

NALC News

North American Lutheran Church

June 2017

‘Moments of Mission’ artwork offered to inspire mission and support the NALC’s Great Commission Society

*By Pastor David Wendel
Assistant to the Bishop
for Ministry and Ecumenism*

Our Lutheran ancestors in Europe, Scandinavia and North America were passionate about spreading the Gospel, baptizing and making disciples.

The two largest Lutheran church bodies in the world (Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania) were blessed by the early efforts of missionaries.

Often, these missionaries and their efforts were initiated, funded and continued through the work of various mission societies organized specifically to reach the world, in obedience to Jesus’ own commission for his followers to “make disciples of all nations.”

Sadly, in the last generation or two, this mission fervor has cooled as many Christians, congregations and church bodies have become more inwardly focused, struggling to simply maintain the Church as an institution while in the midst of decline, loss of members and income.

The North American Lutheran Church, from its inception, has been intentionally Christ Centered



Twelve “Moments of Mission” watercolor paintings were created by Pastor Philip Gagnon in support of the NALC’s Great Commission Society.

and Mission Driven! In every aspect of our life together, we are focused on Christ and his mission. We have a Life-to-Life Discipleship initiative in obedience to the Great Commission. We are planting new congregations and welcoming Spanish-speaking, Chinese, Oromo, Amharic and other multi-national communities. We support global workers serving in various locations around the world, and we are encouraging every local congregation to partner with at least one international missionary effort.

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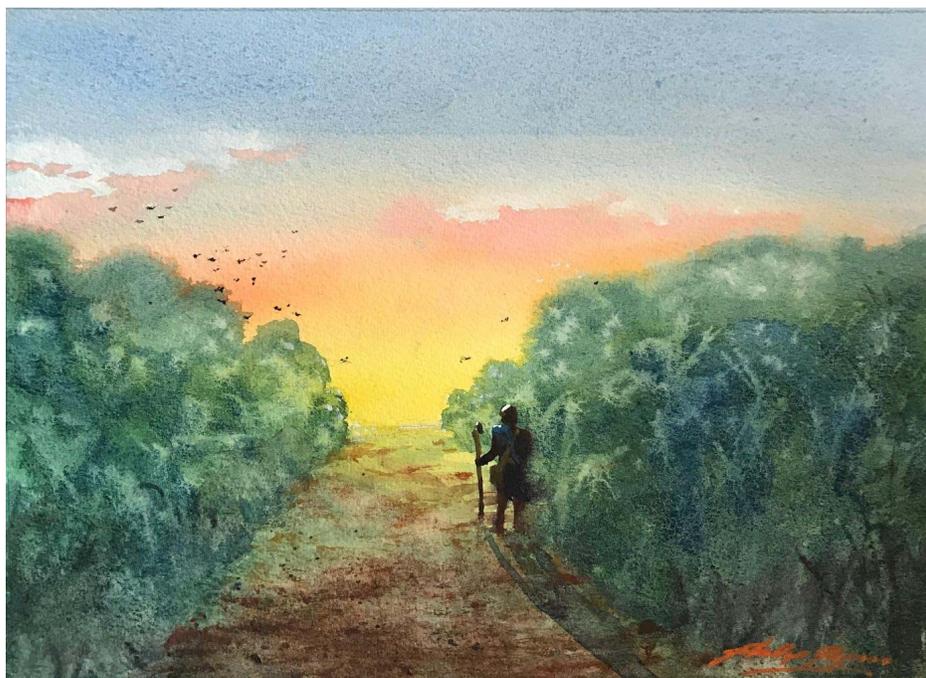
We also have what may be considered the proverbial best-kept secret in the NALC — the Great Commission Society! The GCS is a voluntary group of individuals and congregations who commit to monthly giving to support local mission congregations, global workers around the world, and anything and everything having to do with mission in the NALC.

To get the word out about the GCS, “Moments of Mission” original artwork has been created and will be available for the first time at the 2017 Lutheran Week in Nashville, Tenn.



