

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Third Sunday of Easter ✠

April 6, 2008

Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd:

³⁶ "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

It's always nice to know that what you do makes a difference. I think that's why I always enjoyed the part-time jobs that I had when I was in school. I always did things like landscaping, lawn-mowing, laying sod. Those are things which had a very visible result. When you show up at a job site with no landscaping and no grass, and you leave the same site with shrubs, rock beds, and a new lawn, it makes a big difference. This past week when I mowed my lawn, I noticed that I still enjoy that, probably because so many other things in life are not that way. I'm sure I'm not alone.

Kids: Say you have some math homework to do. You know you have to do it, but you probably don't feel much smarter after doing your math. You probably don't notice the difference.

Parents, how many times do you wonder if the things you say, if the things that you do for your children really make a difference for them? You hope they do, but the difference is not immediately apparent.

And on top of it all, the things that don't seem to make a difference are sometimes hardest things to do. Or in other words, it would be so much easier not to do them. Whether it's learning or teaching or disciplining or exercising or saving, you name it. It's hard to do when you don't see what difference it makes.

How about these? Preaching, worshipping, studying, serving. Does it really make a difference? Does it make a noticeable difference if you opened your Bible this week? I can't tell by looking

at you. Does it make a difference if you were here on Easter or last week? Is it going to make a difference that you are here today? If I followed you around for the next couple days, would it be completely obvious that the preaching of the gospel had really made a difference in your day-to-day life? Or would it look about the same? Does it make a difference?

The truth is that very often it doesn't seem to make a difference. Whether we do it or not doesn't seem to matter much. It certainly would be easier to just forget it all. Maybe no one would notice. Maybe it wouldn't make a difference. But does it? Does the proclamation and the hearing and studying of the Word of God really make a difference? Does the message of Easter make a difference – even today?

Before you answer that, let's look at the end of Peter's Pentecost sermon one more time and see if that sermon made any difference. Let's see if it really makes a difference to us as well.

Peter's audience was, in reality, rather different than this group gathered here today. The people who were gathered together on Pentecost weren't expecting an Easter sermon. They were Jews who had gathered for the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost. But they hadn't come expecting the kind of message Peter had to proclaim. They didn't expect to hear the real story of Jesus' resurrection, rather than the rumor that had been going around about someone stealing Jesus' body from the tomb. They didn't expect to hear that this Jesus was the Savior promised in the Old Testament. They didn't expect to come face to face with the reality that this Jesus is the one they crucified. Their actions or their failure to act; their words or their failure to speak – sent Jesus to the cross, but (Peter says) God raised him from the dead.

Did Peter's sermon make a difference? It made a total difference. When they heard these words, **"they were cut to the heart."** The message of the law in Peter's sermon was like spiritual open heart surgery without anesthesia. It hurt. It hurt bad. It made a difference, a difference that showed – in their desperation.

"Brothers, what shall we do?" Truth is, though, they had already done enough. What was done is done. There was nothing that they could do to go back and undo what they had done. And now they were living with the guilt and the burden of their sin.

What's more, they now realized that they not only *had not* kept God's law, they *could not* keep it. You see, these were not people who hadn't tried to do what was right. They tried hard to keep God's law. Even the leaders of the Jews who had plotted against Jesus to kill him were actually trying to do the right thing. They thought they were pleasing God by getting rid of this Jesus. They were corrupt; they were crooked. Their hearts were by nature opposed to God; opposed to his plan for their salvation.

The difference Peter's sermon made in them was that they now saw that they could do nothing. Their ability to please God was just like ours – we have none.

What difference does the preaching of God's law make in us? It leads us to total desperation. I can't go back and change what I've done yesterday. I can't rely on myself to do better tomorrow. I can do nothing. It is the preaching of God's Word that makes me realize that. It's the preaching of God's Word that makes that difference in me.

And it is that same message that answers the natural question, "What shall we do?": Don't do anything. Repent and be baptized. You used to rely on yourself. Now rely on God in your baptism; rely on the repentance that he gives to forgive your sins. Rely on him to give even faith as a promise and a gift. That's a big difference.

Pentecost sure made a big difference to the size of the Jerusalem church. In one day they grew from just a couple hundred to over three thousand. But what kind of difference do you suppose

it made in lives of those thousands? If you followed them around for a few days, would you have noticed a difference?

Let's do that. Let's follow along: "**They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.**"

What difference did Peter's preaching make? What difference did the message of law and gospel make on these newly converted Jews? A huge difference. After it had led them to total desperation of themselves and to faith in their Savior. These words also led them to total devotion. What did they devote themselves to? **The apostles' teaching.** They heard the sermon. Now they stayed for Bible Class. They wanted to learn more. **The fellowship.** The message that they heard made a difference in the way they looked at each other. The Christian faith is a personal relationship with Jesus, but it also means we have a personal relationship to the other members of Christ's body. **The breaking of bread.** This phrase can refer either to the Lord's Supper or to another joint meal, but in either case they gathered together to build each other up in the faith. **The prayers** – together, they came before Almighty God with petitions and thanksgiving for themselves and for others.

The message that they heard that day made a difference. It made a difference what they did with their possessions. They recognized that those possessions are gifts of God and can be used to serve one another. The message they heard made a difference in how they used their time. You don't heard them saying, "Well, I guess I could spare an hour here, an evening there. But I don't want to make too many commitments. Because you know how busy I am. You know how demanding my job is. You know how many things we have to get the kids to." If we read that here, we might wonder if the Word of God really did make a difference to them.

And if we look at our lives I can't help wondering if it makes a difference to us. But can I tell you something? It wasn't their **devotion** that made the difference. It wasn't their **resolve** to get to the temple everyday, even though there were other things they could do. It wasn't their **will-ingness** to spend extra time studying at the feet of the apostles. It wasn't their **generosity** to share their possessions with those who had need. That's not what made the difference in their lives.

What made the difference was the **teaching.** The teaching showed them that God was responsible for their creation, redemption, and sanctification. **Baptism** made the difference. Baptism made them children of God and everyday it could remind them to live the baptismal life, a life of repentance and faith. The **Lord's Supper** made the difference. Every time they received Jesus' body and blood, they received the seal, the proof that what Jesus did for the whole world, he did for each of them. That's why they devoted themselves to those things. Because those are the things that make a difference.

It may be that your pastor cannot preach like Peter. It may be that you don't feel dramatically different after the Lord's Supper or after the service. You may feel like your presence here or your attendance at Sunday School or your attention to personal or family devotions doesn't really matter – like it doesn't make a difference. But Jesus' gifts that he offers to you in these things do make a difference. They make a total difference and are the only thing in life that really make a difference.

There is a satisfaction to jobs that make a difference. When I'm mowing the lawn, there is a point when I can look back and see all the grass evenly mowed, then I can put the mower away, step back and admire my work, and call it done. If only we could do that here. Perhaps if you had some kind of gauge that could tell me that you've had enough for today and we could say "Amen" and be done with it. Or perhaps we could get to the point in our lives when we've had all the religion we need for a lifetime, and we can put the tools away and call it done. But the truth is, we'll never have that satisfaction, because we will never be done. But that doesn't mean that it makes no difference. Because from day to day, from week to week, and from year to year, "God has made this Jesus both Lord and Christ." And he promises to you – to you and to your children and to all who are far off – that in his Word and Sacraments he makes a difference to you, for you, and in you.