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Lutheran Words: "Church"

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I've been pastoring here at Hope for just over three wonderful years now, and I am delighted to be serving in this church. Many of you have been at Hope for longer than my three years, and others have been here less than that. But I hope all of you know, as I do, that Hope is a very special church, in many ways, and that God is at work in some exciting ways here.

We're not, though, a perfect church, are we? Not quite. I found a list of five things we need to hear around this place in order for Hope to become the perfect church. Here they are.

1. "Hey, it's my turn to sit in the front pew."
2. "Pastor, I was so enthralled, I never noticed your sermon went twenty-five minutes overtime."
3. "I dearly want to be a teacher in the middle school Sunday School class."
4. "I love it when we sing hymns I've never heard before."
5. "Nothing inspires me and strengthens my commitment like our annual stewardship campaign."

OK, so we're not quite there yet. Hope Lutheran Church is an imperfect church. But it's still a warm, wonderful church, isn't it?

With all that said, I have to tell you that next Sunday I won't be in church here; but I'll still be in church. Next Sunday morning I'll be in Vellore, India, worshipping in a Christian church in that city. I was invited to join a group of pastors for a week of mission field visits in the Indian cities of Chennai, Vellore, Hyderabad, and Agra. I leave Wednesday, and I'm excited about this opportunity to observe and interact first-

hand with missionaries in this land of 1.2 billion people. Only 6% of the population in India are Christians; but God is bringing over three thousand people a day to faith in Jesus Christ in that land.

I'm looking forward to my mission tour, and I'm especially curious to be in church next weekend in a completely new culture, in a room filled with recent Christian converts. I'm sure it will be very different than what I'm used to here in our church. I'll tell you all about it when I get back!

I think we often take the word "church," and our experience of "church," for granted. We think of "church" as what happens here in this room. Or we think of "church" as this building where we gather. Or, perhaps, when we say "church" we think of our Lutheran denominational label.

But does the word "church" also include those people over in India that I'll meet next week? Does it include our Baptist friends, and our Catholic neighbors? What about our relatives and ancestors who have died in the faith and are in heaven? Let's talk about this familiar word, "church," for a few minutes more. What do Lutherans mean by "church?"

Here's a simple way to define that word. ***Every person, living or dead, who trusts in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is part of the "church."*** That takes us way past the walls of Hope, and even way past our Lutheran circles, doesn't it? But that's a sound Biblical view, and it's an understanding that we need to adopt, when it comes to the word "church." Jesus expressed this broader view of "church" in our Gospel reading today, when he prayed "... *not for these [the twelve disciples] only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word ...*" (John 17:20). So the "church" is everyone on earth, and everyone in heaven, who believes in Jesus.

And there's more. The Bible teaches us several important little facts about our "church." Give these some thought, as we review them quickly. I know that one or two will strike a chord with you, and help you understand a little deeper what we mean by "church."

- First, the Bible teaches, ***the "church" is one***, because there is one Christ. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, as Paul noted in our Epistle lesson: *"No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11).*
- Next, ***the "church" is holy***, not because you and I are perfect, but because Christians like us -- and this is our greatest joy, isn't it? -- it's because Christians like us have the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. With his own blood he bought us, cleansed us; and for our life Jesus died.
- Also, we say ***the "church" is universal***, because we're linked by faith with the Christ-followers in India, with the saints in heaven, with the Baptists in downtown Wake Forest. That doesn't mean that we're going to agree on every single question, or that we're going to worship in the exact same way. But wherever there are believers in Christ, there is the Church "universal." Another word for "universal," by the way, is "catholic." When that word is used with a small 'c,' it serves as a needed reminder that Christ's church isn't local or regional, denominational or national. It's universal. It transcends time, space, national borders, races, and all other barriers.
- Here's another one. Scripture tells us ***the "church" is apostolic***. Why is it important to be apostolic? Because the "church" is founded on and draws its life from the Word of God revealed to us in the Scriptures through the apostles of Jesus. Without that sacred link, we wouldn't know Jesus, would we?

- Next, we say ***the “church” is triumphant***. When we join in worship here in our sanctuary, the Bible teaches us that we are actually united with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, as we praise God. Isn't that an awesome notion, to recognize that we're not just in church with these fine people around us; but also with all the believers of all time now in heaven!
- And one more. We also add that ***the “church” is militant***. The “church” needs to be militant. Maybe we don't have anyone pointing a gun at us, asking us if we're Christians. But as long as we're on this earth, friends, there will be struggles for “churches” and suffering for Christians. At times we'll battle against the sin of the world, and against the sweeping tide of secularism in our culture. Sometimes we'll have to stand up and be counted for our faith, holding fast to our Bible-based doctrine. Maybe someday we'll be persecuted just for believing in Jesus, as many Christians today are around the globe. But there will always be struggles, for all believers and all “churches,” for we live in a world of sin and opposition to Christ. Yet the “church,” we know, will prevail, for our Lord Jesus Christ has already prevailed! He died, he was buried, he rose, he ascended, and he rules. Though we're still fighting the battle, Jesus has won the war!

I love our “church” here on Rogers Road – the worship, the building, the people – and I'll miss being in “church” next week. But I will be in “church” next Sunday, too, won't I, ten-and-a-half time zones away. For Christ's “church” is one. It's holy, it's universal, it's apostolic. The “church” is triumphant, even while we remain militant.

May Christ bless his wonderful “church,” and our place in it!  
Amen.