In keeping with the theme of supporting missions in a concrete and practical way, accomplished artist Pastor Phil Gagnon of St. Albert Lutheran Church in St. Albert, Alberta, has prepared 12 “Moments of Mission” watercolor paintings.

These paintings give glimpses of life and mission around the world, from Mexico to Tanzania and Ethiopia, intending to inspire hearts for mission and the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (*Matthew 28:19-20*).



The original art pieces, signed by the artist, will be framed and available for purchase during Lutheran Week (Aug. 7-11).

The artwork will also be incorporated into calendars and notecards which will be available for sale. All participants and visitors to Lutheran Week are encouraged to find the “Moments of Mission” display and consider taking one (or more) of these beautiful, unique pieces of artwork back for home or church!

Proceeds will go to the Great Commission Society fund to support the NALC’s annual grant program which provides up to three years of emergency or transitional aid for missions and global workers, as well as start-up funds for new mission starts in North America.

By having this inspiring artwork available and visible in our homes and churches, it is hoped that mission will be on our hearts and minds day by day! It is also hoped that they will serve as an ongoing invitation for individuals and congregations to join the Great Commission Society by making a monthly commitment to participate in supporting and encouraging missions around the world.

Together, let’s be Mission Driven!

'Holding Fast: Being Reformed' is theme of 2017 NALC Convocation

"Holding Fast: Being Reformed" is the theme of the 2017 NALC Convocation Aug. 9-11 at the Sheraton Music City Hotel in Nashville, Tenn.

The Convocation begins with worship at 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Aug. 9. The Rev. Yonas Yigezu, newly-elected President of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, will be the preacher for the service.

The NALC Mission Festival will be the focus of the Convocation Wednesday afternoon and Thursday morning. The Mission Festival is designed to inspire and serve as a resource to congregations. The focus will be "Renewing Congregational Life through the Word of God" with keynote presentations by Bishop John Bradosky and Pastor Gemechis Buba, Assistant to the Bishop for Missions.

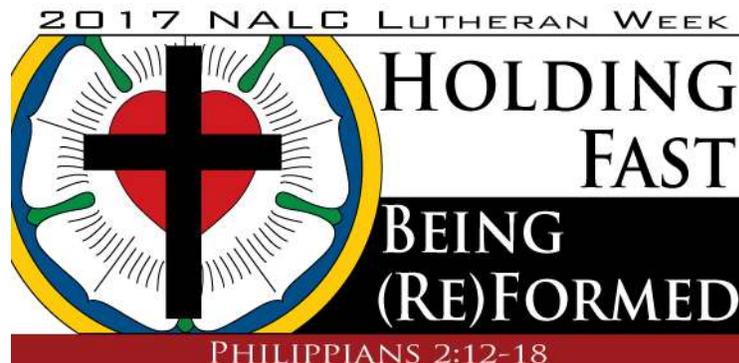
Mission Districts will gather on Wednesday evening for Bible study and business meetings.

A festival Communion service celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. on Thursday. The Rt. Rev. Dr. Fredrick Onael Shoo, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, will be the preacher for the service.

The Convocation is the annual gathering and business meeting of the NALC. The Convocation will elect members of the Executive Council and Court of Adjudication. The Convocation will also receive financial reports and consider budgets.

Changes to the process used to elect the Bishop will be considered by Convocation delegates. Constitutional amendments have been proposed by a task force which studied the election process.

Several speakers representing a variety of ministry partners will address the Convocation. Keynote addresses on the significance of the Reformation will be made by the Rev. Dr. James Nestingen and the Rev. Dr. Nathan Howard Yoder.



The \$200 registration fee for the Convocation includes Wednesday dinner and lunch on Thursday and Friday.

The Convocation is preceded by the NALC Youth Leaders Symposium, Women of the NALC Annual Gathering, and the Carl E. Braaten and Robert D. Benne Lectures in Theology.

The NALC Youth Leaders Symposium will be held on Monday and Tuesday (Aug. 7-8). This training for all those who work with youth in congregations will be led by Gary and Laurie Pecuch of faithwebbing.com. The \$75 registration fee includes lunch on Monday.

