

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Men versus Women. Packers versus Lions. KJV versus NIV. Democrat versus Republican. We have lots of different ways in which we like to divide ourselves, don't we? And while some divisions are certainly necessary, even mandatory, as we separate from those who teach contrary to God's Word, many of our divisions are over personal preferences.

A couple of weeks ago I read in the news that over 800,000 people have signed petitions trying to get their state to secede from the union and leave the United States of America. They don't like which candidate won the election and say that the US is heading down the toilet. And while that may or may not be true, is succession really the best bet? Did you know that Alaskans receive more federal aid per resident than any other state in the union? Would we really be better off as our own nation? But what's really behind such secessionist thinking? It's really an attitude that says, "I have to take care of myself. And after all, it is all about me."

Those same kind of thoughts were creeping into the church at Rome. Some thought, "I'm a good Jew! And I won't so quickly abandon the traditions of our fathers, and the commands of God, tossing out our rituals and dietary restrictions for some new leader! I will eat what God wants me to eat!" Others thought, "I'm a good Christian!" I know that the restrictions of the past have given way to the freedoms of the present with Christ fulfilling the Old Testament law. I will eat what I want! And no one will stop me." But both sides, dead set in their ways, were looking out for themselves and no one else. "It's all about me," they thought, as their unity was being destroyed.

So, Paul set pen to paper and wrote to the Roman Christians in an effort to restore unity in their church. He told them that to secede from others who didn't see to eye to eye with them, looking out for just themselves, wasn't just foolish. It was sinful. And in a sense Paul reminded them of that ancient motto, one our nation is founded on: "United we stand; divided we fall."

It wasn't about political parties or sports teams in ancient Rome. It wasn't about gender issues or Bible translations. It wasn't even about hymnals or worship styles. It was their fellowship meals, their potlucks that divided them. Some ate only kosher foods following the commands of God in the Old Testament, scorning those who so readily threw out their sacred traditions. Others ate their bacon with great enjoyment and flaunted their freedom from such restrictions. All thought only about themselves with an attitude that screamed, "It's all about me!"

But that's not the way it should be. Paul reminded them all, in the verses before ours, that, ***"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." much like he told the Philippians, "3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."*** Instead of worrying so much about themselves, they ought to have been trying to please God. It's all about him. And they knew what God wanted: That each live to serve his neighbor, putting to death that selfishness that said, "It's all about me."

Two thousand years later, and you know what, not much has changed. "This is the kind of worship I like. Who cares if you prefer something else?! My way is the only right way!" "We have to do what's best for our family! Who cares if other members need us here?!" It's all about us. "We've done it this way for decades! Who cares what visitors to our church think?" It's all about us. "Who cares about the church in Anchorage?! We have our own problems to worry about up here." It's all about us. "Who cares what's going on in Wisconsin or the rest of the synod? What have they ever done for us? Alaska's got enough to deal with." It's all about us.

It's hard to always be thinking about others, isn't it? Their best interests, to not be selfish, concerned only about me, myself, and I? It's a burden to be constantly worrying about everyone else when there's enough on my plate already. Carrying my own burdens and theirs? I can't do that.

Well...unless, there's something in it for me. What's in it for me if I do this for you? What's in it for me if I go along with your wishes? What's in it for me if show concern for others? Not exactly the self-sacrificing attitude Paul calls for when he says, ***"Do nothing out of selfish ambition...Each of you should look...to the interests of others."***

You know, the word in our text, endurance, literally means, "to remain under," as if to be carrying a heavy weight over your head. It is hard work to put up with others. Unity doesn't come easily. But that's no excuse to give in to selfishness, to view others as burdens, and to drop them to be free of it all.

And for our lack of patience with others who don't always see things our way, for our lack of endurance when the unity is hard to keep, for our selfish attitudes that scream, "It's all about me!" and the lack of unity among us, we deserve to fall. We deserve to have Christ secede from our lives. We deserve to have Christ separate himself from us for all of eternity. Divided from each other by our petty squabbles that show our selfish concern for our own welfare and for no one else, we deserve to be divided from God and to fall into hell...

