**January 21st 2024 Second Sunday after Epiphany**

**Text: John 4:19-26** 0698

**Theme: Jesus’ Teaching About the Church.**

May our Lord grant that we be and remain members of the kingdom of grace by faith in His redemption, and may He ever preserve among us His true visible church on earth where His Word is granted in abundant measure. Amen. Dear Christians: There is today a great debate raging on about whether or not any denomination of Christian church has the entire true doctrine as contained in Scripture. There are some who claim that no one denomination has the entire truth, but that we must glean from each one what things are in accord with the truth, and reject those things that are not. Others say that their own denomination is that which has the entire truth, and all others hold at least some measure of error. Either way, it becomes rather confusing for a Christian to know where to find the truth. In order to make some sense of the confusion that reigns it is first necessary for us to understand the nature of truth. We first want to note that truth comes solely from almighty God. Truth does not originate within man, nor does man’s reason determine what truth is. Secondly truth is absolute. There are not shades of truth or varying degrees of truth. And finally truth is exclusive. What is true automatically excludes everything else as false. Now taking these three points about truth we can establish whether or not it is possible that sinful man can actually have and know the true doctrine, or teaching, of Christ. If truth is of God then necessarily the only reliable source of truth is from God Himself, which is His Word, as it is declared to be in Scripture itself. (Eph. 1:13, 2 Tim. 2:15) Now if the Word of God is truth itself then the truth it contains is absolute, meaning that there are not shades of truth within any doctrine taught. For example when it is declared in Scripture that the Triune God is the only true God, there is no room left for any other deities of any kind. Further, then, if the Word of God is truth itself, and the truth therein is absolute, that means it is also exclusive. If the only true God is the Triune God, then necessarily that means that the opposite is untrue, or false, a lie.

Now having established the Word of God as the only source of truth, the questions then must be asked: is it possible for man to grasp the knowledge of Scripture? Can any group of Christians hold and teach the entire truth of God’s Word without the admixture of error? To answer the first question we turn to no other source than Scripture itself: *“Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” (Ps. 119:105)* According to this passage God’s Word leads us through darkness, through the sin-darkened world, and if it is to shed light and illuminate our steps then it must be clear and understandable by the Christian through the gift of faith. To answer the second question we again turn to Scripture: *“Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”* Jesus, here speaking to the church, says that we should teach all nations, and not just teach some of the doctrine of Scripture, not just to teach a little here and a little there, but to teach all things whatsoever Jesus has commanded! Now that is quite a command if no denomination or church has or teaches the whole truth! It must be possible, then, according to the powerful of the Lord in our hearts and in the church on earth, to have and teach the whole doctrine of Christ. This is not my interpretation, it is not my words to you, but these things are declared by God Himself. Knowing this then we come to the realization that there are multiple different churches spoken of Scripture: there is the Invisible Church of God, the visible church of God, and the true visible church of God. It is this very thing that Jesus teaches in our text for today, which is found in the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to John beginning at verse nineteen.

**Quote text here.**

Let us pray, O most glorious and gracious Lord Jesus Christ, as we look into Thy Word we are truly in awe at the wisdom and truth proceeding therefrom. We ask that Thou wouldst reveal Thy Word unto us, so that we may rightly know it and ever hold fast the truth of it. Grant that we ever be and remain members of Thy kingdom of grace, Thine invisible Church wherein we find forgiveness and salvation through faith. Help us to also understand Thy will that we find and hold fast to Thy true visible church on earth, that church which holds and teaches all Thy counsel found in Thy Word alone. Be with the ministers of Thy church, as they study and preach this pure Word at Thy calling. Help those who hear to rightly understand and truly to believe when the ministers teach according to Thy pure Gospel. Keep from us all error and all false doctrine, that no soul be led into misbelief, despair, or other great shame and vice. Grant us faith in the forgiveness of sins, and help us to witness to the world of sinners of their sin and their forgiveness, and help us to witness to Christians who have been deceived into misbelieving lies. Grant all these things unto us, O Lord, by Thy grace and in Thy name. Amen.

Guided then by the Spirit of God let us learn of Jesus’ teaching about the Church, learning first of:

1. **The Invisible Church.** We read verses twenty three through twenty six: **read verses here.** Our text jumps in in the middle of the story relating the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. As we remember, it is declared in Scripture that Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans, for they held many false doctrines which had been mingled into the Jewish faith, and yet the Jews took it much farther than simply avoiding fellowship with these errorists and entirely avoided them, derided them, looked down upon them, and even often said that Samaritans had no part in the kingdom of God. More on that later. Further, typically Rabbis and religious leaders would never be found conversing with a woman about religious doctrine. These two things being true, the scene laid before us by the apostle John was, in Jesus’ time, completely frowned upon in the Jewish community. Jesus was conversing about faith to a Samaritan woman, a thing unthinkable to the Jews of the day. And yet we here see first of all a glimpse at what Jesus knows is the first and foremost work of the Gospel, and that is to make sure that souls, that is souls of men, women, and children, are members of the invisible Church. Jesus speaks to her concerning the Gospel which engenders faith and makes a person a member of the Invisible Church, which means they are true believers and heirs of eternal salvation no matter what visible church they outwardly belong to, whether the Jewish faith or the Samaritan faith; whether they belong to the Lutheran church or the Roman catholic church. This is the reason Jesus speaks of worshipping in spirit and in truth. The Invisible Church can be defined as “the whole number of believers in Christ; for all believers, and only believers, are members of this Church.” (SC q.175) The definition given in the Small Catechism shows clearly that membership in this Church is the chief thing, for it is membership in the Invisible church which makes a person a child of God and an heir of eternal salvation. In our text Jesus emphasizes this membership to the Samaritan woman, for Jesus came to save the souls of men and women. He points her to the true worship in spirit and in truth, and that those who truly believe are worshippers of God no matter where they are found.

