

THIRD SUNDAY IN END TIME  
(SAINTS TRIUMPHANT)  
*2 Thessalonians 2:13-17*  
“To This He Called You Through Our Gospel”

Last week, as I sat in Ford Field for one of the most pathetic football games I had ever watched, I started to think about this text—after all, there was nothing to see on the field. I started to think that being a part of the church militant is a lot like being a Lions fan. Each year we say, “Next year will be the year, with that new quarterback, stadium, coach or running back.” Similarly, we members of the church militant wait with eager expectation for that day when budgets are a problem of the past, when all our members are excited about the gospel, when elders forget what delinquent calls are because delinquents are a thing of the past. Unfortunately, much like the Lions, the church militant often doesn’t develop like we’d like.

The church on earth is called the church militant because it is in constant battle. We battle sin, false teaching, poor stewardship, a hostile culture, selfish visions and goals, and so on. We are militant. Yes, a day will come when those dreams mentioned above will be realized, but that day is for another church, the church we will transfer to when we breathe our last: the church triumphant.

Today is the Third Sunday in End Time—Saints Triumphant. We celebrate those saints who have gone before us and cling to the very same hope that brought them from this life to the next. We remember that we are not the first to battle what we battle, but part of a long line of Christian soldiers who wielded the crucifix in battle with all who would oppose our crucified Lord. We remember those who donned their Savior’s crown of suffering in this life, knowing the crown of life would be their reward. We remember those who in the face of the trials of now could sing of the glory of then.

Such men and women are always a rare gift and so we give thanks for them, just as I give thanks for the saints God has brought here today. St. Paul writes, “*But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.*” The miracle of faith is no less miraculous today and so I too ought always to be grateful. You ought to be grateful, because you are a rare gift, as are your fellow members, and it is a blessing of God that we can all gather as gifts around God’s gifts.

Notice how this miracle, this rare gift, comes into existence. St. Paul writes, “*To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” The gospel, not an apostle or a pastor, makes saints. What is the gospel? It is the good news of Jesus Christ, presented to you in Word and Sacrament. The gospel is the Means of Grace, the saint-maker. The Word, Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper each are the gospel, the whole gospel, and all present to you the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. This gospel, this saint-maker, never changes. It never needs to be made new and it cannot be improved. It is the same yesterday, today, and forever, because it reveals the unchanging Christ.

I've often thought that the official American motto should really be "new and improved." We are an ahistorical people, meaning that we have little use for history. We keep two eyes on the future. Henry Ford once said, "History is bunk," and many share his view. As American Lutherans, our own synod has at times fallen into this mindset. We have failed to look to the struggles of our fathers and mothers and thus seem determined to repeat them. I fear this is especially true at present. As Harry Truman once said, "The only thing new in the world is the history you don't know." What all too often is sold to the church as new and improved is often really the very same false teaching and unwise plans that almost destroyed it in the past.

St. Paul urges, "*So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.*" Tradition means "handed down." The traditions given the Thessalonians were handed down to them by the mouth and then pen of the apostles. The tradition that St. Paul is speaking of is not necessarily the preservation of certain ceremonies and rites, but of the message on which the Church's best ceremonies and rites are founded and which they convey: the gospel. It is good and wise to preserve and adapt the forms and actions handed down to us by many centuries of the Church's collected experience, but it is better and most necessary to preserve and never adapt the message which births the Church and on which the Church rests. This is the message that made Saul into Paul. This is the same message that made saints in Thessalonica, that exploded onto the scene again with Luther, that made saints militant into saints triumphant this year here at Christ, and that will do the same for us. This is the gospel, and this alone is what will preserve and increase the church. Any church preserved and increased by anything else has lost its history, its tradition, its unique relevance in a fallen world, and its usefulness for the future.

The Lions may disappoint us year after year, always seeming to lack that something they need to win. They may give glimpses of glory, but we still end up watching games wondering how they will mess things. Not so with the church. Yes, the church militant loses battles and falls short of our fantasies, but we can always be sure its won the war. It always has what it needs to win, because it always has the gospel. Yes, we as members of the church might often mess things up, and yes, in our cynicism, we often wonder how we'll mess up next, but the gospel never drops the ball. My friends, fellow saints, fear not and do not despair. You are not the first to think such thoughts and feel such feelings. Take heart that saints militant become saints triumphant, and saints triumphant never get let down. Remember those saints triumphant today and give thanks for them—both the saints of old and our dearly departed in this past year; but, even more, remember and give thanks for what made them what they are: the gospel, which has been faithfully preserved and is still administered to you even today. Know that St. Paul's prayer and blessing for the Thessalonians still stands true for saints today: "*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.*" Amen.