ST. JOHN LUTHERAN CHURCH

September 28, 1969 - Seveenteenth Sunday After Trinity
Text - III John, verses 9-15

WHAT KIND OF CHURCH MEMBER ARE YOU?
BUILDER OR DISMANTLER?

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus, our Lord of Glory:

During the last great war, we heard much about saboteres, that is, one who helped assemble the parts of an important power vehicle or strategic weapon, but deliberately fumbled. Outwardly, the ship seemed altogether safe abd seaworthy. But the sly workman, paid off with a neat sum, was bribed to make the ship or plane dangerous, putting in inferior parts, or leaving out a bolt here and there. He was like a person St. Paul describes: He tears down, dismantles, and destroys while he claims to build up something. His kind, like the rodents, are always with us even in the church! Lest we fall into such a class and spiritual sabotage, interfere with the free course of the Gospel, prevent others from keeping the faith or from getting Christ's heaven, let us be on the alert to examine our hearts without a mask or pretense of any kind, to face the question of St. John implied in his picture of two church members of His day.

Like the man in Jesus' parable today, the man in St. John's letter liked the head place at the banquet table. He is doomed to be put down, for pride, indeed, tears apart and tears down the church. It divides the flock of Christ, to say the least. Here was a man by the name of Diotrephes. As one looked at him, he had, we might say a good head on his shoulders. That is, he had ability to lead. But the way he pushed others around, found constant fault with the zealous and faithful, he was a menace. This man was self-appointed leader of the congregation, while opposing the ministry of St. John and the elders, and co-pastors. He refused to receive and to accept them. Thus he disrespected the office of the ministry and he furthered a spirit against the ministry to gain a following, thus dividing the flock.

That pride of would-be domineering spi has to be avoided like a plague in the Church. As, in the case of Demetrius, a proud spirit of know-it-all drives people away, breeds ill-will, and breaks the bonds of fellowship in the faith. He set up a blockade against converts from coming in. He interfered with the missionary efforts of those who received John and re-born people. If anything is a curse that muzzles the voice of the Gospel it is an anti-missionary, clanish, closed-door policy of a Diotrephes, be he of the 1st century or of the 20th. When he died, the church was better-off!

Not only was it running the apostle John's ancient congregation - we don't know where it was located - running it to the ground. His pride was that he used the church only to sound-off and to have a base of operation to be No. 1, and he alone. It ran that ancient Church down to the danger point of complete disappearance, because, if the door is closed to strangers to cater to a proud man, the church has lost its reason for being, has given up the truth, the Gospel, and has lost Christ its head.

Being an asset to the church is no worn-out goal. There is much at stake. If I am only like the barnacles that cling to an old ocean vessel, I am detriment to the church showing no signs of desire for Word and Sacrament. Nor do I wish, though If I am regular in the taking in the Gospel, to be a hinderance by my attitude toward others, as well as to God himself, while in church action. Some people are worse than children "playing church". At least children who play church waer a sincere countenance

and reflect an inner drive to imitate a pious exercise. When grownups go to church, like Diotrephes, only to be at the head, first in line, domineering, they are playing church to swell their own ego, and feel their pride. The other way is to be church, mean it, not to build yourself a place or rank, but to build Christ's kingdom, to build up your fellow Christians and to cast out the net of the Gospel outside the walls of the Church, like Demetrius did. Who will you be? A Diotrephes, the wrecking crew, or a Demetrius, the construction team of the church?

Second, humility builds up the Church. We are not to imitate the first example, a bad one indeed. But follow the second one, that of Demetrius. Be a Demetrius, not a Diotrephes. The second man lived according to his new nature in Christ. He did not seek the head place at the table. While the others had not really seen God by faith, this man rather was a child of God. Every one had a good word to say about Demetrius. Even perhaps heathen, unconverted neighbors felt compelled to admit that Demetrius lived up to what he believed. Not only that, his behavior, loyalty and humble dedication to learn God's Word, to become saturated with the Gospel of Christ, and to be busy helping others on the way to heaven, won him a witness from the truth. Like a supporting character-witnedd, God's truth, Scripture, the Gospel, verified that Demetrius spoke and lived the truth. To these testimonies of acquaintances and of the living Word of truth, which recommended Demetrius, St. John adds His own recommendation of Demetrius.

He was a man who could be depended on to serve without fear of a quarrel, without fear of strife, without fear of pettiness. Yes, his humility as a co-builder with St. John of the Church of Christ, furthered good witnessing within the Church. When people heard and saw, met or spoke with Demetrius, they were touched. They were moved to re-act and to say something about Christ. He stirred them to zeal. He awakened in them the hope of life eternal in the crucified and Risen Lord. What is more, his humility was bent on glorifying the Christ of the Cross so much that he thereby strengthened and lengthened the bonds of Christian fellowship. While Diotrephes was a trouble-maker, Demetrius was a helped in and out of trouble. When a fellow-Christian or when his pastor, St. John was discouraged, he did not disrespect and beat him down further, but he prayed for his pastor as he did for his bretheren.

There is reason to pray for more like Demetrius, that his kind increase more and more inside the Church. In St. John's absence, Demetrius filled in, kept things going, continued to pass on the torch of the Gospel even while the apostle was unable to be there. John thought so highly of him that he goes out of his way to remind the church of the pillar it has in a Spirit-guided man that he was - rare, precious, Demetrius!

Now, the one who builds up the Church need not be the world's most talkative person. He may have little to say at times. He knows that silence in occasion is Golden. But when he does speak, he does so to win a straying sheep of Christ back or to win him over, to gain him, if never won before. When Demetrius spoke, people were all ears because he was not a mere fault-finding talker, but one who helped. It was not depressing, but edifying, uplifting - so as to call forth a good report. Why? Because he brought them down to the ABC's of the faith, to repentance and to faith in Christ's resurrection, life and pardon completely, to the surviving wisdon of God. Each and every one of us can and ought to be a Demetrius, never letting up in digging into Scripture, participating in group study as well as in private. That builds the Church more than any plans, methods, and the like. In Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Amen.