



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 31, 2007

New Year's Even Worship

1 Peter 1:22-25

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 51:1-6

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 90

Second Lesson: Luke 13:6-9

Gospel: Luke 13:6-9

Love One Another Deeply

I spent most of last week out in South Dakota with some relatives and I got a glimpse of what is coming for us. Not the weather that goes from there over to here most of the time, but commercials. The television station was close enough to the Iowa border that it ran some commercials with the Iowa Caucus coming up. So I got to see some of those lovely political commercials that sometime along the line we will all get bombarded with.

Did you ever notice how these guys and gals talk about each other? You don't exactly expect them to go up and hug each other when you listen to them talk about each other, do you? But have you ever noticed that at this time of the year, as the year draws to a close, someone that ran against someone else 20 years ago or whatever it was has died in the past year and they do those retrospectives of all the people who have died over the past year, and the people that were hurling mud at each other at that time now can only speak glowing things about this person who has died and what a wonderful person they were and how honest they were, and on and on and on. If you see them now in these commercials, think about that; 30 years from now the ones that are still alive are going to be talking glowingly about the one who died, right?

Have you ever thought to yourself, "Why do we wait until people are dead to talk nice about them?" Isn't that kind of foolish? Isn't that a little silly? But we see it every year at this time of year, don't we? The retrospective, the list of all the people that have died in the past year—you never hear anyone say, "Boy, that guy was an obnoxious jerk. I'm glad to see him gone."

Don't you wonder if we are like that within the body of Christ or do we reflect that same thing in our society? As you look back over the past year, how often did you defend your brothers and sisters in Christ in our congregation when someone else was attacking them and they weren't there? How often did you speak up for them? And then, on the other side of the scale, how often did you join in? How often did you heap more coals on their heads when they weren't around?

It's kind of interesting if you think about that for yourself, especially when you consider what Peter has to say to us this evening. "Love one another deeply, from the heart." Love one another fervently. Love one another in a way that it shows itself, not just with words that are mumbled. We tend to mumble "the Lord be with you, and also with you." We tend to mumble that once in a while, don't we? But, love one another deeply, from the heart. Why?—because we have been born again from imperishable seed.

At this time of the year we have a tendency to look back at all the things that are gone, all the things that happened in the past year. A lot of things will come and go, a lot of things in your life, things and loved ones will come and go in the course of the year. But in reality, you and I last forever because we have been born of that imperishable seed. And because we have this bond, this commonality of our faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior, that's why Peter encourages you and me to love one another, deeply, fervently, in ways that others can see.

That's kind of a neat reminder as we end the year, isn't it? Look back, see where we fail to do it, and say, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." Then remind ourselves as we go forward and cross over into 2008 why we have every reason to love one another deeply. We have been born again, Peter said. We have been born again of imperishable seed through the living and enduring Word of God. We have purified ourselves by obeying the truth. What he is talking about there is believing that Jesus lived and died in our place. Even that obedience is the gift of God.

In paragraphs leading up to this text, he quotes from Leviticus where it says, "Be holy as I, the Lord your God, am holy." That isn't the truth you and I have obeyed. You and I haven't been holy as God is holy. The only thing we have been holy-like is Swiss cheese in all the places we haven't kept God's law. But we have obeyed the truth because God, through his Spirit, through the Spirit working through Word and Sacrament, through this gospel message, has led us to believe that Jesus lived in our place and died in our place. And now, even as all these readings remind us that things pass away, that time marches on, that things change, the one thing that doesn't change is God's justice that goes out to the nations and that has went out to us, the justice that poured out his wrath on Christ instead of on us, his justice that redeemed us and bought us back from our sins so that we can stand holy before God because Jesus' obedience is counted as ours. That's why he says to love one another deeply, from the heart.

It doesn't take long for me to see it. I'm sure it doesn't take long for you to see it—where you have failed to love over the past year, where you haven't loved deeply from the heart, where your love has been superficial at best, or at worst completely absent and loving words have been replaced with attacking words. That's why we gather together this evening and we remind ourselves of our sins. We meditate on our sins. And then we rejoice that those sins, our failure to love, has been taken away by Jesus Christ. And as we sit here in the presence of God and one another, we are holy, we are perfect, and we are completely and absolutely forgiven, because Jesus' blood covers us.

