

Central States Synod Assembly
Opening Worship Sermon – Bishop Gustafson
Thursday, June 2, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God the Creator and the Lord Jesus. Amen.

It happened during one of those early summer storms that blow through the Midwest with some regularity – high winds, heavy rain, chance of flooding. We had heard that morning that it was coming, so when it hit we were ready. The warning sirens started going off around 9 that night, and a few minutes later the wind and rain began, light and easy at first, then steady, then pounding as the sky turned dark purple and black.

I was in the best possible place for a storm like that – standing in the wide-open door of my garage, watching all the action. It was awesome! The rain was blasting sideways; tree branches blew by, shrubs blew by. The wind was howling and I thought, “Man, it sounds like a freight train out there!”

Meanwhile, my wife was inside, watching the weather channel and paying close attention to that little strip that scrolls across the top of the screen. That’s how she learned that a tornado had touched down about a half-mile from our house. She came out into the garage and got next to me and – she had to shout to make herself heard above the storm – she yelled, “Do you think we should go down to the basement now?” I said, “Oh, it’s not so bad.”

And no sooner were those words out of my mouth than the little sycamore tree in our front yard partially uprooted and blew over. I said, “But if you really want to”

So we went down to the basement and waited out the storm. When it was over we came back up to inspect the damage. I walked over to the sycamore tree and saw something very interesting. It was a fairly young tree so its surface root structure simply had not developed enough to hold it up in that fierce a storm. But it also had a taproot – the tree’s main feeding system – that descended down into the depths of the earth. It was that taproot that kept the tree from simply blowing away.

What I was seeing in that taproot, ravaged as it was by an unforgiving storm, was an abundance of strength; and it was that abundance that kept the tree alive.

“Abundance” is the theme tonight, specifically Trusting God’s Abundance. Usually when we think of God’s abundance we might think of the kind of abundance we heard about in that reading from Second Corinthians: an abundance of God’s reconciling love that was poured out for us on the cross of Christ, an abundance that shows itself in forgiveness and mercy and grace. Or we might think of the kind of abundance that Elijah and the widow of Zarephath experienced, the abundance of care that God provides for those who are needful through those who are faithful. And certainly those expressions of abundance speak to the heart of who we are as people of faith. But as we saw from the abundance of strength that kept our sycamore tree alive, God’s abundance can also come in some surprising forms. And that draws us back to our Gospel lesson tonight.

This passage from Luke’s narrative of the life and ministry of Jesus is a familiar one to some of you, maybe to many of you. Some church councils and committees use it as the basis of Dwelling in the Word at the beginning of their meetings. It’s a fine passage that focuses us on the mission of Christ’s church.

This episode, which some editions of the Bible refer to as The Mission of the Seventy, occurs shortly after the announcement that Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem, where he will give up his life and physically leave this world. Maybe this is preparation for that event, to rehearse his followers for what is to come following his bodily absence from them; in any case, Jesus appoints 70 “others” and sends them out ahead of him as his personal envoys. That word “appoints” can also be translated as “elects.” It’s an election, a unanimous vote of 1, and all of Jesus’ candidates win! He single-handedly elects these representatives to be his personal agents in the world.

But just who *are* these people, these “70?” Scripture doesn’t tell us anything about them – nothing about their hometowns, their families of origin, their occupations, their stands on abortion or gun control or bathrooms for people who are transgender; nothing about their education or their qualifications to represent God. The Bible is silent about all of that. All we know is that Jesus picks them.

They are to go in peace and vulnerability, relying only on the hospitality of those they meet. The gift they bring is healing. The message they bring is profound: The Kingdom of God *is right here*. That message is vital and dynamic whether those it is meant for receive it or not. (Perhaps it was this passage that inspired Martin Luther to explain the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer this way: “God’s kingdom comes indeed without praying for it, but we ask in this prayer that it may come also to us.”) The reality of the kingdom doesn’t depend on its reception. It depends only on its sender, none other than God.

So off they go, returning several verses later overjoyed that they have accomplished their mission. And Jesus cautions them to rejoice not in their success but in their salvation.