The Women of the NALC Annual Gathering will be held on Tuesday, Aug. 8. The theme is "Being Reformed and Transformed." Featured speakers are Pastor Amy Little and Pastor Paula Murray. The \$80 registration fee includes lunch.

The Carl E. Braaten and Robert D. Benne Lectures in Theology are scheduled for Tuesday afternoon, Aug. 8, and Wednesday morning, Aug. 9. The \$125 registration fee for the lectures includes lunch on Wednesday.

Hotel rooms at the Sheraton Music City Hotel are available for a discounted rate. The hotel provides a free shuttle from the airport.

To register or for more information on any of the events during Lutheran Week go to thenalc.org.

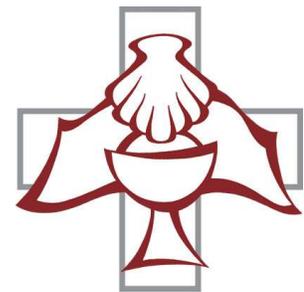


Samar Ghandour was ordained on May 19 at St. James Lutheran Church in Newton, N.C. He is called by Advent Lutheran Church in North Charleston, S.C., to serve in Liberia.

Celebrating Ordinations



Jonna Bohigian was ordained on April 30 at St. Timothy's Lutheran Church in San Jose, Calif., where she serves as associate pastor.



Dan Mershon was ordained on Feb. 11 at Salem Lutheran Church in West Alexandria, Ohio, where he was called to serve as pastor.

Summer Reading

By the Rev. Dr. Amy C. Schifrin
North American Lutheran Seminary President

When I was two months into the second grade I finished reading all the assigned readers through the sixth-grade level. My teacher really didn't know what to do with me, this little girl who devoured a book a night. So, she sent me to the library during daily reading hour. Unsupervised, uncensored, too short to reach the card catalogue, I was free to roam the stacks until some book's title piqued my interest. I would pick it off the shelf and just sit, cross-legged on the floor, until the librarian (who saw in me a future librarian) would come and find me and tell me I had to go back to class. She would, however, on occasion, show me a book that might be of interest to me. But mostly she knew what was in her library, and she knew that whatever book I chose, there would be something good for me to learn.

During the summer months in many of our NALC parishes we have Vacation Bible Schools and we encourage our children and youth to attend Bible Camps. We want them to be familiar with the library of books that make up the Bible. We know that they will learn something about the eternal goodness of God from every chapter.

Like my librarian, we elders sometimes point out things that we want them to know, passages like the 23rd Psalm or the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But truly, we want them to have enough familiarity with this library of books that they will want to sit and read and read on a quiet summer's day. We want them to know God's Word, for while they are reading, we also know that God is reading and shaping their hearts for eternity.

As your Seminary President, I spend most of my time teaching adults — seminary students and parishioners — but occasionally, I have a chance to teach children again. When I see



Dr. Amy Schifrin, president of the North American Lutheran Seminary, and Pastor James Lehmann talk with children at Immanuel Lutheran Church of Flatville near Thomasboro, Ill.

them and experience their eagerness to learn, I am always renewed. I also get excited, because when I see them I know I am meeting the next generation of seminarians.

Where do our pastors come from? They come from our congregations, where they are nurtured in faith, in love, in mercy, in the arms of Jesus as he makes himself known when his word is spoken and his body and blood are given for our sake. Our pastors come from the love of God poured out in Christ Jesus through the ministry of faithful congregations.

So I encourage each of you to guide your young ones into a special kind of summer reading. Teach them the stories of God's love through the ages. Teach them to sing the love of Jesus. Teach them to trust the breath of the Spirit, who gives life in God's name. Help out at Vacation Bible School. Start a regional NALC Bible Camp. By so doing you'll not only be strengthening the witness of the whole church, you'll be forming our future pastors, who, by God's will, will someday be teaching our grandchildren and great grandchildren to read the most important book in all the world.

