

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ, Amen.

(I tell myself every Sunday: if I can just make it through the Children's Sermon, I'll be okay... So, again, I just want to thank the parents and others who support children being here at the church. It reflects your commitment to the baptismal vows that were made for each of your children, three of whom were seated up here today. So, thank you again to the parents, and those others, family and friends, who support the presence of children in this congregation.)

It happened again.

Another Lutheran Church has fallen.

After 50 years of public ministry, Holy Cross Lutheran of Bellevue closed its doors. This is surprising, since as recently as 2022, its Facebook feed contained a number of posts, including a great picture of an Easter baptism, as well as many pictures of community involvement on the part of the congregation.

Now, however, the Church no longer exists. It no longer has a website. In fact, a quick Google search for "Holy Cross Lutheran" brings up almost no evidence it even ever *existed*, except a glaring red banner next to its name that says, "Permanently Closed." Permanently Closed.

Now, from what little I *could* find, Holy Cross Lutheran bears a number of similarities with Queen Anne Lutheran Church. Let me name three of them.

As a "greening congregation," it committed itself to the stewardship of God's creation—just like we do.

As a Reconciling in Christ congregation, it proudly welcomed all people, irrespective of sexual orientation or gender identity—just like we do.

And finally, it understood itself as a place where one could raise questions and express doubt—just like we do.

Indeed, in 2019 its pastor at the time, Paul Eldred, who's a friend of mine, described Holy Cross Lutheran in exactly the same words I would use to describe Queen Anne Lutheran: "We are a small but mighty congregation." he says. "No matter who you are, whoever you love, whatever your gender identity, wherever you come from, whatever you think of organized religion, or what your experience of God and faith or doubt is, you'll find a place of love and acceptance as we walk together this journey of discipleship."

Like Holy Cross Lutheran, in short, Queen Anne Lutheran Church is, and will continue to be, a place of grace—where all are welcome, particularly in the light of our mission statement of "proclaiming the love of God and Christ for every single person."

So, what happened? What compelled this “small but mighty” congregation to close its doors? What national trends regarding church attendance led to its demise? And what can *we* learn, so that Queen Anne Lutheran Church does not suffer the same fate?

Easy questions.

Well, at the outset I can say I don’t have all the answers. If I did, we would be the first Lutheran mega-church in the Northwest. I know next to nothing about the ministry of Holy Cross Lutheran, apart from what I learned online, but I do know something regarding national trends with respect to church decline, and I also know something about Gen-Z, the generation least likely to attend church, and most likely to identify as “spiritual but not religious.”

How do I know these things? The answer is simple. Not only do I host a bi-monthly Bible study here at Queen Anne Lutheran for young adults, specifically college students from SPU, just down the road; I am also teaching, for one more month, 60 undergraduates at Seattle University on my days off. This has turned out to be quite advantageous. It’s given me a chance to learn, or in some cases confirm, first-hand, why Generation-Z does not attend church.

Let me share three things in particular that I’ve discovered. Number one: Many who do not attend church were raised by parents who felt their children could simply “decide for themselves” what religion, if any, they would practice when they get older. The result was quite predictable. A Facebook meme (which of course is the source of all truth) captures it perfectly. It says, “When church becomes optional to you, it will become unnecessary to your children.”

When church becomes optional to you, it will become, I would say in most cases, unnecessary to your children.

That was on a sign of St. Luke’s Lutheran Church, not in Bellevue, but back East, a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, and I think it’s quite, quite telling. Of course, raising your children in the church provides no guarantee that they will practice their faith in community with others as adults, but at least you’ve given them something other young people don’t have: a *spiritual language* they can use to navigate their way through the complexities of life.

And secondly, the counter-cultural value of “living for others instead of simply living for ourselves.” Now, you’ve heard me say this 1,000 times. In fact, while I wish you would remember *everything* I say, this is the most important thing in my preaching: We are called in Christ to be men and women for others – not at the expense of ourselves, but as a way of working toward the common good, as Paul says in First Corinthians 12. So, the church provides this, ideally; a counter-cultural perspective, or value of living for others, instead of the me-first culture that is around us.

That’s reason one. Young people often do not attend church because they were never exposed to it as children.

