

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you. Amen.

MATTHEW 28:20.

“And behold, I am with you all the days up to the very end of the age.”

At one of the weddings I preached for during my time here, I shared a story from the life of Pastor Andreas Schroedel. Permit me to share the story again. Pastor Schroedel came to St. Paul from the seminary back in 1876. He got married twice while he was here. His first wife Anna died in childbirth a year after their marriage; his wife’s name is on the single granite marker just to the north of St. Paul Church in the middle of the original cemetery. Not long before he finished his service here, he married a widow named Emma; they remained married for 28 years up until Pastor Schroedel’s death. After Pastor Schroedel left here, he served several other congregations, became a professor in Watertown, and then concluded his ministry as pastor at a large church in St. Paul, Minnesota.

In November 1909 Pastor Schroedel grew critically ill. Shortly before he died, he called his wife Emma to his side, grabbed her hand, prayed the Lord’s Prayer with her and sang the final two stanzas of the hymn “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” with her. Then he told her he loved her and said goodbye to her for the final time. She started sobbing, so he squeezed her hand again and said, “Don’t cry that I am departing from you. You have someone with you who cares for you better than I and who is *always* with you.”

This morning I feel like Pastor Schroedel. This is perhaps not the best comparison. I am not dying. I am only married to one of you, and she is going with me. And I would be surprised if I never saw any of you again. Nevertheless, today marks the last time that I get to preach to you as your pastor before I say goodbye and leave you, and there is and will be tears and sadness on this account. But my God-given duty this morning, as it has always been, is to calm and comfort you by pointing you to the One who cares for you better than I ever have and who will *never* leave you:

Jesus Christ is with you always.

There are so many things to marvel at about our Savior Jesus. Many of them are directly related to the fact that he is 100% God and 100% man in one person. And he is 100% God and 100% man in one person in such a way that what is true of and can be said about God can also be said of Jesus as a man. His divinity and humanity were and are united in such a way that the characteristics of his divinity were and are shared with his humanity.

For instance, God is omnipresent. The psalmist says, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast” (Psalm 139:7-10). God is present everywhere. And since God is present everywhere, that means that Jesus, even as a man, is present everywhere, because in him God and man are united in one person. Of which other human being can that be said? We can’t even imagine a human being being everywhere without imagining something ridiculous like a person perhaps being stretched out like a parachute so that he covers the entire earth. But that’s not what Jesus is like. He is flesh of our flesh, made like his

brothers in every way, and yet he is present everywhere, something which none of us can do or be.

But that is not what Jesus is talking about here, when he tells his disciples, “Behold, I am with you all the days up to the very end of the age.” He is talking about something even more special that being omnipresent.

On the one hand, Paul tells us that Jesus dwells in our hearts by faith (Ephesians 3:17). That is, when Jesus sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts through the good news of what he has done for us, and through that good news sends the Spirit to create faith in himself as our Savior, it isn’t just the Holy Spirit who takes us residence in our hearts, but Jesus himself does. Elsewhere, he calls coming to faith and remaining in the faith “obeying his teaching,” and he says that when anyone obeys his teaching, he and his Father come to that person and make their home with him or her (John 14:23). And please take note that this presence with us and in us as individuals is directly connected to his teaching and to faith in him and does not exist apart from his teaching and faith in him. Jesus is everywhere, but he is not with unbelievers in the same way he is with you as individual believers.

On the other hand, Jesus doesn’t just talk about being with *individual* believers, but also talks about being present in a special way with believers when they come *together* in his name. Earlier he had told his disciples, “For where two or three come together in my name, there I am in their midst” (Matthew 18:20). And here, before he ascends into heaven, Jesus tells his disciples, “Behold, I am with you all the days up to the very end of the age,” and when he says, “I am with you,” the *you* there is plural. “I am with each of you individually,” he is saying, “but I am also with you collectively, with you as a group.”