LWR Farmers Market Coffee

Starting this summer, Lutherans in the United States will be able to purchase LWR Farmers Market Coffee, a delicious line of coffee sourced directly from farmers involved in Lutheran World Relief (LWR) projects.

LWR is producing this line of coffee in partnership with THRIVE Farmers, a coffee roaster that shares LWR's passion for helping farmers lift themselves out of poverty, become self-sufficient, and be better able to support their families.

Through their purchases, Lutherans will also be supporting and strengthening the work of Lutheran World Relief. For every pound of coffee purchased, THRIVE Farmers Coffee will donate 80 cents back to LWR to continue reaching out to the rural poor around the world.

Just as a local farmers market creates a closer connection to the people who grow our food, LWR Farmers Market will create a closer connection to coffee farmers and the many ways Lutherans reach out to them through Lutheran World Relief.



Gustavo Talavera with his granddaughter, Margarine, on their family farm in Nicaragua. Gustavo's family has benefited from the generosity of Lutherans through Lutheran World Relief and now sell their coffee through LWR Farmers Market Coffee.

Gustavo Talavera of Nicaragua is one of the farmers whose beans will go into the first round of LWR Farmers Market Coffee. Gustavo is proud of the crop he raises, but not just because of its quality.

"I am proud that coffee allows me to support my children," Gustavo said. And not just his children.

Gustavo has been a leader in his community for establishing a school for all children. Asked about the opportunity to share his coffee with the same Lutherans who supported projects in his community, he said, "That will be really beautiful to feel like we know you."

You and your congregation will get to know Gustavo, other farmers and their families through LWR Farmers Market. There are opportunities for you and your congregation to serve, sell LWR Farmers Market coffee and share the story of what Lutherans are doing around the world as they put their faith in Christ into action for the sake of the poor.

Visit lwr.org/coffee to learn more. Pre-orders are being received at lwrfarmersmarket.org, with the coffee becoming available in August.



Coffee farmer Abelino Herrera (third from left) and his family have worked with Lutheran World Relief and its partners in Nicaragua to strengthen their community's ability to provide a better future for their children.

Good stewardship starts at the very beginning

By Pastor Gerald Miller

Composer Richard Rogers offers some delightful songs in the movie musical “The Sound of Music.” Maria and the Von Trapp children offer one of them in the simple song “Do-Re-Mi.” Maria begins with the words: “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.”

Starting at the beginning of something is often a wise point of entry, especially if we’re trying to understand the deeper roots or heart of something. That’s also true when it comes to understanding the roots and heart of stewardship before God.

St. Paul points to such a starting point when he writes very plainly and simply to the Christians in Corinth: **“What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”** (1 Corinthians 4:7). For St. Paul, life before God and stewardship before God begin with acknowledging and thankfully confessing that all we have — including our very lives — comes from him.

In Paul’s words to the Athenians spoken at the Areopagus, site of the ancient supreme court of Athens, Paul returns to this same theme when he says: **“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything”** (Acts 17: 24-25).

So if **everything** — absolutely everything we have including every breath each of us takes — is given to us by God, that gives us a very interesting “starting point” when it comes to the whole notion of stewardship, doesn’t it? It’s a starting point that shouldn’t be denied, ignored or forgotten — not, that is, if we want “a very good place to start.”

For me, no one has said this better than C. S. Lewis, when he wrote in *Mere Christianity*:

Then comes another discovery. Every faculty you have, your power of thinking or of moving your limbs from moment to moment, is given you by God. If you devoted every moment of your whole life exclusively to His service you could not give Him anything that was not in a sense His own already. So that when we talk of a man [or woman] doing anything for God or giving anything to God, I will tell you what it is really like. It is like a small child going to its father and saying, “Daddy, give me sixpence to buy you a birthday present.” Of course, the father does, and he is pleased with the child’s present. It is all very nice and proper, but only an idiot would think that the father is sixpence to the good on the transaction.

The starting point for Christian stewardship — our own personal stewardship, the stewardship of any congregations, also the stewardship of any denomination, including the NALC — is one and the same: It starts with joyfully confessing that nothing is our own. It starts with joyfully confessing that all that God has given to us is his, placed into our hands for a time, to serve him.