A second reason I learned for why Generation-Z does not attend church is one with which I was already somewhat familiar. In this case, however, the reason for not attending church came from those who *had* a religious upbringing. Again, those who had a religious upbringing. In paper after paper I received at the beginning of the term, students shared their disapproval of the harsh and judgmental attitude they observed *in church* toward those who identify as LGBT. This confirms the trend the Public Religion Research Institute or PRRI noticed way back in 2016. When PRRI surveys asked religiously-unaffiliated Americans who were raised religious, “why they left their childhood religion,” respondents have given a variety of reasons:

They stopped believing in its teachings; They had problems with the way it conflicted with science; Lack of time; *et cetera*...

But one issue stands out, the study says, particularly for younger Americans: about 70% of millennials, ages 18 to 33 at the time, believe that “religious groups are alienating young adults by being too judgmental about gay and lesbian issues.”

And 31% of millennials who were raised religious but now claim no religious affiliation, report that “negative teaching about, or treatment of, gay and lesbian people by religious organizations” was a “somewhat” or “very important” factor in their leaving.

I’m not saying I *agree* with their leaving. I’m just telling you what the survey says. That’s point two: Those who were raised in a religion often talk about their disapproval of the harsh and judgmental attitude they observed in church for members of the LGBT community.

Number three: The reason Gen Z does not attend church also includes the various *scandals* of the church, especially in the Catholic Church, and its protection of priests who were molesting children. Of course, the Catholic Church is not an outlier here. Sexual abuse occurs across Protestant denominations, while other professions, including teaching and coaching, also have sexual abusers among the ranks, the point here should be clear. The church not only has a serious ethical or moral problem, it also has a major PR problem. By protecting perpetrators of sexual violence towards children, churches are understandably turning young people away.

So. How might we respond knowing, at least partially, why Generation-Z no longer attends church? Whether it’s because they were not raised in a religious community, or because of the church’s perceived attitudes toward gays and lesbians, or the various scandals with which the church has been caught up over the last few decades? What, in other words, can we do to prevent what happened to Holy Cross Lutheran from happening to us at Queen Anne Lutheran?

Well, obviously, there are no easy answers. That said, I think there are hints from today’s reading, today’s Second Reading, as well as our mission statement, that might help light the way. Let’s start with Scripture. Notice what the Apostle Paul says in our Second Reading: “And even if our gospel is veiled,” he writes, “it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of the

unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” That’s 2 Corinthians 4:3–4. We see the same language for Christ in Philippians 2, when it talks about how “though he was in the image of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, so he emptied himself.”

“Christ,” here, is the mirror of the divine, the perfect embodiment of God’s love in the world.

So if our gospel, then, is veiled, what should we do? If our gospel of *grace* is veiled, what should we do? If our gospel of *hospitality and welcoming others* is veiled, what should we do?

We should unveil it! We should, as Martin Luther says, “Shout it from the rooftops!” We should show others that an *alternative* exists to the kind of fear-mongering, homophobic version of Christianity that generation-Z rightly rejects. Can I get an Amen to that?

We should, in short, invite people to experience what it means to be Christian in a place of grace.

And we should do all of this, not only because of what the Apostle Paul says in the Second Reading about unveiling the gospel; we should do it because *that’s who God calls us to be*, as a Reconciling in Christ congregation with a mission of “proclaiming the love of God in Christ to every single person,” – full stop.

“Whether Jew or Greek,” as the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 3, “slave or free, male or female” – and I would add, straight or gay.

Dear Friends in Christ, there is no easy answer to the question of what to do in the face of declining attendance in church. I acknowledge that. Just as there is no guarantee that by living and witnessing to the gospel of grace, as Holy Cross Lutheran presumably did, we will not suffer the same fate.

But there is something we can do. We can be the people whom God is calling us to be! We can unveil the gospel! And we can welcome others, as God in Christ has welcomed each of us.

May all of us, with enthusiasm, therefore, unveil the Gospel of grace, by living for others, and by accepting others, so that the light of Christ shines not only in our hearts, as the Apostle Paul says, but throughout our community and the world around us.

In Jesus’ name,  
Amen.