

## MESSAGE

### Graduation Service for the Class of 2009

May 23, 2009

About a month ago, the date on the magazine's front cover says April 13, 2009, Newsweek's title said in big red letters: **'THE DECLINE AND FALL OF CHRISTIAN AMERICA'**. Wow, that is quite a headline isn't it? According to the article's statistics, I quote 'the percentage of self identified Christians has fallen 10% since 1990 from 86 to 76 % ... the percentage of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith has doubled in recent years to 16% ... the number of people willing to describe themselves as atheist or agnostic has increased fourfold from 1990 to 2009, from 1 million to about 3.6 million'. Most of you know what an atheist is. It is someone who says there is no god. An agnostic, however, says there is a god, a higher power, but not a personal God, as we believe is revealed in the Bible - God's Word - God's real presence among us.

Now, don't get me wrong. The United States of America has never been a Christian nation. I agree with the article when it says 'as crucial as religion has been and is to the life of the nation, America's unifying force has never been *a* specific faith'. True. However, the foundation of our country, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, certainly has been upon Christian principles such as: the three branches of government; legislative, executive and judicial, because the sinful human nature of one human in power corrupts power. That is a Christian principle of original sin, or freedom of religion not a freedom from religion, that is a Christian principle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment, or God is above all nations as we pledge 'one nation under God' is certainly a Christian principle or *E Pluribus Unum* is Latin for 'out of many one' printed on the Great Seal of the United States and upon our money is a Christian principle of unity. The United States of America has never been a Christian nation with a state church but we are founded upon Christian morals, ethics and principles which for generations of people have reaped benefits. But, things are changing and changing rapidly. A popular word today is 'change', which is the general point of the Newsweek article, causing **'THE DECLINE AND FALL OF CHRISTIAN AMERICA'**. Proving for me the truth of God's Word from our Gospel lesson, John 17, words of Jesus' High Priestly Prayer: **'Holy Father ... I have given them Your Word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world ... sanctify them in the truth, Your Word is truth'**. And that is what I want to talk to you about a little bit this Lutheran School Graduation and High School Baccalaureate weekend at Immanuel Lutheran.

#### I.

In our Gospel lesson Jesus is specifically praying for His disciples of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, that's the immediate context. But, because Jesus is God incarnate 'one with God the Father' whom transcends all

time and place, Jesus in turn is praying for His disciples in all 20 centuries since, including us. Like 21<sup>st</sup> century America, the Greco-Roman world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, though politically a representative republic, wasn't any more Christian than we are today... even less so. The truth of God's Word needed to infiltrate people's lives in the 1<sup>st</sup> century as much as it needs to infiltrate people's lives today. Jesus knew He was soon to ascend into heaven having accomplished this world's eternal salvation by His substitutionary atonement via His death on the cross and His victorious resurrection from the grave. Jesus knew that He would soon not be visible on this side of heaven, so, by His grace and in His great love, Jesus prayed for us - His Church - His disciples, who are His visible presence in this world. Jesus knew the mission **of** His Church would be very hard, just as His mission **for** His Church had been hard. The Church is in the world, but not of the world and this would be a very difficult balance to maintain. These disciples Jesus was praying for were human beings. So, by their very human nature, they would be ambitious to the point of arguing among themselves about who is the greatest. They would want rewards and accolades for their hard work. They would get tired. They would become discouraged. They would be tempted and lured by the world, just like we can be today. So, Jesus prayed for them. And within Jesus' prayer is His (God's) answer for every generation of Christians for 21 centuries = **God's Word**, the Bible and God's Word His Sacraments in the lives of God's people sustain them in this world and through these means of grace makes them not of this world. It is actually that Word of God which has really changed this world, the Greco-Roman world rose and declined and fell, other great world empires and nations have risen, declined and fell over every century. And as the Newsweek article says is happening 'The Decline and Fall of Christian America', if there ever was such a thing, is happening today. BUT, through it all, for 21 hundred years, God's Word has never risen to decline and fall. The truth of God's Word, the Bible and His Sacraments, have always remained steady and constant, even as all the great empires of the world have disappeared into world history, which is actually HIS-STORY = God's story of His Church in the world but not of the world.