And please notice that here too he doesn’t just want us to know that we are not alone, period. He tells his disciples that he is with them right after he has told them to carry out his work of making disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching. So here too Jesus’ presence with us as a group of believers is directly connected to his gospel in Word and sacraments. That’s why the writer to the Hebrews encourages us not to give up meeting together but to encourage each other mutually more and more. If we want the assurance that Jesus is with us, we can’t go it alone. We need to continue to value and enjoy the fellowship of our fellow believers. Here in the gathering for worship, Jesus with you in a special way that he is not with you otherwise. He is with you otherwise, but not in the same way as he is here when you gather together.

Now let’s take note that Jesus says, “Behold,” and when Jesus says that, that means we especially need to perk up and take notice. “Behold,” he says, “I am with you all the days up to the very end of the age.” What is especially noteworthy about this?

First of all, note whom he promises to be with. Whom do you hang out with when you’re not here? Don’t we tend to hang out with and enjoy the company of those whose company is enjoyable to us? Those who make us laugh? Those who have knowledge and wisdom to share? Those whose personalities don’t get on our nerves? Aren’t those the people we want to spend the most time with? But whom does Jesus promise to be with?

Jesus promises to be with you and me. He spoke these words first to his disciples, to those who had disappointed him by getting scared on the stormy sea even though he was in the boat with them, to those who let him down by arguing with each other about who was the

greatest, to those who had promised never to disown him and then had fled from him in his moment of greatest need and denied that they even knew him.

But he wasn't speaking only to them. After all, he says he will be with them to the very end of the age, and the disciples he spoke to that day weren't around that long; they have long since died. He is speaking these words also to us. And he speaks these words also to us even though we too have let him down time and again by arguing with each other, by exalting ourselves in comparison with others, by returning to the same pet sins. He speaks these words to us even though we have sometimes not valued his Word and the fellowship of believers as we ought to have, and have often forgot with our thoughts, words, and actions, whether in public or in private, that Jesus the God-man was right there with us.

These are the people Jesus promises to be with, the people he wants to be with.

And not just that, but he promises to be with these people, with you and me, all the days up to the very end of the age. If today is a day between his ascension and his return to judge the living and the dead, then it is a day that Jesus with us and has not left us, just like yesterday, just like tomorrow. I don't know about you, but I can handle being with people who don't make my life too pleasant, as long as I know that my time with that person will come to an end eventually. But Jesus promises to - yes, he wants to - be with us sinners every single day up to the day he returns, to be with us in his grace and mercy to forgive all our sins and guide us through the troubles and trials of life without fail.

And just think - every day! In Acts 18, the people of Ephesus asked Paul to spend more time with them, but he couldn't. That never happens with Jesus. When we ask him to stay with us and abide in his Word, his answer is always, "Certainly." It is sad that today I have to preach a farewell sermon, but it would be infinitely more sad - yes, nothing could be more sad than if you had to hear one from Jesus. But you never will. I cannot and never could be with you always. Jesus has always been and will always be, and that's all that really matters.

As Moses said to Joshua, so I say to you, "The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (Deuteronomy 31:8). Jesus promised, "Behold, I am with you all the days up to the very end of the age."

And what about after the very end of the age? After the end of the age, friends, we will be with him always. We will be with him in that age that has no days, no hours, no time. We will be with him forever.

Most of all, I want to see him there, and if you are Christians, that is what you want to see most too. But I would really, really love it if I could see all of you there too. And you know who would love it even more? Your Savior Jesus. The One who lived a holy life in your place, who died to pay for all your sins, who rose from the dead to prove it, who reigns on high at his Father's right hand for your good, the One who promised to be with you always. Remain in his Word and promises and never let them go, for he is only One who can promise and who has promised you eternal life in his name, the only One who can promise and who has promised to be with you all the days up to the very end of the age.

Be with us, Lord Jesus Christ, as you have promised. Be with these dear people and bring them safely to your heavenly home through your eternal Word, for your holy name's sake. To you be all the glory, now and forever! Amen.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forever more! Amen.