As we think about our own next steps in stewardship — whether personal, congregational, or denominational — this beginning point is “a very good place to start” and also to continue. Taken seriously, this same “starting point,” under God’s grace, can also make a huge difference in where we personally and corporately eventually end up.

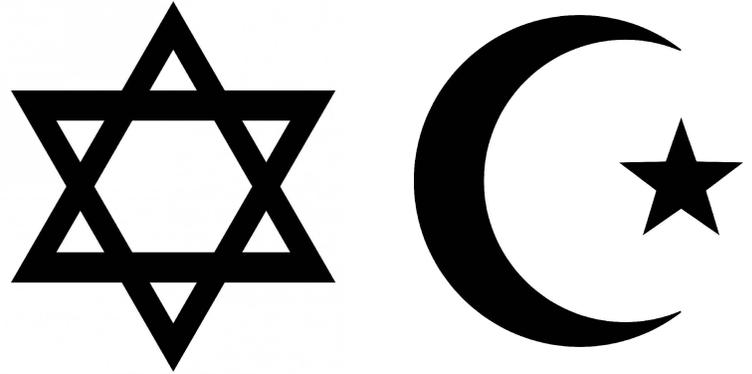
So, as we continue to use what’s been entrusted to each of us for a time, we keep on saying it and singing it to ourselves and to each other: “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start!” It’s all gift, dear brothers and sisters, gift to be put to

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Prayers for the Jewish people and people of the Islamic faith

At the suggestion of Dr. Glen Johnson, Calgary, Alberta, the Commission on Theology and Doctrine has reviewed prayers for the Jewish people and for the people of the Islamic faith. The prayers, together with brief commentaries, can be found on the "Resources" posting of the NALC website. Congregations are invited to pray these or similar prayers either for personal devotion or in public worship.

**Bishop Paul E. Spring, convener
Commission on Theology and Doctrine**



A Word of Encouragement

Bearing witness to Jews and Muslims at home and around the world is a most difficult and complex mission. But they and we need to hear and know that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, to the glory of God the Father. It is both our calling and our mission to bear witness to these two communities. The Spirit will lead and guide us if we hear the call, pray for the wisdom and insight and guidance that we need, and move ahead in confidence.

Prayer for the North American Lutheran Church

Holy Father, Beloved Lord Jesus Christ, and Gracious Holy Spirit, look with favor upon the North American Lutheran Church, and broaden our vision of mission. May it become the mission of our church to reach out to the Jewish people and the people of the Islamic faith that we might bear witness to Christ and proclaim the Gospel to members of these communities, both in North America and around the world. We lift our hearts and voices to you on their behalf and on behalf of all people, each one made in your image and likeness. We pray that you would bring the reconciling and merciful peace that comes from Christ alone, so that the whole world will manifest your glory and divine love. To you, O Father, with your Son and Holy Spirit be all honor and praise.

Brothers and Sisters, let us begin and undergird this mission with constant prayer. Our hope is that, as the North American Lutheran Church begins this particular ministry, each of you, and hopefully, every person in the church, would be especially encouraged to pray daily for the Jewish people and for the people of the Islamic faith. Please include such prayer when you engage in your daily prayers and when you gather as a community on the Lord's Day. The act of prayer on behalf of others opens each of our hearts to be instruments of God's love for the world. May our prayers for the Jewish people and for the people of the Islamic faith create in us a witness of love that is bold and clear, pure and selfless, and that through such prayer God will draw all people to Himself.

Prayer for the Jewish People

Holy Father, we give you thanks for the Sons and Daughters of Abraham and Sarah, the First Covenant People through whom our Savior, Jesus Christ, came into this world for our redemption. Help us to love and honor and respect this people, who for 23 centuries have endured suffering and humiliation, some of it sponsored and encouraged by the members and leaders of the Church. Forgive us, Lord, and replace our inherited biases with love and respect.