This evening we come and receive his very body and blood in, with and under the bread and the wine and we hear those wonderful words "for the forgiveness of your sins"—not just the world's sins, but each one of our sins. We have the personal assurance, that personal covenant that God makes directly with us, "I have taken away your sins." Not only have you been born again, but you have this continuing food for your faith so that you grow and are strengthened in your faith. That's why we want to love one another deeply. That's why in the future we want to strive to defend one another and speak up for one another.

Speaking up for one another is kind of tough at times, isn't it? When I was in college, I worked for the assessor in Richland Township in Michigan. We assessed the whole township, so I went through every parcel of the township. I had to go through the properties, measure the properties and talk to the owners about what the inside of their house was like if they wouldn't let me in to look at it, and then get it all on paper so the assessors could then come up with a valuation of the property for the property taxes. Evidently my measuring stick was the fault of every property law that the State of Michigan had ever passed, because I had a lot of people that heaped a lot of abuse on me. That was fine. I smiled and said, "Thank you, sir." But I had one guy that started telling me what a dirty, rotten so and so the assessor was. That got my back up because the assessor happened to be my father. I said, "You know, sir. That is my father you are talking about." He said, "I don't give a blankity blank" and so on. It was a guy that owned a business and his workers were right behind him. I stayed smiling, but I gave it right back to him. It's the only time I ever did it when I had that job, but I gave it back to him just as fast as he was giving it to me. I did it with a smile and I didn't raise my voice, but I didn't back down. He could chew me out because I knew he didn't know what he was talking about. He chewed my dad out. I knew he didn't know what he was talking about, but now he was talking about my dad, and I wasn't going to let that be. I met two of the workers at a softball or baseball game later that week, and they came up and shook my hand and said they had never seen anyone speak to their boss that way. He was that kind of guy. But when the circumstances demanded it, you spoke up for someone, especially blood, right?

When you stop and think about it, you and I are blood. Our fellow believers are blood. We've been covered by the blood of Christ. We are brothers and sisters in the faith. We want to speak up for one another. We want to encourage one another. We want to comfort one another. We want to lift one another up when each of us goes through the valleys of life because we are all going to get there. That's why God brings us together so that we can love one another tangibly—not only by defending one another, not only by avoiding joining in, but speaking up to defend one another, and also by loving one another and offering that gospel encouragement that only we as believers have to share with one another.

Peter pagan is not going to come up and comfort me with the gospel as I face life's challenges. But you can. And I can do the same for you. That's how God wants us to love one another deeply, from the heart, with that imperishable Word.

Think of how that is, what are the things we look back on and we think about that we love? Did you ever notice most of the year-end stories start with—what did they start with this year? Credit crunch, house prices falling, what the stock market has done? We start with what we love, don't we—at times, our pocket books—as we review the year? Think of how our God reminds us that these things are all going to pass away. They will come and go. They will go up in value and down in value. None of them are going to go with us. But our fellow believers are going to go with us and those that have gone before us are going to be there waiting for us because they have been born of the imperishable Word of God. So things can pass away, but you and I and our loved ones who are in Christ will endure forever.

So it puts a greater value on them then, doesn't it? As time passes and things change and we get older and we can't do what we used to do, or we get older and now we get to start doing things we couldn't when we were younger, it's a whole new world at times out there. It's always changing. But the blessings that you and I have in Christ will never pass away.

That's a wonderful, wonderful truth to use to encourage one another as we love one another deeply. It also reminds us how important it is for us in the coming year, just as it was in the past year, just as it is in every year, to make faithful use of that living and enduring Word of God and how important it is that we grow in our knowledge of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. With that kind of love, then we reflect God's love for us as we share that Word with one another. Then it doesn't matter whether we are looking back over the last week or over the last year, or whether we are doing it this year or 20 years from now, we can always start with "Lord I thank you, not only for your gospel, but also for the fellow believers that it gave me through the living and enduring Word of God."