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Sermon for the Golden Jubilee of a Congregation

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Sermon for the Golden Jubilee of a Congregation.

Ps. 119, 106.

It is with heartfelt rejoicing and fervent thanksgiving that you are met together in your house of worship on this occasion. After weeks and months of careful planning and prayerful preparation the day of your golden jubilee has come. You have united your hearts and voices in songs of praise, echoing the exultation of the psalmist: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits." "The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tabernacles of the righteous. . . . This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." "O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever."

For fifty years the Lord of the Church has showered the blessings of His grace upon your congregation; for fifty years He has vouchsafed to you the ministry of the pure Word and the unadulterated Sacraments; for fifty years you have found fulfilled in your midst the Lord's word: "In all places where I record My name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee"; for fifty years you have, with the help of God, maintained in this place a Lutheran Zion, holding fast to the principles of true Lutheranism, to which your congregation pledged itself at the time of its organization.

It so happened that the year of your organization as a congregation was a jubilee year in the Lutheran Church. In that year of our Lord, 1880, the true Lutherans the world over were celebrating the 350th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. No doubt, cognizance was taken of this at the time by your founders, especially since your constitution pledges your congregation to strict adherence to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530. In this year of your golden jubilee, the Lutheran Church is again celebrating. This time it is to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of that fundamental symbol of our beloved Church.

It will be fitting therefore to view your own jubilee in the light of this fact, that, as your founders pledged your congregation to fidelity to the Augsburg Confession, you to-day wish to reaffirm that pledge and reconsecrate yourselves to its Biblical principles. Let us consider —

***YOUR PLEDGE TO GOD AS A CHURCH OF THE
UNALTERED AUGSBURG CONFESSION, AND WHY YOU
SHOULD JOYFULLY REAFFIRM THAT PLEDGE ON THIS
DAY OF JUBILEE.***

1.

"I have sworn, and I will perform it, that I will keep Thy righteous judgments." In these words the psalmist, a member of the Old Testament Church, pledges himself to faithfulness to the Word of God. God Jehovah had made a covenant with His people Israel. He had given them the rite of circumcision as a sign and as a remembrancer of that agreement. He would be their God, whose leadership they would follow in all things. He had sent His prophets to reveal His Word, and from time to time had blessed them with special and direct manifestations of His grace and assurances of His love: "The mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee."

The psalmist, in the words before us, acknowledges the importance and value of God's Word to His people. The verse preceding our text states: "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." Then, in our text, he solemnly reiterates his purpose to remain true to the requirements of that Word and to trust in its glorious promises because it is the only true and safe rule and guide for faith and life.

The founders of your congregation, at the time of its organization, took the same kind of pledge. They bound themselves to the Scriptures, the Old and the New Testament, as the inspired Word of God and therefore the sole rule of faith and life, and they accepted the Augsburg Confession and the other confessions of our Church as the correct exhibition of that Word.

Some one may ask, Why was that added? Was it not sufficient simply to accept the Word of God? I remember that as a boy I wondered why the corner-stone of this Church had inscribed on it the letters U. A. C. In our instructions prior to confirmation, Pastor—explained to us that those letters meant that this Church was a Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. But why is it necessary to make such a specification? Not because it adds anything to the revealed Word nor because the Word of God is insufficient, but because the Augsburg Confession clearly proves that the Lutheran Church stands four-square on the Bible and nothing but the Bible.

Experience, the experience of the ages, proves that it is not enough for an individual or a Church to say: I stand on the Bible. The devil himself said that when he tempted our Lord. False prophets of all ages have come forward with the declaration that they were teaching Bible truths, and yet St. Paul, for instance, declares emphatically that the false prophets of his day brought a new gospel. The chief trouble lies in this, that men sit in judgment on the Bible,

and instead of accepting its plain statements, they interpret them by their fallible human reason; and one deviates from the truth in this direction, the other in that, and a third in still another.

Luther's Reformation of the sixteenth century was not the bringing of a new revelation to the world; he took the old Gospel, rid it of all man-made interpretations and unscriptural additions, and let it shine forth once more in all its brightness and purity. And when the followers of Luther were maligned as false teachers and heretics, they answered, in 1530, by presenting the Augsburg Confession as a proof that they taught nothing but Scriptural truth. To this end they said: "We offer . . . the confession of our preachers and ourselves, showing what manner of doctrine from Holy Scriptures and the pure Word of God has been up to this time set forth in our lands." And again: "This is about the sum of our doctrine, in which, as can be seen, there is nothing that varies from the Scriptures." It was simply a definite and detailed way of saying: Here is the proof that we teach the Bible and nothing but the Bible.

From that time forth all true Lutherans have accepted the Augsburg Confession, and pledged themselves to it, *because* it is in harmony with God's Word.

