

Fourth of July--#2

Good morning!

Did you notice the stories we received in our lessons today? Isaiah tells that, even when we are disappointed, God's hand is with us, to nourish and comfort us. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, we hear the things we must do to live as his people. We need to control our impulses, have realistic self-perceptions, critically evaluate ourselves, shoulder our individual responsibilities. Each of us has burdens that can only be borne with the help of others. In the passage from Luke's gospel, we hear that we are commissioned to go into the world, taking Jesus' story to the people and places he would visit. Paul cautions us that we should not sit back and watch others working, but should look for ways to help with the harvest.

So God's message for today is one of accepting God's help and comfort for ourselves, living and sharing our new lives with each other and, then, taking the story on the road to the world. It is not an easy road, and it is filled with dangers—the same dangers Jesus faced.

Today is the Fourth of July, the official birthday of our nation. 400 years ago, small groups of courageous people began leaving their homes and families in search of new lives. They left behind oppressive governments, droughts and famine, poverty and want. They brought only their hopes and dreams for the future. When they encountered disappointments and dangers, God was there to comfort and nourish them. They brought with them their native languages and customs, and a determination to build something new. They felt that all could rise above their past heritage to become something more than before. This became part of the American story.

Gradually, in their moves across the land, cutting forests, and building villages and towns, they laid the seeds of hope for a government where all people had a voice, where law was enforced equally, and the community respected all citizens. They were proud of the American story and of their part in it. The telling of the story was a part of each Fourth of July celebration. It was no accident that the first buildings erected by communities were a common meeting house and a church. It was obvious to these people that, while individualism made them strong and self-reliant enough to step into the unknown darkness of a new land, it was the community that made them safe and it was the church that brought a feeling of emotional and spiritual closeness to their neighbors and to God. In the laissez-faire atmosphere of the frontier, everyone was a law unto himself. Guns settled feuds and property disputes. It was the community banding together that brought order to the chaos. It was the church bringing a message of Jesus' peace and love that supported the people in their quest for order and justice.

The message from Jesus' church made the difference. The story of death and resurrection, God's kingdom bringing justice, peace, and love, and everyone telling that story in the world changed the "don't get mad, get even" attitude to the message, "don't get mad, forgive."

As the country grew, so did the church and its influence for change. It soon became objectionable to God's people that only property owners could vote, and that some of that property included human beings held in slavery. Soon universal suffrage became a rallying cry and male citizens of all economic levels were allowed to vote. It took a devastating war to bring freedom and voting rights to men of color and then another sixty years to include all women in the roster of citizens. Then forty years later, the church was again a leader in the efforts to make discrimination of all kinds against the law. There were Lutheran pastors and members, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians at Selma, in Detroit, Seattle, and Kokomo, Indiana, working to bring justice to all.

The church and its people were instrumental in bringing these changes in the attitudes of the country and to the laws of the land. Jesus' message has always been about change—Repent! He says. Become a new person! Change your life to become part of God's Kingdom of love and grace. Along with this message of the need for repentance and change, the church's story also included the story of individual denominations and congregations. Each local congregation had its own story that it told to others and to its children.

What about Christ Lutheran Church. Do we have a story of who we are and why we are here that we can tell to the world? We do. Just as immigrants brought their "home" church customs to their new country, so have CLC members brought their stories to this congregation. It is the story of people ready to change, unafraid of the future, living in God's grace and seeking ways to serve God's Kingdom in this new place.

Here is my version of the story.

Long ago, a small number of families decided to start their own church. They banded together to develop their own community. Each person felt a personal responsibility to support the others and to use their talents to make the church a place where they could serve God. They became St. John's.

A few years later, a smaller congregation, Holy Cross, was growing too. Both congregations remained true to the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. They made sure that they told Jesus' message about a new kingdom and felt that they were part of that kingdom.

Times changed, the children moved away and the congregations began to shrink. After months of talks, St. John's congregation consolidated with Holy Cross. It was time to change and to

become a new community. They were still true to the stories of Jesus' death and resurrection and to telling the story of God's love and grace through the community.

Even though disagreements occurred which saw some members leave, the new congregation still conveyed the same values that each had held before the consolidation. They lived the commission that Jesus gave us to go into the world, to go where Jesus would go and to do what Jesus would do. The members of Christ Lutheran Church have rallied to help the disadvantaged and to serve the community. They believed in giving away what they had to others in need. They supported a refugee from Hurricane Katrina, collected toiletries for Haiti Health kits, contributed to the Haiti and Chile earthquake drives. They continue to collect food for local food pantries. They serve at the Rescue Mission and as mentors for at-risk students in local schools. Not only does the congregation actively serve outside the church, but they also bring beauty to the community through the Spring Art Show of watercolor paintings and the Fine Arts Festival of organ and piano music during Lent and Advent. None of this labor for God had directly to do with "conversion" or "evangelism." These acts of kindness and selfless giving had to do with making the world a little better.