## II.

As the Holy Christian Church, Immanuel Lutheran, Plainview obviously we are in the world, here we are, gathered together on the corner of Wabasha and Broadway but we are not of the world and this balance is hard for us to maintain, also. The world hates us, or at least it is suppose to hate us according to Jesus. Or have we become so friendly with the world that we can't be seen as any different from the world? Wrong is wrong, you see, even if everyone else is doing it. Wrong can become so normal in our lives, however, that it ceases to appear to be wrong. In fact, wrong can even begin to appear to be right, as we negotiate with evil instead of hating and exposing it for what it is: 'against God and His Word'. Our human nature likes to rationalize evil. Just listen to all the social and moral and ethical issues of

today. Laws of our nation are being passed which legalize evil, immorality, and unethical behavior, and many churches are even approving of this change. Jesus, as God incarnate, our Savior, knows that living in this world is hard for us. Jesus knows our sins and our failures as human beings. That is what the cross and open tomb are all about, our God who shared our humanness and overcame it as our substitute. So, what better vote of confidence can we hear than Jesus praying that we not be taken out of this world because there is work to be done, mission and ministry to infiltrate peoples lives with the truth of God's Word. And we are the ones God has chosen to do it, Jesus' disciples, the Holy Christian Church. Jesus is trusting us, but also entrusting us to do His work. We are not on our own as God's Church, as Jesus' disciples.

### III.

So, as we see the truth of that Newsweek article happening today, we badly need to be that answer to Jesus' prayer. But that's going to mean, as God's people, following that hard road and putting ourselves on the line, the battle line, as the Church Militant. It means great sacrifice and commitment so that Immanuel Lutheran on the corner of Wabasha and Broadway sticks out like a soar thumb among all the deceiving theology and morals and ethics and principles of today, just as the Holy Christian Church has been for 21 centuries. And to do that means that the truth of God's Word must continue to be preached and taught and witnessed and lived by us, as Jesus' disciples. It's an everyday, hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute challenge before us. It's a one-step-at-a-time, one-decision-at-a-time, one-victory-at-a-time. But, we must remember, it is a victory = hard fought, it is a decision = deeply committed, it is a step = that is actually a giant leap into sin, death and hell itself, which has been taken and made and already won and done for us by Jesus Christ. Remember the middle? That is the center. The focal word of the Holy CHRIST-ian Church, is CHRIST! Jesus, our God in flesh and blood in the world struggled against this world. Jesus, our God in flesh and blood, hated by the world, rejected by the world, killed by this world, overcame the world for us. So, when the world does those things against us, as Jesus' disciples, and it will, and it does, through the means of the truth of God's Word preached from our pulpit, through the truth of God's Word taught in our classrooms, through the truth of God's Word poured out upon us in Holy Baptism, through the truth of God's Word received by us in Holy Communion, through the truth of God's Word witnessed and lived by us in our everyday lives there is no decline, there is no fall of the Holy Christian Church in our little corner of this world called Immanuel Lutheran Church and School, on the corner of Wabasha and Broadway, or wherever God puts us as His Church. We're the answer, you see, to Jesus' High Priestly prayer, as the church has been for 21 centuries, until someday we will be taken into heaven - the Church Triumphant - to eternal life, which is absolutely out of this world.

## Conclusion

But, for right now, we are still in this world, aren't we, and this weekend is Lutheran School graduation and Baccalaureate for our graduating High School seniors. My message, though delivered to all of us as the disciples of Jesus, His Holy Christian Church, particularly applies to our young people. America's Christian principles are on the decline and in fast fall and changing as we begin to end the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century unlike any century since the time of Christ. And that's going to become more and more evident to our young people as they leave Immanuel Lutheran, Plainview for high school and college and career.

The Newsweek statistics of unaffiliated people as Christians and more and more people describing themselves as atheists and agnostics will increase in the next decades of our young people's lives. It's going to become increasingly more difficult to maintain that balance 'of being in the world, but not of the world' for any of us, but especially for our young people, as disciples of Jesus. But, Jesus' High Priestly Prayer remains true as it has for 21 centuries, Jesus prays '**Holy Father ... I have given them Your Word ... sanctify them in the truth, Your Word is truth**'. May our young people and each of us, as Jesus' disciples, be the answer in this declining and falling and ever-changing world.

The answer to Jesus' prayer, through God's faithfulness to us, as His Holy Christian Church, through the means of His grace - His Holy Word and Holy Sacraments, Jesus' Real Presence among us, Immanuel = God is with us. May we remain with Him, 'in the world but not of the world'. Amen