Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

I am not sure how many of you, but as I understand it, many of you, the members of the WELS got a letter recently from the Director of the Commission on Congregational Counseling. That letter began in this way:

Will my grandchildren have a place to go to church?

As I travel about our synod, I am often asked questions like that. WELS members see their local congregation aging and perhaps getting smaller every year. They learn of a WELS church in the next town that had to close its doors and hear rumors another nearby church will do the same.

So, naturally, they wonder. When their children of grandchildren are older, will there still be a WELS church in the area that they can attend?

The challenges facing the WELS are not unique. American Christianity has been in decline for 60 years. The decline caught up to WELS about 30 years ago.

For the first 140 years of WELS’ existence it grew almost every year. Peaking at over 421,000. But since, 1990, WELS has lost members almost every year. At the end of 2017, WELS had 359,000 members, a decline of 62,000 souls from WELS’ height.

I have to tell you I was not very pleased with that letter. It is not the truthful statistics that disturb me or even the decline of American Christianity something I have been watching for a good part of my ministry. In another publication from the same group they make this statement: “Moreover, these back-door losses came disproportionally from younger WELS members. As WELS young adults head off to college, the secular humanistic world view espoused there is challenging their faith.” I read those words and I thought, “What incredibly short sightedness. I wrote a Conference paper in 1996 warning of the secular humanistic world view that had already invaded every aspect of our homes and churches. Yet my warning call was not heard or heeded and everything just plowed ahead heavily influenced by destructive forces to our souls and the souls of our children. No, it was not the truthful statistics cited that made me unhappy with this letter.

What made me unhappy with this letter were the things implied. That’s right, things implied. That letter promises that this group can help you “engage in faithful and fruitful ministry.” Then the letter goes on to explain how they are going to help us “open the front door” and “close the back door.” What? First of all, although I don’t think they mean to, this letter implies that our current pastors are not being faithful and fruitful, in other words we are failing the WELS and Jesus! Really! Every single man I know is faithful to the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, the very means by which God says His Holy Spirit will come and carry out the purpose of God. And you know what, there is not even a hint in this letter or other propaganda to point out that maybe, just maybe the decline of Christianity is God’s judgment upon a nation and people who have tossed Him out of their lives! Since God is the one who gives growth and the one who causes decline then our measure as a Church is not to be anything less than: “Is the pastor and congregation faithful to the Word, faithful in its use of the Gospel in Word and sacrament?” That’s the only thing that matters. If God wants souls to catch the sweet smell of Jesus and His salvation that is His business. If God wants our faithful preaching and teaching of His Word to be the smell of death, then so it will be (2 Co 2:15-16)! But to imply that our Pastors are not faithful and not doing the work God desires is absolutely shameful!

The other thing that bothered me is that these men and their letter suggests that they have the real way to grow, they have the right program and they can help you be faithful and fruitful, but what they mean is “faithful and fruitful” to their goals and desires. Wow, super apostles! I thought Paul had dispensed with that stuff in the New Testament? This Synod program promises that now, we are going to open the front door, as if any church in existence would ever not be inviting and open to guests and those longing to learn of Jesus. Or they promise we are going to close the back door. Evidently they are now so sharp that all those members who have been absent for 10 years or so, we are going to share their program and those people are going to instantly become faithful supporters and followers of Jesus! Again, the implication is that the pastorate is not doing its job! Shame, shame on these men for even hinting that such would be the case in our Churches.

What I would have liked to have heard, in view of the statistics presented is maybe just a good old encouragement from God based on the text before us. What wonderful words. What uplifting words. What beautiful words that direct us to the only place we can go as we look to be faithful and God’s blessed children. Our theme will be: **HOLD UNSWERVINGLY TO THE HOPE WE PROFESS.**

Aren’t those beautiful words that our text opens with? And please note that those are words of encouragement all the way, **Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.** Now I do think you have to ask a few simple questions here. The first is perhaps the most important and that is, “Just what is the hope we profess?”

