



One Message—Christ! His Love Is Here for You!

Convention 2007 Saturday Sermon

Text: 1 John 4:9-11

⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

- It is by God's grace that we receive what we do not deserve: forgiveness of sins, fullness of life here on earth, and eternal salvation with God in heaven.
- It is by God's mercy that we do not receive what we do deserve: God's wrath, displeasure and eternal punishment.
- It is in God's grace and mercy that we receive His peace, the peace that passes all understanding, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Welcome to this 63rd Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, held in the Texas District, which last year celebrated its 100th anniversary as a district of the LCMS. Houston is a special place of blessing to me. It is the city of my birth, baptism, confirmation, and ordination, all at St. Matthew Lutheran Church, located a few short miles directly south of this convention center. I pray that your time here in Houston will be a blessing to you and to many.

By now you may already have discovered that people in Texas talk differently than other folks. For example, when greeting another person, many in other parts of the United States are accustomed to saying "Good morning!" Or, "How are you today?" But in Texas, folks often greet each other, employing a little Texas drawl, with the words, "Whaddya' say?" That's abbreviated Texan for "What do you say?" or "What's up?" or "How's life?"

"Whaddya' say?" That phrase is not only a Texas expression that you might hear during your days in Houston. It is also a phrase that finds usage within the context of many of life's challenging moments. "Whaddya' say?"

It was Thursday, September 28, 2006. Two days earlier I had experienced an unpleasant taxi ride in a Chicago All Star cab, prompting me to reserve a return trip to O'Hare airport with a different taxi company. But that morning, for a reason unknown to me at the time, I decided to cancel the new reservation and again called All Star Cab Company for the trip. I casually asked the driver how his life was going these days and was struck by his reply: "Not so good since my brother died suddenly two weeks ago."

In the conversation that ensued, I learned that the driver, Brad, and his brother, Greg, had been baptized at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Schaumburg, Illinois, but had been inactive in the church since they were teens. He asked, "Do you know anything about the Lutheran Church?" I said, "A little."☺ After I tried to explain The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the office of its president to Brad, he said, "So you're a pastor?" I said, "Yes." He then said, "Pastor, I haven't been able to sleep since Greg died, because I don't know where he is. Can you help?"

Whaddya' say to a middle aged man who lost his brother from a heart attack, is scared stiff of death himself, is uncertain whether his brother is in heaven and, more to the point, whether he himself will someday be in heaven? Whaddya' say?

On Sunday, January 7, of this year I was scheduled to leave St. Louis for Dallas on a 5:25 p.m. American Airlines flight for a week long leadership conference with the LCMS Council of Presidents. That afternoon I decided to fly standby on an earlier flight in order to arrive in time for an informal gathering that I otherwise would have missed. After everyone else had apparently boarded, the attendant called my name and gave me a boarding pass for 10-B. After I had taken my seat, a disheveled young lady approached, with a boarding pass for 10-A. She was dressed in jeans and T-shirt, hair in a frazzled pony tail, no makeup, appearing quite shaken and upset.

After she buckled her seat belt, I asked if she was going home to Dallas. She replied, "No sir. I'm going to Iraq." I then noticed the U.S. Marines Corps logo on her T-shirt. I asked how long she would be there. She answered, "Two years, sir." I inquired how long she had known she would be going. She said, "I got a phone call at 10:13 last night, sir." I asked who she was leaving in St. Louis. She answered, "My husband Stanley, 10-year old son Dillon, and 11-year old daughter Jordan, sir." She talked about her life, her childhood, her family, her anxieties, her fears, her hopes, and her dreams. I thought she was coming to grips with her fears when she said her brother-in-law had just returned from Iraq two weeks earlier. But then she added, "He came home in a casket."

Whaddya' say to Jeri Kelly, a 26-year old wife and mother of two children who was on her way to serve her country at war in a far away place, leaving behind her home, her family, her life? Whaddya' say?

