

## **“Yes, we are open!” Romans 8:6-11**

**For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

If you are watching this right now on your computer, then this is quite a powerful reminder that the last weeks have turned many things upside down. We suddenly live in quite different a world.

I met a friend this week and obviously he was concerned about everything that is happening right now, and also about what impact this will have on me. “Your church probably is closed as well, right?” He asked it with genuine care.

“No!” – I said: “I think that for the first time in many years we are actually open. Widely open.” He didn’t get it... I had to explain it to him. So, it’s okay, if you are right now wondering – what is our pastors saying, what does he mean by saying that “our church is open”?

Our todays reading and the situation where we find ourselves offer this great opportunity to remind ourselves, or for some, perhaps, to clarify what the Church actually is, what it means to be a Christian, and how to think about our situation.

This is how we will organize our reflections today. First, we will reflect on the true nature of the Church. Second, on what a great privilege it is to be a Christian. And third, how to think about our situation.

The true nature of the Church. This is one of the things that annoy me the most. And I am sure I am not the only one. There was this fitting quote by Krister Stendahl, a dean of the Harvard Divinity School, he said: “Our understanding is obscured not by what we don’t know, but by what we think we know.”

People think they know what the Church is. Self-identified Christians sometimes imagine that they know what the Church is. And that obscures their understanding, more, that robs them of awe and wonder, of beauty, excitement and reverence, etc.

How often people think about the Church as some sort of social club, hypocritical at that. How often people think about the Church as that building where Christians

gather. Even the way we use language doesn't help. "We are going to church today." Okay, that's fine if we call those buildings, where Christians gather, churches, that's fine. But it would be much more correct and precise if instead of "we are going to church" we would say that we are gathering for the Divine Service. Yes, for the Divine Service. What does this mean?

Nothing less than that according to what the Bible teaches, it is the Triune God Himself who invites and gathers His chosen people, so that He could serve us, so that He could be among us, with us, so that He could bless us.

This is why Christians gather. Responding to God's invitation, gathering in that one unique setting, instituted by God Himself. That is where we can have safe access to the Holy God, and where He shares with us His most precious gifts.

On the one hand, surely, there is a human dimension to such gathering, for those are human beings that gather together, but that is not primarily a human gathering, for the Host, and the keynote Speaker in no one else, but the Triune God Himself.

Thus, most importantly, it is our time with our Father in heaven. Our time with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, or as someone put it nicely, it is our time in the workshop of the Holy Spirit, where the Spirit of God shapes and moulds us to be like Jesus.

Actually, the analogy with the life of Jesus could be very helpful. It was Him, the Son of God, true God who came to us as true man. He then chose and called His disciples; they didn't choose Him.

It was Jesus who taught them, it was Jesus who showed them His love, and then, after He had showed to what lengths He is ready to go for us, when He had sacrificed His life for us on the cross, when their disciples had finally understood what He has done for them, and who He truly was, then He sent them.

"Go, go, Guys, and make disciples of all nations!" And it is similar today. He calls us, He gathers us, He reveals and assures us about His love, that it is you that He loves with His whole hearts and strength, He teaches us and prepares us, and then He says: "Go, go, Guys, and make disciples!"

Remember what the apostles did? They just stayed in Jerusalem. That was good and comfortable for them there. They could teach in the Temple and celebrate the Lord's Supper with brothers and sisters in Christ. They were not much interested to go...

We could say that the Church was closed. They were not open. Until the Lord said: "Okay, that's enough. Let the persecution begin!" And suddenly the apostles and many of the disciples had to leave the Temple and to leave Jerusalem and the Church grew. Finally, they were open, widely open. This situation where we find ourselves, can serve us a good reminder of who we are and why we are here. We are here with

the one main God given mission. We could say that there is one main reason for the existence of the Church. We could say that the Church is God's weapon of choice to bring forth His Kingdom. Yes, we are God's weapon of choice to bring forth His eternal Kingdom.

Okay, I realize that this may sound funny for some. "Sure, sure, look at the Church... at all the people that are there... God's weapon of choice! What a strange choice!" I agree. I often wonder about the same thing. But listen to this.

He didn't choose the most powerful weapons. Because He didn't need to. He is the most powerful and He will triumph with whatever weapons He chooses. The Church is God's weapon of choice not in our power, but in the power of the One, who created the heavens and the earth. And do you remember how He did it?

Yes, by speaking. By speaking His all-powerful word. Now He speaks through the Church, and His word is not less powerful when spoken through us, imperfect, funny and strange human creatures. For it is not us, it is Him.

This is how He humiliates the mighty and proud of this world, by choosing to act in this way which appears as weakness and foolishness to this world. The mind of the flesh can't understand the ways of God. It doesn't want to understand them, for it is hostile to God, the very source of life, and therefore eventually it leads into death.

You see, the day is coming, and it may be closer than we think, when the whole world will be shut down. Not by governments, but by the One, whose power keeps it going for now. The world will be closed, but the Church will remain open, forever. Because it is eternal, it is the body of Christ, it is the fellowship with the Triune God.

Okay, that's enough about the first of our topics, the Church, but it is so great, that it is difficult not to marvel about it more and more. The second topic was about what it means to be a Christian. Again, our misunderstandings are what hinder us from seeing clearly the greatness of what being a Christian truly is.

It is not about being a good and moral person. And regardless of how many times pastors repeat this truth, this false idea seems to be engraved in people's minds. You may have heard people saying that they can be good without going to church.

"I am a good person; I am much better than many whom I know who belong to this or that church." They may be right... But... that is the mind of the flesh, that Paul was speaking about. Paul didn't say that people can't do good things on their own. Paul didn't say that only Christians do good things. What he did say was that for those, who have the mind of the flesh, their ultimate focus is on themselves.

When they do good things, they do good things so that they would be good. Of course, they can do good. The problem is not that they are not good in their

outwardly actions. The problem is that their ultimate focus is on themselves. They don't want anything to do with the Triune God, they are not interested to be loyal to Him, they are not interested to be with Him. They are hostile to God, their whole being rebels against the Triune God and therefore they can't be pleasing to Him, and they don't even want it.

Paul contrast the mind of the flesh with the mind of the Spirit. He gives the simplest definition of what it means to be a Christian. It is simple, yes, but it is also incredibly powerful. If you have the Spirit of God, if the Spirit of Christ dwells you, if the Spirit of life is in you, then ... then you are a Christian.

See, this has nothing to do with our imaginary goodness. Nothing with our self-evaluation. It has everything to do with God's greatest gift. When He embraces you in the divine fellowship with Himself. When the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit surrounds you and fills you, when they welcome you and indwell in you, when you become a part of this divine fellowship. This is what makes you a Christian. It is a pure and free gift of God, undeserved, offered and available to everyone.

Okay, but how can I know whether I have the Holy Spirit? Jesus actually gives us the test that helps us to answer this question. See the gospel according John, chapters 14 to 16. Jesus tells what the job of the Holy Spirit is.

The Holy Spirit will convict you of your sin. He will reveal to you the true state of your heart. But then the Holy Spirit will lead you to Jesus. It is only as the result of the work of the Holy Spirit that we may be interested to listen to God, to desire to find more about Him and finally – to trust Him fully as to our Father in heaven.

That is the test. If you are watching or listening and wondering... wow, this whole Christian thing actually sounds quite beautiful and meaningful and adventurous, then know this – God the Father and Jesus Christ is speaking to you, the Triune God is calling you to Himself.

The Holy Spirit is knocking at the doors of your heart: "Please, let me in, let me in!" He longs to embrace you, He is just waiting like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, waiting for you to return to Him (read Luke 15).

Then He will run to embrace you, He will throw His arms around you, you will be at your home, your true home, and what is His will be yours. Don't harden your heart, it really can be that good, better than anyone of us can imagine... give it a go!

Good, finally, briefly on our last question. How to think about our situation? We are open. We are not closed. We are the Church. We are God's weapon of choice to build His Kingdom that will last forever. For this reason our Father and our brother Jesus has embraced us so closely, this is why the Spirit of God dwells in us.

So that He can use us, unworthy and imperfect human being to perform the greatest of His miracles, to rescue people from the power of darkness and to transfer them into the Kingdom of God's Son. This is why we are here.

And this is how we should think about our unusual situation. The Spirit of God can be quite pushy. If we resist. He already has pushed us out of our comfort zone. Out of our Jerusalem, out of our Temple, out of our buildings.

Now what? Now listen to Him carefully. He is on the move. He has begun to move us. And it has been such a joyful thing to witness during these last couple weeks. The Holy Spirit has really opened many of you. I have been so encouraged by listening to many of you, to your excitement and willingness to be used by God.

By your support and initiative, when many of you have already stepped out of your daily routines to serve others, to encourage them, and to bless them as we ourselves have been blessed. By the Good News of eternal hope.

I don't know where this will lead us. God knows. Perhaps, people still will keep rejecting God's invitation. That's quite likely. That simply would be one more sign of the end times. Just read Revelation chapter 16. Whichever way God tried to break through to them, they would still harden their hearts and turn away.

But, even if that is the case, if only we listen to the Spirit's whispering, if we are willing to step out and follow His guide, you may be surprised and overjoyed by the power of the Spirit in you. By the courage, by the self-sacrificial love, and by the boldness in confessing God's truth that you are capable of.

That may give us a little foretaste of the joy and blessedness that is to come, when "He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you."

Knowing all of this, knowing that this all is most certainly true, remember, we are open. We are widely open.

Amen.