

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

When people in America today speak of believing in God, it probably isn't the God of our Christian ancestors. Our Christian ancestors believed in the God who revealed Himself in Holy Scriptures. The Bible was the source of all wisdom, faith, true love, and hope. It would have been unimaginable for our great grandparents to seek God outside of His Word.

Today, if you ask the person on the street if they believe in a "god," the usual reply is, "Yes, I believe there's a higher being that had a hand in creating all things." In a poll, 90% of Americans said they believe in a "higher being" or "god." What's not revealed in this statistic is the kind of god they believe in. Rev. Bryan Wolfmueller, author of the book, *"Has American Christianity Failed?"* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c. 2016) writes:

"I'm spiritual, not religious." This anti-creed of American culture is as close as it gets to a universal doctrine of our age... Everybody, apparently wants to be spiritual, but no one wants to be religious. What's the difference? **To be "spiritual, not religious" is to have a god that doesn't talk.** As soon as God opens His mouth, there is religion, doctrine, and assertions. As soon as God talks, there is truth, and the truth is always distinguished from error. The desire for spirituality without religion is the idolatrous longing of the heart for a god that is mute. Conveniently...[this god] doesn't say anything about what is right or wrong. The mute god ... is very supportive, but it never tells me anything I don't know...The mute god will never interrupt my plans with its commands. (p. 38).

Wolfmueller goes on to state that **American spirituality today tries to free us from the harshness of God's Law.** It tries to free us from what is seen as oppressive, but in the end, without forgiveness of sins that comes from the Truth of God's Word, there is only oppression and death.

God spoke and the universe, and **all that is** came into being. God spoke, and Moses came down the mountain with God's Law. At Jesus' Transfiguration, God the Father spoke, *"This is my beloved Son; listen to Him"* (Mark 9:7). Throughout the history of mankind, God spoke, and things happened. At your Baptism, God spoke through the pastor, and you were born again (see John 3:3-8). In Psalm 119, God reminds us that His word speaks to us, to keep us from stumbling and to guide us through life: *"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"* (v. 105). While this verse is often quoted, the following verses are just as telling:

¹⁰⁶ I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to keep your righteous rules. ¹⁰⁷ I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word! ¹⁰⁸ Accept my freewill offerings of praise, O LORD, and teach me your rules. ¹⁰⁹ I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law. ¹¹⁰ The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts. ¹¹¹ Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart. ¹¹² I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end." (Psalm 119, ESV)

We are afflicted with sin. Our cry is the cry of the ages, "Give me life, O LORD, according to your word!" God speaks to us through Absolution, after His Spirit has led us to confess our sin, and His word gives us life! Eternal life in heaven! The truth is that we need to hear God speak to us. And

the Living Word became flesh and dwelt among us so that we could have this life, and have it in abundance.

More telling are verses 109 through 112. This section of Psalm 119 is God's only Son speaking of His time on earth. *"I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law."* Jesus understood the consequences of living to die for you and me. He could have walked away from the cross, but the Law of God had to be fulfilled. He carried the final sacrifice for mankind in His human frame. The wicked indeed laid a snare for Him, trying to get Him to abandon His walk to the cross. Satan tried to tempt Him as He struggled in the desert for 40 days. But He would not stray from His Father's precepts. In the Garden of Gethsemane, just hours before His death, Jesus struggled with having to hang on the cross and die. But He said, *"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will"* (Matt. 26:39).

Finally, on the cross, Jesus inclined His heart to remain faithful to His Father unto death itself. He accomplished the requirements of the Law forever and ever. And now, all who believe in Him have the promise of eternal life in heaven.

What do Christians usually say to friends or acquaintances who say, "I'm spiritual, not religious"? The typical reply is "I'm so glad you believe in God! Church isn't for everyone, and you've found God on your own. Wonderful!" The only problem is their path through life is that it's actually a path to perdition – eternal damnation. God Himself must speak to bring us to faith in Christ (see Romans 10:17, Acts 11:15-18), and He must continue to speak to us if we are to remain alive (see 2 Pet. 3:17-18). The Law must do its work to lead us to repentance. God's Gospel is the healing medicine that restores us and strengthens us to live for Him.

For those who you know who are "spiritual, not religious," pray for the courage and wisdom to help them hear the very words of our Lord. Share with them how important worship and God's word is to you. Help them to see that there is a cure for man's affliction called "sin." The cure is Jesus' very words of forgiveness for all who believe in Him. May God use us to help them hear the Truth.

Pastor Travis