These real life stories are reminders to me of the power and relevance of the theme of this convention: **One Message—Christ!** We have a response for the "Whaddya' say?" situations in the lives of those we know or meet, including ourselves. We have a response for a world full of people who are facing real issues of life and death every day, experiencing fear, anxiety, loss, trauma and tragedy, wondering whether there really is life after death and where those they love are spending eternity. We have a response

that can be abbreviated quite simply in this phrase: **One Message—*Christ! His Love Is Here for You!***

We in the LCMS are blessed, privileged, and challenged “vigorously to make known the love of Christ, by word and deed, within our churches, communities, and the world.” The **One Message** we have for this task is the message of **Christ** and **His Love** .

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostle John addresses the person and work of Christ, focusing specifically and powerfully on the power of God’s love, made known to mankind in the person of Christ. The One Message we receive and proclaim is God’s love for the whole world, fulfilled in the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. God showed his love among us through Christ, whom he sent into the world as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Love is not that we loved God – that was not possible because in our sinful nature we are spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God. Love is that God loved us—that’s not comprehensible but it is very real because of God’s grace in Christ.

The power of the One Message of Christ’s Love is that this love, unlike what the world defines as love, is not self-focused or self-satisfying. Christ’s love is self-sacrificing. The Greek word *agape*’ means just that—love that is not self-serving, but self-giving, love defined in that memorable passage in John 15:13: “Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends.” That’s precisely what Christ has done for us on Calvary’s cross—not only for us, but also for all the people of the whole world. His death on the cross assures us of life, with abundant blessing here on earth and perpetual blessing someday in heaven.

So where can this love be found? It is given solely by God’s grace in Word and Sacrament—*sola gratia*—“without any merit or worthiness in us.” Out of his mercy and grace, God looks with favor on our lives and forgives our transgressions through Christ. God’s gift of love in Christ, totally undeserved, is real!

Yet, people in the world too often are “looking for love in all the wrong places.” Many people, young and old alike, look for love fulfillment in many and various ways, only to be left empty-hearted following failed self-serving relationships, vaporized chat room connections, and shattered dreams so delusional and unrealistic that they could only be portrayed and realized through fantasy in a movie or TV soap opera. Many turn their lives toward things they believe might fill the void—accumulation of bigger, better, and faster possessions, overeating, excessive drinking, or abuse of controlled or uncontrolled substances—all to no avail. Whaddya’ say to folks who are “looking for love in all the wrong places?” Whaddya’ say?

We have **One Message—*Christ! His Love Is Here!***

- Christ’s love is here—in God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, infallible Word, bringing hope, comfort, and assurance in time and for eternity.

- Christ's love is here—in the sacrament of Holy Baptism, that “special washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit,” sealing us with God's promise of new life in Christ.
- Christ's love is here—in public worship, as we confess and repent of our sins of commission, omission, and no mission, and receive God's full and free forgiveness in Christ.
- Christ's love is here—in the sacrament of Holy Communion, in which we receive the very body and blood of our Lord Jesus, in, with, and under the common earthly elements of bread and wine, for the forgiveness of our sin and assurance of life eternal.
- And Christ's love is here—in the mission and ministry of individuals, congregations, schools, institutions, organizations, and auxiliaries of the LCMS, all of whom are called to focus on proclaiming **One Message—Christ! His Love Is Here for You!**

On Monday, August, 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina, the costliest and one of the deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States, struck the Mississippi and Louisiana Gulf Coast. Nearly every levee in metro New Orleans breached as Hurricane Katrina passed east of the city, subsequently flooding 80% of the city and many areas of neighboring parishes for weeks. Over 1800 people lost their lives in Hurricane Katrina and in the subsequent floods.

On Friday, May 4, 2007, in Greensburg, Kansas, 95 percent of the town of 1,500 was destroyed and the other 5 percent severely damaged by a category E-5 tornado with estimated winds of 205 mph. Ten people lost their lives. Everyone in town lost their homes and virtually all their possessions. Our LCMS congregation, Peace Lutheran Church, was reduced to two big piles of rubble.