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By Gary and Laurie Pecuch

The last faithwebbing.com webinar of the school year was on May 16. The webinars from April and May are on the editor's desk to be separated into shorter clips for easier viewing. Those on our email distribution list and members of the Faith Webbing group on the NALC Network will be notified once they are posted on the website. If you wish to join either group email us at faithwebbing@gmail.com.

We hope to see you at the Ventures in Youth Ministry Symposium, for adults that work with youth, to be held Aug. 7-8 (during Lutheran Week) at the Sheraton Music City Hotel in Nashville, Tenn. To register or for more information go to thenalc.org. We are hoping to have all Mission Districts represented.

Gary and Laurie Pecuch have served in youth ministry for more than 30 years at St. John's Lutheran Church in Grove City, Ohio. They serve the NALC as youth ministry coaches and provide a variety of no-cost resources for NALC congregations through their website. Visit faithwebbing.com and fill out the contact form.

Stewardship

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good use. Help us to see this and to rejoice in it! In Jesus' name and for His glory, Amen!

Pastor Gerald Miller serves on the Stewardship Committee of the North American Lutheran Church. After serving four Lutheran congregations over 42 years, Pastor Miller retired in 2016. As Pastor Emeritus of Annapolis Evangelical Lutheran Church, he and his wife, Lynn, continue to live in Annapolis, Md.

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We give you thanks for the Jewish people who now also believe in and confess that Jesus is Lord and Savior and who are reaching out to their Jewish brothers and sisters around the world. May we become as active in our outreach to our Jewish neighbors as are all these Messianic Jews. Help us, Lord, to pray for and reach out in love and respect to this First Covenant people.
Lord, in your mercy ... Hear our prayer. Amen.

Introduction to Prayer for People of the Islamic Faith

The people of the Islamic faith need our help and our prayers. Though Muslim nations have persecuted Christians and Jews for centuries, people of the Islamic faith need our love and respect, for they, like all people on this earth, are made in the image and likeness of God. They are in bondage to a religion that has replaced the Old and New Testament Scriptures with the Qur'an and reduced the person of Jesus Christ to that of a prophet, with Mohammed being the chief prophet, and salvation being awarded on the basis of good works. They need to hear that Jesus is their Savior, and that God loves them and wants them to know the fullness of His love, the love that He gives for the world through Jesus Christ.

Prayer for the People of the Islamic Faith

Holy Father, we give you thanks for the privilege of reaching out with the Gospel to our Muslim neighbors, for they are in need of your mercy and grace. Lord, help us to speak the truth in love, that our words and actions may bear witness to the living Christ, and the hearts of our Muslim neighbors may be set free to love you and to know the fullness of your steadfast and eternal love.
Lord, in your mercy ... Hear our prayer. Amen.

These prayers are available on the NALC website under the Resources/NALC Statements tabs.

The nature of Christian relationships

Fair or unfair has nothing to do with it

This sermon was preached by Bishop Bradosky at an NALC congregation.

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” — Matthew 18:15-20

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is a joy and privilege to be with you during this Easter Season. Our text is Jesus’ instruction regarding broken relationships. How many here are dealing with broken relationships? We live in a world filled with broken relationships — broken marriages, broken families, broken friendships. It happens in our homes, our neighborhoods, our places of employment, and even in our congregations.

What happens in many of those situations when someone offends us? We quickly end the relationship, neglect the person, ignore them, say negative things about them to others. Some suggest if the relationship requires any effort, “if it is this difficult, it can’t be healthy,” extra effort is wasted. We treat things in this world as treasures and people as though they are disposable. We use people and relationships for our own gratification, and when they no longer please us we walk away. It is the norm for the world and, since so many people function this way, we feel justified in treating others the same way we feel we are treated. Our problem with relationships begins at an early



From the Bishop

Bishop John Bradosky

age. It arises out of a conflict of desire. The child wants something that another child has. So the child does what it can to take the object of its desire away from the other child. But the other child resists, anger follows, and the result is some form of assault. It is the story of Cain and Abel. Cain is jealous of Abel, so he kills him. In his attempt to excuse himself he asks, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Feelings of resentment, contempt and jealousy can run deep within our souls and result in actions that are assaults on others — actions such as theft, lying, murder, adultery and covetousness. It becomes our desire and will to injure another person and make them suffer loss or, even worse, to treat them as if they didn’t matter at all.