The Invisible Church is found wherever the Gospel is in use, for according to the Word the Gospel will never be preached in vain. *“For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater. So shall my Word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.” (Is. 55:10-11)* The Gospel is here compared to the rain which falls on the earth causing the seed to germinate, sprout and grow. Like unto the rain which when sent always causes growth, the Gospel when it is sent will cause faith to germinate in the heart, sprout and grow in grace. Thus wherever the Gospel is still in use, even in small measure, there in that place, we are assured that there are believers there. Thus, whether the Samaritan woman already believed or not, she here receives the pure preaching of the Gospel and the Gospel does its glorious work. Fruit is brought forth. Jesus then is concerned first and foremost of strengthening this woman’s faith, which strengthening causes her to go into her town and proclaim the messiahship of Jesus Christ. She is a member of the Invisible Church and many others along with her. Thus Jesus teaches about the Church, showing first of the Invisible Church, and then teaching of:

1. **The visible church.** We read verses nineteen through twenty one of our text: **read verses here.** Having seen the chief thing which Jesus is concerned with as He converses with the Samaritan woman, we do not want to fall into the trap that many have fallen into of thinking that it is entirely unimportant which visible church we belong to as long as we believe in the Gospel. Jesus makes this mistake known to the Samaritan woman and declares that the Samaritan church is heterodox, saying, **“Ye worship ye know not what.”** The fact of the matter is this, if a person is a member of the Invisible Church, then they are CHRISTians, meaning they are disciples of Christ, and if we are disciples of Christ then necessaril;y that means we are to follow the teaching or doctrine of Christ, and here is where we find that all congregations and denominations are not the same. It does matter what visible church we belong to, because truth matters, and error is not the same as truth, but is rather falsity. Now the visible church is defined as the whole number of those who profess to be Christian, but among whom there are found hypocrites. Now Jesus is here not saying that this woman is an unbeliever, nor are we saying that Christians within erring denominations and congregations are unbelievers, but we are saying that within the visible church only the true doctrine of Christ should be taught and believed. Jesus makes this distinction clear between the Samaritans and Jews at the time, but following the death of Christ the same was true of the Christians and Jews. At that time no longer did the Jews hold the true faith of the Gospel because they rejected that Jesus Himself was the Messiah, and are still waiting for Him to this day, whereas the Christians received the Gospel. At that point the Jewish faith became heterodox. The woman Jesus speaks to has the same criticism as many of our day. We say this and you say that. In other words we just have a different interpretation, that’s no reason to depart from fellowship! Yet Jesus makes clear that there is a difference, and that these differences are of great concern, for error cannot and should not be taught alongside of the truth of God. Paul declares this: *“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” (Rom. 16:17)* Therefore, Scripture makes a very sharp distinction between the visible church, and:
2. **The true visible church.** We read verse twenty one of our text: **read verse here.** Throughout Scripture we see that there is a definite line drawn between the visible church which has the true doctrine of God’s Word and those that have error mixed in. Now Paul’s words in Romans 16 declare that we are to depart from, fellowship with those that hold error, which necessarily means that there is a visible church which has, believes, teaches, and practices the true doctrine of Christ and administers the sacraments in accord with God’s Word. This visible church is what is termed the true visible church. At the time of leading up to and even during the life of Jesus to an extent, this true visible church was the Jewish church. Following Jesus’ death and resurrection the Christian faith, founded on the doctrine of the apostles, became the true visible church. Over time the Christian church became divided through false doctrine and heresies up to the time of the reformation, when the Lutherans became the true visible church, holding to the four solas as they are called, that is, Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone. These distinguished the Lutheran church from the Roman Catholic church. From that time on there were further heresies and further divisions within the Lutheran church, and today there are only a small number that makes up the true visible church.

Now for a Christian, we are to be concerned about finding this true visible church, for there is God;s true Gospel found in purity, and the Sacraments retained and administered, and further, that is where the true doctrine is actually practiced in her pulpits, at her altars, and in her prayers. Jesus Himself said: *“Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28:20)* And in the Old Testament: *“He that hath my Word, let him speak my Word faithfully.” (Jer. 23:28)* Now if we are commanded as the visible church to teach all things Jesus has commanded and if we are commanded to speak His Word faithfully, that necessarily means that God has given His church all that she needs to do so. We have seen this in the introduction and Jesus now clearly makes it plain. The Jews, at the time, before their rejection of Christ, were the true visible church, for as Jesus said: **“we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews.”**

Here we have the doctrine of the Church taught to us from the mouth of Jesus Christ Himself, and it makes clear to us the truth of this doctrine. As Christians, that is, as followers of Christ and His Word we are to follow Crist and His Word without exception, including in this doctrine. Let us then concern ourselves with being members of the Invisible Church and of the true visible church as our Lord teaches. Let us gratefully some before Him and give thanks for His pure Word and His gracious Sacraments being retained in our midst. *“O give thanks unto the God of gods: for His mercy endureth forever.” (Ps. 136:2)* Amen.