Whaddya' say to folks who lost their homes, their possessions, their loved ones, their jobs, their church, their hopes for the future as a result of such horrific storms? Whaddya' say?

Christ's Love Is Here! In response to such disasters, millions upon millions of dollars have been received for assistance through the local, regional and national relief agencies of our Synod. Thousands upon thousands of volunteers from congregations and districts of the LCMS have contributed, and are still contributing, hours upon hours of time and energy to help re-establish devastated areas, rebuilding homes and churches. Congregations open their buildings and their arms to receive those who have become homeless. Christ's love is here! It is made known in His Word and is being manifested through His people with this message in their service and on their lips.

Christ's love is here! It is here in accord with His promise. It is here for all who call upon His name. His love finds expression in and through our lives. So how about your life? How's your faith and love in Christ? Is it strong and sure? Or weak and wobbly? Is the presence of God and His love in your life real, personal, and meaningful? Is His love finding expression in your life? Or is God a handy but far away presence, to be

consulted only in time of despair, depression, death, or even much less serious need or want? Is His love here?

We must confess that we have not always lived or loved as if Christ's love is here. We lay bare our souls as we confess that we "are poor miserable sinners." We confess to God that we "have sinned against [him] in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved [him] with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We justly deserve [his] present and eternal punishment."

But then we hear those precious words of absolution: "Almighty God in His mercy has given His Son to die for you and for His sake forgives you all your sins. As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by His authority, I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And we remember once more the **One Message—Christ! His Love Is Here for Me!**

All this is a simple but strong and sincere reminder that as Christians we have **One Message—Christ! His Love Is Here for You!** --

- Assuring you in moments of doubt and disbelief,
- Upholding you in times of trial and temptation,
- Embracing and empowering you for mission and ministry.

For that empowerment, John clearly focuses his Spirit-given words. "*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*" He also writes, in the 19th verse of this same chapter, "*We love because he first loved us.*" His love compels us and propels us to proclaim the light of Christ's love to all who live in the darkness of doubt and disbelief.

Non-believing people of the world are wondering and wandering in their effort to discover love, meaning, and acceptance, often turning to movements or groups based on beliefs contrary to what we in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod believe, teach, and confess. For 160 years we in the LCMS have firmly believed and proclaimed the truth of God's love in Jesus Christ, expressed so clearly in the words of Jesus himself: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*" (John 3:16-17)

We have **ONE Mission**—to be **ABLAZE!**—on fire with the love of Christ—our hearts burning within us in seeking the lost for Christ with the power and presence of the very Spirit of God in our lives, on our lips and in our labors! We proclaim **ONE Message**, that Jesus Christ alone is the only Savior of the world! We are **ONE People**, united by God's love in Jesus Christ!

So whaddya' say? As best I could from the back seat of a taxi in Chicago traffic, I explained to Brad the grace of God, His promise to us in Holy Baptism, and the assurance of His promise of eternal salvation to those who accept His gift of faith in

Christ. As we arrived at O'Hare, I asked Brad if I could pray for him. He readily agreed, so I prayed right there in the back seat of a taxi at O'Hare airport, with horns blaring behind us, for a measure of the peace of Christ that passes all understanding. When I told Brad about my change of plans that morning and my decision to call All Star Cab, I said, "I really don't know why I was in your cab this morning." Brad said, "I know why, Pastor Kieschnick. I needed to hear the message of comfort that you shared with me."

So whaddya' say? As best I could from seat 10-B on American Airlines, I shared with Jeri Kelly in seat 10-A the love of God in Christ, his assurance that he will never leave us nor forsake us, and his promise, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26) When I told Jeri that I was originally scheduled for the 5:25 flight but had boarded this 4:25 standby flight, I said, "I really don't know why I was on your flight this afternoon." Jeri said, "I know why, Pastor Kieschnick. I needed to hear the message of assurance that you shared with me."

So whaddya' say? In times of such "divine appointments" that God sends your way, remember these words—the theme of this 63rd Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: **One Message—Christ! His Love Is Here for You!**

The peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus! Amen!