeks on Wednesday nights together. Rather I will give you the excellencies of God. Because forsaking the lust and corruption the world and clinging to these virtues you will enter into the everlasting kingdom of your Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.