We have an exciting worship service, and a congregation with a powerful singing voice. We have young members working to tell Jesus' story in puppets and song. We open our church to the community for jobless groups, Alcoholics Anonymous groups, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, to a Thursday morning Bible Study group and for the Red Cross Blood Drive. We have adults in our congregation who come at 8:30 every Sunday morning, winter or summer, whether in rain, snow, or sleet to study God's word. The entire congregation is becoming more aware of our responsibility in the care of God's creation and are finding more ideas we can use to protect our world.

This is who we are. This is what we do. Why do we do this? Not to collect praise and gratitude, publicity or new members, but out of love. We know the love of God through the stories of Jesus, through our worship and song. We share this love and God's concern for the improvement of the human condition with the world.

This is our story as it has been written. Now it is time for the next chapter. Where does the congregation go from here? Is there more to write about our Lutheran Christian journey?

We are facing some hard decisions now as we see our finances no longer covering our expenses. We must be again willing to change, but how? We must accept that no matter what we decide, what course we take, things will never be the same. Just as the caterpillars in their cocoons, we are at the brink of a new future. We are tightly bound with our stories of the past, with how things used to be, tied to our fantasies of the glories of "before." If we decide not to struggle to escape our cocoon, we, and the caterpillar, will surely die.

Or we can face facts. We know what won't work. Changing the pastor, cutting costs to the bone, losing our housekeeper, changing the heating or air-conditioning temperature, or turning off the lights won't make our church grow. The same-old, same-old won't save us.

What can we do? How do we emerge from our cocoon and spread our wings to become a more vibrant congregation? First we need to realize that we are not alone in this struggle. Churches of all denominations, across every state and country, are asking this same question and struggling to find answers. Second, we must know that ALL of us have to intentionally want to become something new and we each must take personal responsibility to see that it happens. We can recognize, as Tom Ehrich said in his "On a Journey" column that Jesus came to love people, not to recruit them for a church. He called them to self-sacrifice and self-denial when he sent them into the world without purse, or bag or sandals. Jesus sent followers out to proclaim God's closeness. He sent them to heal the sick. The "success" Jesus saw wasn't about taking pride in casting out demons. It wasn't a future roster of church members bound for a glory that no one else could attain. "Success" was lives touched, infirmities healed, prisoners freed, hungry fed, naked clothed, homeless housed, outcasts embraced. Can we take Jesus' challenge to become a "successful" church?

It is our decision. We can stay as we are, stay comfortable, sing only familiar hymns, fear change as non-Lutheran, and watch as each year the congregation shrinks smaller and smaller and eventually dies.

Or we can struggle. We can work to revitalize our church, search for ways to strengthen our spiritual faith, strive together and support each other to be the best that we can be as a community. We can bring God into our lives and our conversation, We can look for new ways to be Lutheran Christians.

Nothing can ever be the way it was, or the way we think it was. Our future changes with every decision we make or decide not to make. We don't know what success will look like for CLC. It is easy to define failure, but not success – we don't know the words. We each must decide that this church community is worth the sacrifice of our time and our finances because we have a story to tell. We have lives to touch, infirmities to heal, and hungry to feed.

As Tom Ehrich says, when religious institutions engage in God's labor and tend to God's people, they usually prosper-----Wait! What does this prospering mean? No stress? Overflowing offering plates? Crowded pews? No. Tom Ehrich interprets "prospering" as heavily used facilities, strained budgets, overworked laity and clergy, noisy worship, constant change, messy rosters, loose doctrine, surprising spiritual gifts, and loss of certainty. This is prospering God's way. Do these traits sound familiar? Heavily used facilities (scouts, AA, Red Cross,) strained budgets, (hmm) overworked laity and clergy, (yeah) noisy worship (I think we need more

talking babies in the service) spiritual gifts (yes). Looking at this list, it seems to me that CLC is well on its way to prospering.

Such messy prosperity has a cost, of course, and many cannot bear it. Nevertheless, God's point is always the doing of good, the healing of wounds, the spreading of mercy and justice—making the world a little better.

If we at CLC decide to accept the challenge and work to find new ways to be a faithful and successful church of Lutheran Christians, it will be blindly, relying on God as we step off into the unknown. In the same way that our forefathers and foremothers struggled to make a new life in a strange land, we are on a new path. This Fourth of July, we will retell the stories of our history, but without the worries of the journey that the pioneers faced. In following God's path as a church, we will not be shielded from the risks and dangers. It will not be an easy journey. It will be messy. We will need to gather together to reexamine our mission, defining ourselves by what we do well, asking ourselves where we need to work and what we need to do to continue bringing peace and justice to the world. We will recognize steps toward success when we feel increased energy and excitement within ourselves and our congregation. But when our church butterfly breaks from the cocoon, it will spread its wings as a new creature, one still telling our Lutheran Christian story, but engaging God in a new way.

Nothing can happen, of course, unless we include God in our plans. Perhaps we will need small groups to engage God in prayer, to talk about our mission, to find new ways to do things in this place. Through prayer we can make God's plan for the future our future. In the words of Paul to the Galatians, "A new creation is everything! As for those who follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy."

Let us pray. Let us pray for our congregation. Let us pray for our future.

God's mercy and peace be with you.

