

“These are the Days”

I Corinthians 1:10-17

Didn't need no welfare state
Everybody pulled their weight.
Gee, our old LaSalle ran great.
Those were the days.

Back in the days when TVs did not take up a whole wall, and when people could watch without using special 3D glasses, a popular bigot from Queens, New York kindled the viewers' desire for the good old days. After the turmoil of the 1960s and 70s, people harkened back to more comfortable times, days with less tension, a more reasonable pace of living, and values which were less complicated.

We need not debate this morning about HOW good those days were. It's enough to note that we can have the inclination to believe that things were better in the good old days – whenever that was. Christians sometimes wish that we could live in the good old days of the early Christian Church.

The Christian Church has a rich, historic heritage. Its roots can be traced to Jesus and the apostles. Believers consider ALL of history to be His story. In the Old Testament, we clearly see the need for the Savior, and the promise of the Savior, and the Messiah, who would redeem people from their sins. In the New Testament, we read about the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Since His ascension into heaven, we notice the advancing footsteps of his followers, as they turn the world upside down.

The job of the Christian Church has not gotten any easier over the centuries. Even though we have new and exciting tools, the work of telling the Good News and living lives that reflect it, is as challenging as ever. There are many believers, who look back at the early New Testament with nostalgia, and sigh “Those were the days!”

But Paul reminds us of what things were like in the young Church in the first half-century after the resurrection of Jesus. Within the Christian Church, there was infighting and a party spirit to rival that of any other age. There were people who thought they were special because they were baptized by

someone special. Those who had close connections to one apostle or another apparently considered themselves superior to no-name believers. They needed an apostolic reminder that is the Holy Spirit who calls people to faith through the Word, and the nurtures them by Word and Sacrament. Yes, it was just as easy for them to take their eyes off the cross of Christ, as it is for us, or our neighbors.

The truth is, the Christian Church cannot afford the luxury of sitting on the piano bench with Archie or Edith or anyone else, and join in the chorus of “Those Were the Days.” If the Christian Church is going to fulfill its mission of making disciples by going, preaching, teaching, and baptizing, then its people, its living branches are going to have to be convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that THESE are the days. These days – with economic insecurity and concern for our financial future, with people living apart from Christ standing up loudly for their right to be distant and unexposed to Christianity in any form – these are OUR days, and these ARE the days.

In his second letter to the same congregation in Corinth, Paul picks up on the same theme. He warns about fondly looking back on the old life, and hesitating to embrace the new life in Christ. We are inclined to go slowly and safely, and we convince ourselves that it is better to move decently and in order at a snail's pace, than it is to be bold and energetic in the cause of the Gospel. We are surrounded by government, schools, and industries who won't add jobs and won't spend money until they have a sure thing – guaranteed return and satisfied citizens and consumer.

Believers have come to expect great things in Kingdom work, because our power and resources come from a generous God who would have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of His truth. He knows it's a huge task. God almighty provides the resources to be used in our personal resources, and in our stewardship of the Gospel.

We have not divorced ourselves from our past, and we must admit before God and others that our sin – our lack of trust, our apathy, our lousy ranking of priorities, has, at times, hindered our progress, and even left some casualties behind.

I once served as vacancy pastor for six months in a rural community in Wisconsin. St. John's was founded more than a hundred years earlier by immigrant farmers and loggers. The church building stands tall and well kept, on a hill, visible for miles. A beautiful church cemetery is tended by members. As I called on families, I often drove by another small cemetery, with the name Forest Township on the gate. It is sadly uncared for and mostly overrun.

I asked one of our cemetery's volunteer gardeners – Francis turned 90 that summer -- about that OTHER cemetery. He was uncomfortable with my question, and he was uncharacteristically quiet. He would talk your arm off about almost anything, especially any plant, bush, flower, or tree, but he didn't want to talk about the other cemetery -- Forest Township cemetery. It suddenly dawned on me that he may have a loved one buried there, and the grief connected with that loss was still too great to talk about it. I was wrong. I determined to quietly wait for an answer. He finally spoke in soft and trembling voice:

“The people in that cemetery are buried there because of us.” As he found the strength to continue he said, “There are people buried there who committed suicide. There are people buried there who had no friend or family to claim the body. We didn't reach them. We didn't do enough.”

Francis was not judging anyone. He was acknowledging the human limitations and the ineffectiveness of the pastor and people of the church on the hill. Francis knew that we don't make believers out of unbelievers. That miracle is done by God the Holy Spirit. But every time he drives past Forest Township Cemetery, he is reminded how determined the enemy is, and how important it is that the people of God don't lose sight of their mission and purpose.

We look to Jesus for our model in ministry. He preached – effectively, powerfully. He healed – completely and unselfishly. He counseled and comforted – compassionately and personally. Those who came in contact with Jesus knew he was someone special, doing something special. He was

the only Son of God, and he was here to save people from their sin.

The New Testament Gospels and the book of Acts are refreshing accounts of ACTION – not just thinking or reflecting. The people of God in 2017 must be convinced that our business is PRESENT business – that THESE are the days.

If the Church is going to be effective these days, it is going to have to use plain talk about Jesus, the Christ. Paul was convinced that if he couldn't speak of Christ, he was treading water and wasting time. Plain talk works: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

It's not our job to convince, argue, or persuade people into believing that it makes sense that Jesus should save them from their sin. Our job is to hold up the cross of Christ, to show people the empty tomb, to introduce people to the Jesus they have never met or barely know, and then get out of the way for the powerful working of the Holy Spirit.

These are the days for positive outreach on the part of believers. These are the days for plain talk. And since actions speak louder than words, these are the days for a clear, convincing witness to Christ by the way we live our lives.

Paul has to encourage us to keep at it, because we often don't see the results of our efforts. We can become discouraged. We experience setbacks. We feel a divisive, party spirit. We don't have the discernment to understand how God can use the current circumstances to advance his kingdom.

When Paul was imprisoned for refusing to quit his preaching, he might have figured that his work was grinding to a halt. But we know that Paul used the opportunity to bring the Good News of salvation to people in prison. His long-distance pastoral care encouraged the people who received his letters, and us, too. If we are united in purpose and extend ourselves for the sake of the Gospel, God will bless, and the cross of Christ will be magnified, and the Word of God will accomplish its purpose. We often hear that more and more people are turned off by the organized Church. I disagree. I believe that people are turned off by the disorganized church – congregations that have lost their way. Every

Church that has a visible cross on the building or on its sign ought to be proclaiming in no uncertain terms what happened on that cross, and what it means for the person who is blessed to hear it.

Two ants once lived on a golf course. One day there were assaulted by a wildly swinging duffer who was hitting everything in sight EXCEPT that little sphere with the dimples. One ant said to the other: “If we’re going to get out of this thing alive, we’re gonna have to get on the ball!”

An encouraging thought! So much for nostalgia and a divisive, party spirit. These are the days for positive outreach. These are the days for plain talk about a Savior who loved us and the whole world so much that he gave his life for our salvation – for THEIR salvation. These are the days for a clear witness by word and action that what Christ does FOR us makes a difference IN us. Amen?

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January 22, 2017
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