The founders of your church, when they organized, wished to establish a Lutheran church here and desired to preserve the correct teaching and preaching of Scriptural doctrine. They wished to set up a strong bulwark against error and superstition. They desired to have their children and children's children assured of the same spiritual blessings. And therefore the specific pledge was made to the Augsburg Confession and the other Lutheran symbols. Every pastor called to minister among you, every teacher called to instruct the children in your midst, every officer elected to serve your congregation in any capacity, aye, every voting member, every communicant member, and every child at its confirmation has throughout these fifty years been required to make the same pledge, — to use the words of our text: "I have sworn, and I will perform it, that I will keep Thy righteous judgments."

By doing this, your congregation, by the grace of God, has remained a true Lutheran congregation in the face of opposition, slander, and attacks by spiritual foes of all kinds. Not all, it is true, who at one time or another made this solemn pledge have remained faithful to it. Some have fallen by the wayside. Moreover, all those who were true continued so not by their own strength, but by the power of God's Holy Spirit working in them. But as a congregation you stand to-day on the same platform established by your founders, and you, as a church, can on this day of jubilee praise God's overabundant mercy in having kept you loyal to the faith of the fathers.

In fact, this should be the chief cause of your thanksgiving to-day, this should be the theme of your songs and the burden of your prayers, that from your inmost heart you give glory to God, who once began this good work in you and who has performed it unto this day and hour; that it is the Lord's mercy that you were not consumed because His compassion failed not.

The Lord hath helped me hitherto
 By His surpassing favor;
 His mercies every morn were new,
 His kindness did not waver.
 God hitherto hath been my Guide,
 Hath hitherto my wants supplied,
 And hitherto hath helped me.

2.

All your jubilations, however, and all your festivities, dear friends, would be an empty show, a meaningless gesture, if they did not include a solemn resolve for the future, a reaffirmation of the sacred principles that are basic in your church's constitution, a re-consecration to abide in the Word of God as true children of God.

Why is that so essential? Because your Lord and Savior desires it. To His disciples He once said the weighty words: "If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed," and He is saying the same words to you to-day. Again: "Now are ye clean through the Word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in Me."

In our day the visible Church is full of people who have forsaken this Word of Truth and of congregations which, though once banded together on the basis of Biblical principles, have long since departed from them. There is a general defection, a falling away from the truth. The heart of the Savior must bleed in view of such conditions.

To-day He, as it were, stands before you and repeats the question, once asked of His disciples when so many who had hitherto followed Him were leaving: "Will ye also go away?"

Therefore this your jubilee should be your decisive answer to your Lord and Savior; it should mean, to use the words of the disciples on that occasion: "Lord, whither shall we go? Thou hast words of eternal life"; or to express it in the words of our text: "We have sworn, and we will perform it, that we will keep Thy righteous judgments."

In other words, your celebration should have this significance: We purpose, with God's help, to remain faithful to our foundation. In our midst henceforth, as in the past, we shall know nothing save Christ and Him crucified; the Word of God in its purity and fulness shall be preached from this pulpit; our children shall be carefully

instructed and trained in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; the Sacraments shall be administered strictly according to Christ's institution; and we shall endeavor to walk before the Lord in conformity to His Word. We declare before God and all the world that we are, and wish to remain unto the end, humble, believing, Bible Christians — a truly orthodox Lutheran congregation!

Oh, how the rich and bountiful favor and blessings of the past should incite you to keep this solemn vow! For has not your God been good and gracious beyond all deserts? Originally you were but a small group; now you have become a large congregation; daughter congregations have sprung from your loins; the stream of living water has flowed into all parts of this city, and beyond, from this place. Who can estimate the good done for immortal souls through your work? Who can measure the fruits of the sacred seed sown in this place? Who can weigh the comfort, the encouragement, the strengthening, the instruction, the lifting up, the new life and light and love and zeal which immortal souls received through the ministry of the Word established in your midst?

I know, dear friends, that nothing is farther from your thoughts at this time than to deviate even a hair's breadth from the faith once committed to the saints. But Satan is ever active, temptations of all sorts are to be expected, and as Christians you are well aware of the weaknesses of the flesh. Therefore pray God to-day to strengthen you in your high resolve; pray Him to forgive all faults and shortcomings of the past and by His grace to continue His gracious work in and through you.

Furthermore, you have the divine assurance that God will be with you also in the future. The glorified Savior, at His ascension, promised His disciples: "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." He is the great Head of the Church, and through His Holy Spirit He guides and leads His members here below. With His Spirit and by His power you will be able to go on from strength to strength. His strength shall be made perfect in your weakness. His kindness shall not depart from you, neither shall the covenant of His peace be removed. He will bless you, and you will be a blessing to many.

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." "Hold fast to the profession of your faith without wavering." "Hold that fast which thou hast that no man take thy crown." Amen. W. G. POLACK.

