

Good morning, everyone; grace and peace to all of you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Open up your Bibles with me to Matthew 13, so that you can follow along with me. The text this morning starts with a kind of confusing passage, and ends with an amazing promise. You'll want to see it with your own eyes as we go through, and it might be a passage that you'll want to earmark for later, too.

The reading starts with Jesus addressing a crowd, asking to what he will compare to this generation. He says that they're like a group of people who isn't dancing when a child is playing the flute, and isn't mourning when the child is playing a sad song. The example would have been understood by everyone during Jesus day because he was quoting one of Aesop's Fables. It would be like if one of the Pastors referenced the three little pigs or the boy who cried wolf. The fables goes like this, there was a fisherman who grabbed a flute and went to the sea and played a beautiful song, hoping that the fish would dance. But the fish weren't dancing, so frustrated, he went and got his net, cast it into the sea, and pulled up many fish. He looked at them flopping in the net and said to them, "I played my flute and you didn't dance, but now all you can do is dance." It's as though Jesus is saying that he is like a child playing a song in the street, but is being ignored by everyone around him. That he is the fisherman playing a song, but no fish pay any mind to him.

Mark Twain once said that history doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme. As I look throughout history I see that humanity has had different problems with Jesus and the church. As for today, I think that our generation has a twofold crisis that Jesus would see and try to remedy.

The first crisis is something I call “The crisis of 59%.” This is a Calvin named crisis, so Google won’t yield any results, but the research behind it is real. When a student turns 15 years old, 59% of them stop coming to church. That’s almost 2/3rds. This has happened in the past, too, but the unique thing about this generation is that they aren’t coming back to church between the ages 26 and 29 like they had in the past.

And the crisis doesn’t end there. Those who claim to be Christian in the United States are dropped from 77% to 72%. And of that 72%, only 35% are coming to church on a regular basis. Of the remaining population, 20% say that they have no religious beliefs at all. It would be one thing if people from other countries with predominately other religions were moving here, but that isn’t the case. Only 6% of our population have other religious beliefs. Organizations like Barna, Pew Research and Group Publishing are trying to figure out why these statistics are the case. Why is this our new reality? And make no mistake about it, this is a crisis!

The second part of the twofold crisis is loneliness. Our advances in technology have made us more connected than ever, but we are one of the loneliest generations in history! In fact, research is showing that one of the biggest health detriments to middle aged Americans, and specifically men, is loneliness; loneliness actually affects our physical health. The impact technology has had on our society has changed childhood and adolescence, and it has changed the way adults relate to each other. Thanks to facebook and snapchat, Instagram and twitter we can talk to each other with no need of actually being together.

It isn’t just technology that impacts our loneliness either...our divisive political climate plays a role. It has become increasingly difficult to be able to agree to disagree. Opportunities have increased what feels like exponentially over the past 50 years, and with those opportunities

have come busy schedules. We're running all over the place each day, driven by our calendars. I used to think that retirement used to bring some kind of rest and relaxation, but the more I talk to people who are retired the more I learn that there is *always* something to fill our time. Whether it's volunteering, groups and clubs, grandkids and family, part time work. It would appear that it never ends, and it can be isolating.

I knew when I was writing this that this was a heavy way to start a sermon. When I come to church and hear the pastors preach, I want to feel the Holy Spirit bringing hope to me and those around me. I want to be clear that we are facing a crisis, but I also want to be clear that God is bigger than any crisis that could come our way. Last week I was reminded after reading the text that we're not Holy Spirit Jr., and I even put it in the sermon. The same goes for this week. While the weight of these challenges can see overwhelming, God is at work within them and God is more powerful than they could ever be. It isn't up to us to worry about them, it's up to us to be faithful and keep telling others about God's promises.

Speaking of promises, there is an amazing promise starting in verse 28. Take a look at that with me and read along. [READ VERSE 28] Remember the children's sermon when we were trying to move that heavy thing? And the more people that helped, the easier that it would get? That is exactly the kind of rest for the weary that Christ is talking about in this passage.

It says to take Christ's yoke and put it on. A yoke, for those that don't know, was a piece of farming equipment that was used to tether two animals together so plow a field or pull a wagon. Instead of having just one ox or horse working, they would yoke them together so that it was easier for them to do the work.

Today we have our own yokes that are pulling all of our cares and worries behind us. The yoke that is pulling our busy schedules, our loneliness, our disagreements, our budgets, our brokenness and our questions and doubts. It seems to me that so often we feel like we have to carry that burden alone, but God says “Come to me all you who are weary from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest.”

Taking Christ’s yoke means giving our cares to God. I believe that in our day to day lives, it starts with prayer – asking God to take the burdens, and genuinely trusting that God is at work in our lives after we pray. It can be a difficult task, but it is necessary if we are to take Christ’s yoke.

Another amazing way that we are yoked with Christ is with communion. We’re going to take communion in a little bit here, and I want to explain a Lutheran belief about communion that I think is beautiful and helpful. You’re going to come up and take what we call “the elements,” which is a fancy word for the wafer and the wine or grapejuice. And when you do, someone is going to say to you “The body of Christ broken for you” and “the blood of Christ shed for you.” Those words, along with the Words of Institution (which is when the pastor says “In the night in which he was betrayed...”), are living, breathing, powerful words. We believe that when those words are spoken, that the real presence of Christ shows up. So when you eat that wafer and wine, you are consuming the peace of Christ, and the forgiveness of Christ.

Not only that, but we also believe that when we take communion every single one of us is a part of a deeper community. We believe that everyone in this room that takes part in communion is sharing in everyone else’s joys and struggles. It’s like, in that moment, we are lifted up in a magical bubble altogether, and we are a perfect community of Christ. Anything we

are celebrating, everyone else is celebrating with us. Anything we are struggling with, we have a room full of people to help us in that struggle.

I think that one of the reasons that the church faces the crisis of dwindling attendance is because it has the reputation of being judgmental and hypocritical. People think that they need to have everything figured out before they come, or they need to have all of the answers. People have had bad experiences with condemnation, and on the television we sometimes see people representing the church in hateful or unhelpful ways. Folks, **I want to take our reputation back.**

I want people to think of community when they think of the church. I want people to think of peace and rest when they think about coming to a service. So after we come back down out of that magic bubble when communion is done, let's keep bearing one another's burdens. Let's keep sharing in each other's celebrations. I want to encourage you to stay after church today and have a donut and coffee. Invite someone out to lunch, especially if it's someone that you don't know super well yet. Invite each other into your homes, and listen to each other.

And maybe most importantly, let's tell other people about the amazing community that we experience when we share in communion together. Let's tell people about the peace and rest that Christ gives us when we take Christ's yoke upon us. Christ's yoke isn't about doing the correct things, having the right answers, knowing the inside jokes, meeting the dress code, or hiding our problems. Christ's yoke is giving our burdens over to God and the community, and authentically trusting God to be at work within those problems.

We follow a God that is absolutely crazy about us. We have a God that searches after us harder than anyone else. We have a God that loves everyone in creation so much, and wants us

all to be in community together. And most importantly, we have a God that is bigger than any crisis, struggle, or problem that we face.

Join me in a word of prayer. Loving, caring, peaceful, tenacious, crazy for us God, we are so thankful for the yoke of Christ. You have created such a beautiful model of community, and each of us has benefited from that. Today, as we take communion together, help us to hand over our burdens to you. Help us to celebrate with each other. Help us to grow together as a community. And help us to spread the good news of Christ's forgiveness, peace and rest. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.