

March 10, 2024

Bp. Jeff Johnson

Texts: Numbers 21: 4-9; Ephesians 2: 1-10; John 3: 14-21

On behalf of your siblings in Christ throughout the Synod, greetings.

Thank you for welcoming me into this space. Afterwards we're going to have a time for some thoughtful conversation together. I'm hopeful that you might stay and join me in that conversation.

As Pr. Steve mentioned, we've known each other for over 40 years—from a time of great turbulence and creativity in our church when Pr. Steve joined a couple of other clergy to accompany us through a wilderness path—as we found our way forward through great difficulty and great conversation. And I am forever grateful for that. Pr. Steve's advice to me in advance of my ordination, almost 34 years ago, was to not spend all of my time in preparation with details of the service, but to make sure that I took time (and he helped facilitate that time) the day before on Retreat—when I gathered with Phyllis and Ruth, two of the women with whom I was ordained, with Pr. Steve and another—to be in prayer and meditation, and to walk to at the beach, to be with one another in preparation for that day. And so, I am grateful not only for your accompaniment, but for your insight and wisdom along the way.

Grace to you and peace from the One who is, who was, and who is to come that we might know love. Amen.

Each of you—each of us—has a reason for showing up here at Peace. I know what my reason is, what's your reason? Whether you're here for the first time, or whether you're part of the regularly gathering community, why do you come? Why do you show up at Peace? Why do you come back? Why do you plug in to help one another, and to help transform the world around you?

I'm going to sound a little bit 'Fundigetical', but I show up at Peace—I show up at church—because of the difference that Jesus Christ makes in my life. Jesus is my door to understanding God—and God's loving-kindness—at the center of the cosmos. Jesus is my way of figuring out who I am, and what is possible in the world because of my investment. Jesus and his family of ancient ancestors point me to God's intent—God's loving intent—for all of creation, for God loved the world in this way. Pr. Steve read, "*For God so loved the world [John 3: 16],*" says the Gospel of John, the cosmos, the multiverse, our planet home, each of us, our families. Love is God's intent. It always has been, it is, it always will be. Love is what is possible.

Love is God's activity with and through us and even, even, as clouds hang over us, as storms are brewing around us. The writer to Ephesians calls these clouds and storms that threaten us the power of the air, the 'ruler of

the power of the air' [Ephesians 2: 2]. They ensnare us in despair, and in disintegration, and in disillusionment. They entrap us.

Even so, God who is rich in mercy out of love makes us alive over, and over, and over, and over again, restoring us so that we might restore the world around us, so that we might connect to our neighbors who are in need, so that we might fight for this creation that gives us life. And it is this love that I know because of Jesus, and his family of ancient ancestors, and their wisdom.

For we are what God has made us. I think Pr. Steve read, '*We are God's work of art.* [Ephesians 2: 10]' We are God's work of art created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand to be our way of life. And this is gift, sheer gift, God's gift—and it changes everything. It changes the way life is possible—for me, for us, for our neighbors around us.

I come to you this morning from a meeting with the Conference of Bishops in Chicago, by way of an ordination yesterday of Rachel SanDiego in San Mateo, after meetings earlier yesterday (on Saturday) throughout our Synod of our nine Districts or Conferences, and it's been a very busy couple of weeks. I'm exhausted.

The Conference of Bishops meets twice a year, in the Fall and in the Spring. We meet for about a week and a half at a time, and it includes bishops from all 65 Synods, plus the Presiding Bishop, and the Secretary of the Church. And, in former years, it was a button-down and laced-up kind of group with practices that restricted new bishops from speaking on the floor, or the Conference itself from speaking in public about anything that mattered in the world.

But diversity has brought change and urgency to the Conference. No longer are bishops mostly older, straight white men, but bishops now have [given birth to] children. They are rural, suburban, and urban. There are more bishops of color than ever before. Women make up one-third to one-half of the Conference, and currently there are three queer bishops (with the possibility of two to three more after Senate elections this spring). At this meeting, the Bishops issued not just one, but three statements without any objection from the floor (which would have been impossible even five years ago) on important things that are happening around our world: one, in support of migrants at the Southern border, and criticizing the actions of the governor of Texas; and, two in support of a permanent ceasefire in Gaza—one a public statement, and one a public letter to President Biden.

As well, we spoke about the accelerating decline that's happening in the number of viable congregations throughout the denomination—not something that's unique to the ELCA—but is happening across Christian churches in our country and throughout the world. Attempting to stem this tide, about 10 years ago the ELCA began starting new ministries, and they started 300 new ministries over the past 10 years, only seven of which became sustainable congregations—something which at the Conference was acknowledged as a failure.

Our organizational model isn't bearing the message of God's love in a way that our neighbors can hear it—the message of God's grace, the way of Jesus—clearly enough so that those who need to, want to, are desperate to hear it, hear it.

