

The Sunday after the Ascension

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Our Lord says that the apostles will be thrown out of the synagogues, that is, out of the churches. Whoever kills them will think he is offering a service to God, which is to say, the murderers will not come from outside the Church but from within it. We should be aware of this, because we often hear the complaint that the Church fights too much and Christians and nonchristians alike are surprised that Christians behave badly toward one another.

The Church fights because we are the Church Militant. That is what Militant means; we struggle, we fight, we battle, with the cross of Jesus going on before us. We have not yet been relieved of all suffering and pain and hardship. We are the Fighting Church. False teachings and divisions will and must come and we must fight against it. Jesus has promised us that. We will have tribulations. No one gets out of this valley of the shadow of death alive.

Satan brings his most powerful attacks against us from inside the Church. The devil is the most productive and successful in leading the sheep from the green pasture from within the church. Remember, the devil is the wolf dressed in sheep's clothing, ready to attack and devour us. That is why we are the fighting Church. We must fight. We must watch and pray and be prepared. Why is this so hard for us to understand? Why do we think we should live in a utopia where all the Christians teach the same thing and are nice to one another? The Church at the time of Jesus was not like that. The Church at the time of the Apostles, immediately after Jesus' Ascension into heaven, was not like that. Christians were and are dying for the one true faith and that is a good thing. The Church was and is and will always be severely divided. Why do you think we have different denominations? It is not because of race or color or language, it is because of Creed. We do not believe the same thing. Jesus told us there would be division between father and son, and mother and daughter; so why do we act so surprised?

We fight because there is something in us that wants what is good and longs for heaven. We all, no matter who we are, rightly desire to see the face of God right now. We want the peace God promises us. We want the love that will show the world we are the disciples of Jesus. We want to live out the fruits of the Holy Spirit. We want to be doers of the Word, gentle and kind to all, who live in grace and forgiveness, and not those in constant contention and strife. We want Easter because we are tired of Good Friday. We want the Ascension into heaven because we are tired of the struggle and pain.

But we need to be aware of what we want. Satan uses what we want against us. We want the good, but we don't always want the Giver. We want to take the things that are convenient and leave behind the things we are ashamed of. But we cannot divide God. We cannot pick and chose, from God's Word, what we want to believe. The problem is not so much with what we want, peace and harmony, that is a good thing. The problem is how we get there. The problem is that we fail to realize that Christian unity is not a product of the Church but the gift of the Holy Ghost. We can create peace and love by forcing ourselves to be nicer to each other; that is fake and short lived. We can reject the truth of God's Word; but that will not create true unity either. Christian Unity comes by the Word of God, as it is taught in all of its truth and purity. Christian unity comes when the Sacraments of baptism, Confession and Eucharist are used according to Christ's command. Christian unity comes as a gift from the Holy Ghost, when and where He wills it. That is where true peace, on this side of heaven, is to be found.

The time will come when we will enjoy full Christian unity, and that will be when Jesus comes again to judge the quick and the dead; but that time is not yet. Now the world and the devil will do all kinds of evil things to us, as they did them to the apostles before us, and it will hurt. We will have tribulations. False teachings will come and they will bring with them shame and suffering. Who is proud and happy about the divisions in the Christian Church? Who here rejoices at the

burden of closed communion? Who here gladly goes and tells his friends he believes in the twenty-four hour, six-days of creation, knowing they will think that means he is backwards, a bigot, and stupid? Who here eagerly defends the need for God in the public square and in our schools, against teacher and peer alike who think they are nothing but Jesus' freaks?

We live with false teachings and divisions and they hurt. They are difficult to bear. But do not think them strange. Do not be surprised that the Church fights, that we are so riddled through with denominations and even bicker non-stop within our own church body and congregation. The Lord has told us these things beforehand so that we would not stumble, so that we would not be deceived and slump into despair. Do not become ashamed of the Church Militant. What we struggle with and against, inside ourselves, as baptized and forgiven Christians, struggling against sin, death and the power of the devil, is what the Church Militant knows and struggles with. The Church Militant has two natures, one forgiven and clean and one fallen and condemned. The baptized Christian has two natures, one sinful and one forgiven; we are at the same time sinners and saints. The Lord has told these us things in advance, that we would not be seduced by the lying prophets who cry, "peace, peace," when there is no peace.