We don’t see the 70 again until the end of the Gospel, when they are referred to as the “companions” of the disciples. And their number starts to grow; by the beginning of the book of Acts they have swelled to 120. Now the pace really picks up; in Acts there are four references to the growth of the church. Chapter 2 contains the first one, and it describes a new-member class of 3,000, give or take. From there the church grows by multitudes.

But the mission of the church starts right back here, with the sending of “the 70.” ***This community of 70 is the abundance of God, God’s own delivery system specializing in mercy, grace, forgiveness, peace, love.***

Well, there are more than 70 of you here today, but the mission is the same, the message is the same, and the power is the same. And the basic fact remains: ***You are the abundance of God.*** Whether your church worships multiples of hundreds every weekend or just a handful in one Sunday morning gathering, God’s abundance is on full display, and it is an abundance that continues to change the world.

That might seem like a strange notion these days, because all of the data seem to point to shortage, decline, scarcity. It is estimated that by the year 2050, only 14 percent of the population in this country will live in rural areas. Many of our synod’s 175 congregations are in those areas now. And no matter the geographic location – rural or urban – the erosion of participation across the board in mainline Christian denominations continues uninterrupted. Yes, we see the data, we read the reports, and it’s tempting to throw up our hands and, at best look for someone to blame and at worst give in to despair.

But no matter how grim the statistics or persuasive the dismal trend reports, there is one reality that is more central, one reality that is no respecter of trends or cultural shifts, one reality that we couldn’t escape if we wanted to, and that central reality is this: *we’re stuck with Easter!*

We're stuck with the fact that as the cross of Jesus Christ was doing its hateful work of showing the world that death has the last word; when Jesus' life itself was shrinking away to nothing – God was at work preparing for the greatest act of abundance the world has ever known.

One man, raised from the dead by the power of God, set the world on a new course, and not only the world, but you and me. So I claim the truth that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver or gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. This is most certainly true!

That is the truth that unites each and every one of us, and it is that truth that you and I carry into every encounter with another human being. *It is that truth that makes us God's abundance*, not defined or restricted by numbers but overflowing in the gifts of love, forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation that God wants to lavish on God's creation.

This is an abundance that is, thanks be to God, far beyond our control. I close with a story. I have a friend – I'll call him Jason – who I greatly respect and who embodies many admirable qualities. He's retired now from a successful career in business, which he entered after a number of years in the military. He's a faithful, every-Sunday church-goer. He's also extremely patriotic, makes no bones about his love for our country, has no patience with those who don't share his quick and deep affection for the USA.

When 9/11 happened, Jason, even though he was retired and getting on in years, was ready to take up arms again, go to war against America's enemies. And the face of the enemy, as far as Jason was concerned, was the face of Islam. He has lived with a simmering hatred of Muslims ever since, freely admitting his hardness of heart.

And so it was that on a sunny afternoon last month Jason and his wife were driving to the grocery store when a car flew past them, weaving in and out of traffic. Jason slowed down to create plenty of space between them and what was obviously an out-of-control driver. And he watched in horror as that speeding vehicle slammed into another car waiting for the light to turn at an intersection. The impact pushed both cars into a ditch, the speeding vehicle flipped on its side. Several drivers stopped to render assistance; Jason also stopped and hurried over to the car that had been hit. When he pried open the smashed passenger door to help the innocent driver, he was totally unprepared for what he saw.

The car contained only one person, on the verge of going into shock. She was wearing a hijab, the traditional head covering of a Muslim woman. At that moment Jason was confronted with himself, torn between hate and love ... and love won. As he leaned into the car and reached out to take her hand, he couldn't help noticing the cross that hangs around his neck gently swaying between the two of them.

When Jason told me his story, the tears that streamed down his cheeks were eloquent testimony to this God who does not respect our boundaries but who breaks through our hardness of heart as God sends us out on God's mission to love and bless the world. We go as church. Sometimes there are 70 of us, sometimes "multitudes," sometimes only one. But no matter our number, we go in abundance, trusting that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will guide our steps and shape our witness. And we go knowing that this God trusts us to *be* God's abundance in the world.

To this same God be all honor and glory, now and forevermore. Amen.