When we consider how we deserve to be separated from God for our sinful pride and self-centeredness, we're prompted to cry out to God in repentance. And when we do, God gives us the encouragement that we need. ***"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."***

Through the Scriptures, written in the past, God speaks to us words of comfort, encouragement, and hope. Through the Scriptures, God reveals his entire plan of salvation, or our rescue, with prophecies about Jesus in the Old Testament and promises of Jesus fulfilled in the New Testament.

Do you know what Jesus' resume says here? "It's not about me." It wasn't about Jesus. Paul writes in our verses, ***"For even Christ did not please himself."*** Jesus even said, ***"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve..."*** We even confess in the Nicene Creed, "For us and for our salvation, he (Jesus) came down..." To Jesus, it's always been all about us. You and me. Jesus was in it for us!

When we, by ourselves, deserved to be separated and divided from God, Jesus acted in our best interests. He did what needed to be done for us, to save us, to unite us with God. He lived. He died. He rose.

For us, Jesus lived the perfect life we couldn't. And then he died the death we deserved to. It was his way of saying, "It's not about me and how I can be served. It's all about you and how I can serve you. Let me take your sin on myself. Let me take your pride on myself. Let me take your self-serving attitude on myself. And let me pay for all of it, so that you won't be divided from God, but united with me and with him in the perfection that I give." It's all about us.

And that's exactly what Jesus' resurrection showed, that for us, we don't have to worry about suffering the consequences of our sins, even after we leave this life. Because of Jesus, heaven is ours.

Because of Jesus' selfless attitude and actions, we are one with God. We are united with him. And because of Jesus, we are united with each other, united in faith. And through faith in Jesus, we can say, "It's not all about me. It's all about us." We can live for each other, bearing with each other in our weaknesses, carrying each other's burdens, serving one another in love.

We do that because we are united in hope, the sure hope of a final salvation. Now, the question I most commonly hear about people in Fairbanks, and I'm sure you do as well, is how can you put up with these winters, these frigid, arctic temperatures? And for most, it's because at the end of this, we know we will have some of the most beautiful summers of anywhere. We have the sure hope, we know the summer will more than make up for the cold and dreary winters.

Why do we endure struggles here on this earth, and bear each other's burdens? Because of our sure hope, that at the end of this life, our Redeemer has something much greater, bar none, waiting for us in heaven.

And so here, now, we hope, and we bear with each other. And with such attitudes, our unity will grow and we will stand together. It will really be all about us. Paul says, "**May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves...**" But the Greek literally says "may God grant you to think the same in yourselves." That's where we find true unity. It comes from God that we all think the same of our sin, that we are no better than anyone else. It comes from God that we think the same of our Savior, that we are all forgiven in him. It comes from God that we all think the same in our desire to live for him in thanks. It comes from God that we all think the same that our greatest need is to stay ready for his return. It comes from God that we all think the same that our greatest mission is to help others to do the same. It comes from God that we all think the same in our doctrine holding to every teaching of the truth together.

This unity comes from God through his Word. So stay in the Word, dear friends! Encourage one another in the Word! That's not just the job of the pastor or the council members. But, "**Let us encourage one another... all the more as [we] see [Judgment] Day approaching.**" Call a brother or sister you haven't seen in worship in a while. Call someone you know could use a word of encouragement from the Word

of Encouragement. After all, that's what walking together is all about. And some day you may need them to return the favor.

And as we do this more and more, together we'll stand. Or maybe better still, together we walk, because we don't just stand idly by. We don't just assume a defensive position. But just as we confess the same truth with one mouth, so too we proclaim the truth with one mouth and take the Gospel to the ends of the earth! And how much easier that task is when we're walking together!

How much better it is when we join together as WELS churches in Alaska with pastors encouraging pastors! How much better it is when our Christian education thrives, providing more lay leaders to our congregations grounded in the Word of God! How much better it is when our pastors and teachers are thoroughly equipped by our synodical schools to do the great work entrusted to them! How much better it is when we can pool our resources to open missions around the world! For united, we stand. And united we march around the globe with the hope and encouragement God's given to us in his Word.

Yes, divided from each other, divided from Christ, we're sure to fall. But united to Christ, we stand even in the face of Judgment Day. And united in Christ, we march, working together to do the task he's entrusted to us, not because we must, but because we recognize it's not about me. It's all about him. It's all about each other. It's all about us.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."