We fight because it is important. The confession we make matters. To confess false things about God, for any reason, even to preach false things about God for the sake of peace or unity is blasphemy, it is a damnable offense. It can affect the comfort and hope that is ours. We fight because false teaching about God misleads people and plays into the devil's hand. False doctrine undermines the doctrine of Christ and the promise of salvation. If you claim that Genesis is spelled with two n's, you're not a heretic you just got a detail wrong. But if you claim that Jonah wasn't actually swallowed by a great fish and wasn't inside its belly for three days, but that Jonah just made up the story; then you confuse Our Lord's use of that event to point to His own resurrection from the dead on the third day, you bring the truth of Holy Scripture, and thereby the Gospel itself, into

doubt. That is not tolerable. That has to be fought against. We do not hold to our doctrine out of some obsessive compulsion or stubbornness. We do not break fellowship or fight over technicalities or personalities. We fight for, and suffer for, the doctrine of God's love in Christ Jesus, that creates faith in men and saves them. We fight for the one true faith, for people like Makayla, that she would be confident in the baptismal grace that now saves her.

Fighting is tiresome. Our fallen flesh is weak. Who hasn't become disheartened, even at times ashamed of the Church and her constant fighting? In such moments it is hard not to fear that we have gone too far, put our hope in the wrong things, or wondered if it even matters. When that happens, repent, and look at the reality of God's love in Christ Jesus on the cross. The question to ask is not, "have I been pure?" but, "Has Jesus laid down His life for me? Am I baptized? Does He forgive?" The answer is yes. The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are condemned, but to those being saved it is the power of God.

Our comfort and peace will never come from men, not even from the Church. It will come from above. Denominations might move farther away from teaching the truth of God's Word, people might think you are stupid for believing God and going to church on Sunday, but it doesn't really matter. What matters is that Jesus has died for you. Your name has been written in the Book of Life. He loves and remembers you. He will see you through. What matters is that Jesus has died for you, has paid for your sins, has risen from the dead for your justification, has ascended to the Father to pave your way into heaven, and sends His Holy Spirit to teach you this. If you are criticized for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of God rests upon you. You are baptized. You are forgiven. You are a child of God. The kingdom of heaven is yours. Amen.

Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Lord Jesus, we are in danger all the days of our life unless You surround us with Your strength and keep the wolf in sheep's clothing from overcoming us. Keep us faithful in the day of temptation and rescue us with Your grace when we fall, that we may be ready to receive You when You come again in Your glory. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord Jesus, You created the Sacrament of Baptism that by it we would be Your dear brothers and sisters, members of Your Father's family. We rejoice today that Makayla Ranae Shaver has been made a child of God, forgiven of her sins and promised the blessings of heaven. Be with Carol, Dwaine, Kinnick, Richard, Judy, Alissa, Alex, William, Kendal, Cael, Michelle, Richard and all those who celebrate birthdays, reminding them of Your baptismal grace. Be with Mike and Ranae, Darrell and Bonnie, Chadric and Alyson, Danierl and Hannah, John and Amy and all those who celebrate the gift of marriage, reminding them that you are at the heart of their marriage. Lord in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord Jesus, You hold the might of man in Your hand and can destroy all things by Your mighty power. Bless our nation and all the peoples of the world. Where war and violence threaten, bring peace and justice. Where oppression reigns, bring freedom and liberty. Watch over those who serve to protect and defend us, especially all the men and women of our armed forces and their families, and those within our own community who act on our behalf. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord Jesus, give peace and unity to Your Church. Keep us from discord and strife that would distract us from the work of the Kingdom. Bless Matthew, our Synod president, Paul our District President, Chadric our Pastor, and all who proclaim Your Word of truth. Give us unity as we work together to proclaim Your Gospel to every end of the earth. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord Jesus, as once You prayed to the Father for us, continue to speak for us and for all those in special need. Grant Your healing to the sick, Your peace to the troubled, Your comfort to the grieving, and Your courage to the troubled [*especially Ruth Good*]. In accordance with Your good and gracious will, deliver everyone in need from their troubles. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord Jesus, help us to remember that, though we live our lives out in the world, we belong to You. Keep us from saying words that betray this truth or actions that betray our baptismal identity as Your own brothers and sisters by faith and help us to make a bold confession that gives witness to the fact that we fear, love and trust in You above all things. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord Jesus, You are both host and food in the Holy Sacrament of the Altar. Give us faith to recognize Your body and blood and to receive with grateful faith this blessed food in the communion of Your body and blood. Guide us to live faithfully here on earth until we live forever with You in heaven. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord Jesus, grant us only those things which are profitable for us and for our salvation, for we pray Your will be done. Into Your hands we command all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**