There was one Church executive who acknowledged this failure, addressed it, said that it was a failure of focus. He said,

“Change is coming. It's here. Now. We'll do it together. This is how we need to shift from a focus on starting new congregations to a focus on discipling people into faith.”

Think about what you do here at Peace. Think about the route, Howard, that we took this morning where you disciplined me into the faith that you teach here at Peace—shifting the focus from starting new congregations to discipling people into faith—from new ministries that are focused all on clergy to efforts that engage everyone in sharing the Good News that is Jesus Christ.

That was his recipe for the future—two ingredients—make disciples for the path of Jesus, empower the leadership of each one of us with this Good News—not just roster leaders, or not just deacons, not just clergy—but everyone with the good news of God's love.

Recently, I had the occasion to walk along the cliffs of Northern California with the Rev. Dr. Moses Penumaka, who is a professor at PLTS, and he told me that the future isn't about buildings and property—the future is about relationships and good news. He said,

“Long gone are the days when all we needed to do was build buildings and cathedrals, and our church would grow almost automatically. In this next era, relationships, loving relationships, will be at the center, and we can build these relationships wherever we are and live—in rooms and office parks, on the labyrinth, in neighborhood social centers. This is where

people discover God's love. This is where people meet Jesus. This is where we learn how to walk together the path, as disciples.”

Even as the model that we know in the ELCA is under stress, the message is solid. Hear again these words from Ephesians. (This is from the NRSV, the New Revised Standard Version, not the New Jerusalem version.)

“God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us, makes us alive with Jesus Christ. By grace you have been saved, raising us up with Christ, so that in the ages to come God might show the immeasurable riches of grace in kindness toward us.

For by grace, we have been saved through faith. It is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not the result of works. For we are God's work of art. We are what God has made us to be, created in Christ Jesus for good works on behalf of our neighbors, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. [Ephesians 2: 4-10]

God so loves the cosmos, God is rich in mercy, and shows us kindness and gentleness and compassion. This is not something we do. It's not based on merit, or status, or wealth, or ability. It is gift.

And we are free. We are free to take this gift and share it with everyone we come across, for we are God's work of art. We are what God has made us, created in Christ to care for one another, and to transform our world.

This is our way of life on this path we call discipleship.

This is what we have been called to do. This is our purpose.

This is why I show up at Peace Lutheran Church. Maybe it's part of the reason you show up here. Maybe it's part of the reason you come back here, and maybe it's part of the reason that you plug in here, so that you might transform the space around Peace, the neighborhood around Peace, the neighborhoods where you live.

Recently, I wrote in our Synod newsletter about a trip that my husband Pepe (Pepe is sitting back in the back; raise your head) ...that my husband Pepe and I took up the coast of Highway 1. (It was the trip where I talked to Pr. Moses Penumaka, along the bluff overlooking this stormy sea.) We were there during the second storm, a couple of weeks ago, and we had to flee town at the end of worship to avoid being stuck in Gualala as the storm was coming in.

We were there to worship with the people of the Episcopal Lutheran Mission at Shepherd by the Sea. It's an Episcopal-Lutheran Church, and I was invited along with The Rt. Rev. Megan M. Traquair, who's the Episcopal Bishop of Northern California, and we were invited there to dedicate their new Sanctuary in a beautifully renovated office park space.

Previously, they had worshipped at a Roman Catholic Church, but the newly installed, more conservative bishop kicked them out. And for a couple of years they wandered, looking for new gathering space, but focusing on strengthening their relationships with one another.

Bishop Megan and I came expecting to dedicate a Sanctuary. Instead, we blessed their renewed commitment, rooted in love to one another, and to the neighborhoods in which they lived. We dedicated this resilient, nomadic community of faith to renewed discipleship in Jesus Christ for the sake of the world.

And we sang together a song, an anthem—and these are the lyrics from the first two verses.

*Come build a church with soul and spirit, with flesh and bone.
We need no tower rising skyward, no house of wood or glass or stone.*

*Come build a church with human frailty, of flesh and blood.
Jesus, its sure foundation, built by the hand of God.*

I hear in these lyrics this invitation to discipleship, to the renewal of love between us, to showing up for each other, to coming back to each other, to plugging in together to change the world for the sake of our neighbors.

For the concluding blessing at the church in Gualala, we offered this prayer, and I leave you with it as I leave you this morning.

*Sojourning people of God, come home.
From this gathering place, you will reach out in love and in generosity.
From this gathering place, you welcome all people.
From this gathering place, you care for the well-being of those in your midst, and you are bold in the Spirit's new possibilities for the sake of the Gospel.
For you are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus for good works on behalf of your neighbors. May this be so among you, and may what is true among you be so among your siblings, who are in churches throughout our Synod. Amen.*