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Debt Retirement Vespers
14 December 2013
Grace Lutheran Church, Wichita
Ps 127; Eph 2.8-21; Mt 18.21-35

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” (Ps 127:1)

It's the Lord's will to build His Church.

Now, you might think it's a bit trivial to gather together as the Church to burn some papers.
Isn't this just a bit mundane: mortgages, loans, financing, and the like?
After all, the Church isn't just a building, is it?
It's more than brick and mortar, dry wall and wood slats.

Well, yes, that's all true.

This is mundane.

It is just a building.

And the Lord's church will go on even if 3310 E Pawnee is here one day and gone the next.

And yet, this building is not like other buildings.

Sure, it has walls and carpeting and lights and doorways—

but this building has been set aside for something extra-ordinary.

It's been set apart from all other buildings to be a place of Holiness.

This isn't common ground, here, this is a *sanctuary*—a holy place.

Now, it's not holy in and of itself,

but because God Himself has taken it up for His use.

This building has been set aside by God to be place where He will come and dwell with us.

It's His house; a house of prayer; a place where He comes in order to bless His people.

This is the meeting place of heaven and earth, God and man, saint and sinner.

In this building—

which we now celebrate the end of its debt—

God has chosen to locate Himself for you.

And that's what makes the Church, Church.

It's the gathering of the faithful around God Himself.

This is the Lord's will—

that He locate Himself and gather all men to Himself that His joy may be complete.

For that He doesn't need this building, and yet He has taken it into His usage for our sakes.

All that money spent over the years paying off the debt of this building,

has been for the sake of creating a space,

where the debt of all those sinners who entered this sanctuary's doors might also
be forgiven.

And the Lord builds His church through the forgiveness of sins.

The building took years of work *by the sweat of your brow* (Gen 3:19).
 It took patience and sacrifice, generous giving and lots of lumber.
 And you did it.
 It was a work, a debt you could repay.

But you built it so that you could have a place to come—and others too—
 where the debt you *can't* pay, could be forgiven.

And that's what the Lord is all about—forgiving the unforgivable debt of your sin.

Jesus told the story about a king whose servant owed him 10,000 talents.
 To put it in perspective, a day's wage was a denarius.
 There were roughly 10 denarii in a talent.
 That would mean the man would have to work 100,000 days to pay off this debt
 (assuming no interest, of course!).
 100,000 days is roughly 274 years.
 Putting a dollar sign on this debt is something like: \$640 million.

It was an unforgivable debt.

*“So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him,
 ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’
 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.”*
 (Mt 18:26-27)

That's how the Lord builds His church.
 It makes no sense.
 There's no finances or mortgages or I.O.U.'s with the Lord.
 There's no working your way, or even just doing a little.
 As St. Paul says, *“...not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”* (Eph 2:9)

And so the building of the building is different than the building of the Church—
 and yet the two go hand in hand.

For in this building, the Lord does the building of the Church.
 Here sins are forgiven by grace alone.
 Debt is paid not by our effort or good intentions,
 but by the precious blood of Christ—worth far more than silver or gold.

But the Lord isn't done building His Church.
 There's still plenty of folks out there who run around with their sins as if they were their own.
 They live and act as if the cross has never happened,
 as if God who became man hadn't gone to Calvary for them.

And we're often the same way—
 thinking that this church is just a social gathering, a weekly obligation.

But to live apart from the Church is to live apart from Christ,
where forgiveness, life, and salvation are found.

And so our Lord uses this Church—
even this building—
as a place to build you up into the body of Christ,
and use you to bring others in as well.

We're gonna celebrate in just a moment by burning some papers and sitting at a meal together.
But we'll most honor God by living as His workmanship,
"created in Christ Jesus for good works..." (Eph 2:9-10)

The Lord has others to forgive, and so do you.
Don't be like the servant in tonight's Gospel, who, being forgiven 274 years worth of work,
goes and demands every last penny from the servant who owes him 3 months of wages.

You, who have been forgiven freely and totally in Christ,
go and forgive those who trespass against you.
Don't hold grudges against them.
Don't be slow to say, "I forgive you."

For that's how our Lord builds His Church:
through the forgiveness of sins.

This is a place of forgiveness.
Where Christ comes to us.
And thanks be to God our minor debt has now been paid,
so that the major debt, the debt of the sins of the world,
might also be forgiven not just for us, but for all those who enter these doors.

Finally, St. Paul says,
*"But you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,
built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure,
being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.
In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."*
(Eph 2.20-21)

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.
And your labor is not in vain.
The Lord is doing the building.
We are His workmanship.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit