

Dear members and friends of St. John,

"I don't like church anymore. The message is never **practical** – I don't see how it affects my life." That was a statement made in a recent visit I made to a member of St. John. Oh, it wasn't the member that said this; it was a relative who was visiting her at the time. This woman was tired of "going through the motions of church," and getting nothing out of it. She wasn't Lutheran, but this could just as easily have come from someone inside the Lutheran church.

There are a few things about the American culture that make leading a congregation challenging for pastors. First, we live in a self-help, do-it-yourself world. "Give us instructions on how to **live better, be happier, and find life more fulfilling.**" And what should be the best self-help book ever written: The Bible, of course. After all, it's written by the Author of life Himself. If the pastor is worth his salt, he should be able to glean out of God's word what we need to improve our lives on earth, right?

"What do I get out of my time in worship? The pastor keeps talking about the cross of Christ, and how Jesus died with my sins. So what? How does that solve my messed up life?" These comments point to a related problem: Americans expect a return on their investment, especially with our hard earned money, but even the investment of our precious time. We are a consumer-driven society, and as consumers, we want something to consume! "All this talk about our sins and our need for a savior doesn't give me something practical for use in everyday life." Satan and his minions are just waiting to convince you that your church is **never** going to meet your needs. Why keep going?

What Christians typically **want**, and what they **need**, are quite often two different (and wholly opposite) things. Our sinful side focuses on our physical and emotional needs. We're short-sighted, viewing things from the perspective of our temporal life. We place the greatest importance on this short time we have here on earth, worrying about our health problems, our relationship problems, and our financial problems. Notice that the focus is always on **tomorrow: being at least as good as, or preferably better than today.** We think about **our future** – but not *too* far into the future, because too far and we must admit that change is coming (and change makes us feel uncomfortable).

What does God have to say about our focus on the temporal – this brief time we have on earth? What does He have to say about our desire for the *practical Jesus* – a "savior" from our earthly troubles and worries? Plenty.

First, from Romans 12:2: "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" (ESV) From this text, we glean that believers should not be molded by the ways of this world. Instead, they are to be *transformed*, which is the same Greek word that God uses to describe Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain (Mark 9:2-3). The verb *transformed* is passive in the Greek, meaning that we don't change ourselves – God changes us! God began this work in Baptism. But that's only the beginning. He uses His means to renew our minds. And what kind of renewed minds do we need? To think the way God would have us think. That leads us to our next text.

"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever."(1 John 2:15-17, ESV) Our focus on this temporal life always comes from a love for this world, or the things in it. But this is in direct opposition to what God desires for us. "*The desires of the flesh*" include our health concerns, and the desire to 'live forever' in this flesh. The "*desires of the eyes and pride in possessions*" includes our storing up treasures that moth and rust can destroy. All folly.

So what does our Living Lord want for us? Jesus said, "*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*"(Matt. 6:33-34, ESV) The **focus is** not on our earthly existence (and how to make it better) – it's **on our spiritual life as a follower of Christ!** And how does God help you 'discover' the depths and riches of His love for you? How does He renew your mind, so that you don't get lost in worldliness? Through His Word and Sacraments. Pastors in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod know *what you want* – but, more importantly, we know **what you need!** (see also Eph. 4:11-25).

There are churches that focus on the worldly desires of American Christians, and they're often the largest congregations in the land. But pastors who truly seek to help their flock present the Word of God to the best of their abilities, in all its fullness and authority. The Law is presented, to show us our sin, and our true condition before God. The Gospel is presented to those brought low by the Law, that they may receive the wonderful comfort of knowing all their sins are forgiven – through Christ's work on the cross.

Every Christian should come to worship with the expectation that **God is going to bless them.** But it's not going to come the way the world wants to be blessed. It's going to come in a way that transforms your mind. God wants you to shift your focus from the worldly, to the heavenly. **He wants to wean you from your earthly desires,** including *a practical Jesus*, to thoughts that are Godly and beneficial to His kingdom. And what does God promise to His people that are transformed – renewed? Wonderful blessings, beyond measure! Not the absence of earthly problems, but a life that puts those problems in the proper perspective. He gives us strength to endure, and a focus that isn't on the temporal, but finds its roots in the sure and certain hope of eternal life in heaven. To those who have been disciplined by His Word, He offers riches beyond measure. May God lead you to a greater depth of faith, and a richer understanding of His Word.

Pastor Travis