Your answer to this question is very important. If you think the answer is about how Jesus came to help you be better, live better, love better and by your actions and life earn eternal life, then you have a problem. That is really a preaching of the law. Do this, don’t do that and you will have a great and good life! That’s it, that’s what you think faith is about? Or you think faith and the church is about numbers and growing and being effective? How sad! Me, I think the hope mentioned here is based on Jesus and what Jesus has done and accomplished for us. I base that on the entire context of these words.

Let me share with you a few of the verses that are found near our section. Chapter 10:10, **“And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”** Verse 12-14, **“But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being sanctified.”** Verses 19-22, **“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”**

Now, I only went back in this chapter. You could go back two or three chapters and hear the same wonderful encouragements and joys that I quote here again and again. In a nutshell all of those passages are telling us about our hope, that sure and certain confidence we have in Jesus. That Jesus died, rose and ascended into heaven for our sins! Jesus has made us holy before the Living God and with that Jesus has given us eternal life and salvation. Jesus is working to call and keep us in the faith. Jesus has promised to be with us and to guide and operate this world for the eternal good and salvation of all believers.

By the way, do you think that Jesus has only promised us good and wonderful things! Has he not warned us that as people hated him they will hate us? Has he not pleaded with us not to be friends with this world and those of this world? Has he not warned us that the love of most will grow cold and that all kinds of evils and problems will arise and be called good and that good will be called evil? Were we not warned that life as a child of God would be tough and difficult, that our welfare and perhaps our very lives, just because we follow Jesus, will give rise to persecution and terrible times especially as His day grows near? If you don’t know those things or don’t grasp that God is with you for your eternal good even in the midst of struggle and terrible times then you really don’t have the hope of Jesus to hold onto. Somewhere along the line you have forgotten all that God’s Word declares. You have forgotten to simply and only cling to Jesus and his work of redemption. That is the hope we profess: Jesus is the Savior from sin, my savior, and the giver of the Holy Spirit who will call me to faith in Jesus’ wonderful work!

Then our second question, “How do we hold unswervingly?” Well, we don’t let this or that detract from God’s Word and will. We study God’s Word and wrestle with its truth. And today, many times, we have to weigh what God says versus what the world says and either believe God or not! Because the hope we profess is based on something very important. That very important thing is revealed at the end of verse 23, **“For he who promised is faithful.”**

There it is. We can only have this hope, profess this hope if finally we believe what God’s Word says! Either God is faithful and has given us a faithful and true revelation of his plan or there is no point to religion! Either God is almighty, all knowing, present everywhere, filled with grace, love, compassion for all the souls of the world, and who sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins or there is no God. I don’t think, based on God’s Word, that any of us can pick and choose what we want to believe or not believe about God. Because if that is true, that we can choose, then really there is no God. Fact is, the Bible is God’s revelation about who, what, when and where. And in that revelation God clearly reveals himself as absolutely truthful in everything…or another way to put it, “a faithful revealer of truth.” Give this some serious thought. If you think that God is unfaithful in anything, then in truth, you do not believe in God.

And right there is probably the biggest problem most people of the world have. They think God has been unfaithful, especially to them. God hasn’t given them what they want or their life isn’t what they think they deserve. They blame God and walk away from him. Or church bodies, instead of sticking to the truth and wonder of God’s Word, they work at changing things, making things more friendly, more inviting, more purposeful, and more Godly than God’s Word allows. And yes, they change things, at first subtly but in the end it is a complete abandonment of God’s majesty and the truth of God’s faithfulness! Or the lack in trust that the Gospel is sufficient and alone can save. Even the abandonment of something like the fact and reality of sin. Again think of it. If you don’t believe there is sin, then what is the point of God and Jesus!

So our text encourages, **“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”** Then our text goes on: **“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”** There is our job. To hold forth the hope we profess. To stand firm in the truth and wonder of Jesus and with his Gospel message to spur one another on in love and good deeds. And just as important, stop skipping church. God has given us Church to be built up, encouraged, to help us carry each other’s burdens and troubles. To pray for each other, to study God’s Word together and let the Holy Spirit be our guide and help in this troubled world. All of this, because one day, on The Day, Jesus will return and you will find all that is proclaimed in God’s Word truth. Hold on to Jesus! Amen.