The last seven commandments all deal with ways to avoid the brokenness that plagues us. Let’s not forget how deadly a weapon the tongue can be in assaulting or attacking others, to their face or behind their backs. We can inflict wounds that last a lifetime.

We can only properly understand this text when we understand the value that God has placed on relationships. We were created to be in relationship with God and with one another. Sin always corrupts and destroys those relationships.

The witness of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is that God has never given up on restoring those relationships, through his covenants, his life-giving

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love and ultimately in giving his only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who gave his life on the cross to pay the price for our complete forgiveness.

Through faith in Jesus and all that he accomplished for us, we are in a right relationship with both the Father and the Son.

You matter infinitely to God! You are of infinite worth and value. This infinite God entered our world in Jesus Christ, and this same infinite Lord gave his life for you and me. He died the death we deserve to die so that we might live through faith in him. Jesus gave it all for this relationship with us.

From the very beginning, God created us to live in community with others. He created Adam and Eve to live in community. He created marriage and family, a community as the fundamental building blocks of life. Jesus created community among his followers. The community Jesus modeled for his disciples is the same community the disciples modeled for the Church after Pentecost. This is the same community about which Jesus preaches and teaches, the same community that Paul and others insist that the churches of the New Testament have. The Bible tells us that, not only does our relationship with the Lord matter infinitely, but our relationships with others are to be just as important.

The preciousness of these relationships came at a very dear price for me. It was not until the death of our son Joshua that I realized relationships are all we have in this life — a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ and relationships with the people he has given us to love and care for. That's all there is in this life that is eternal. Everything else is dust and rust. Only our relationships with Jesus and the people with whom we share this faith and love will last eternally. Everything else is going to vanish. This is the nature of heaven, living and rejoicing eternally in those relationships.

Jesus was transforming the hearts and the worldview of his disciples. Jesus gave his disciples a Kingdom of Heaven worldview. He taught them about what truly matters in that Kingdom, and he called them to begin to live in the reality of that Kingdom now!

We cannot grow in our relationship with Christ unless we are also willing to permit him to transform our relationships as well. Every disciple of Jesus must live in the context of transformed relationships that reflect the values of the Kingdom of Heaven, the kingdom Jesus came to proclaim.

Listen to Paul's instruction to the Church in Corinth (*2 Corinthians 5:16-21*): "From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ **reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation**; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."

If we are disciples of Jesus, then his mission of reconciliation must become our ministry. His reconciliation of our relationship with him must be manifest in our reconciliation with one another, proclaiming our mutual reconciliation through Christ Jesus.

Paul's words are clear: Don't treat people like the rest of the world. They are not just flesh and blood, but spirit. They are spiritual beings. We are new creations in Christ and will treat people differently. We will treasure these relationships just as Jesus does, and we will work to restore them, investing our time and energy, our lives for the sake of this restoration.

These are the values that undergird this Gospel reading from Matthew 18. Let me point out several important things regarding Jesus' instruction.

1. First, the person who believes they were offended has the primary responsibility of initiating the reconciliation process. Why? Because the other person may not even be aware they have hurt you or harmed the relationship. Often we wait for the other person to come and apologize to us and are even more offended if they don't make contact,

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when all along they had no idea. Be the first to go and meet with them because you value the relationship.

2. Don't expect that they will be eager to hear from you. In fact, you should expect that they will be resistant and defensive. Those are normal reactions when someone tells us that we have offended them. Equally important is to be ready when someone comes to you expressing their disappointment in you. As some of you know, I spent more than 34 years as a sports official in basketball, football and soccer. I learned some very important lessons for ministry. I learned how to accept criticism. At first I was defensive, and at the beginning of my officiating career I was known as "Mr. T." Lash out at me and you could be sure that I would lash out at you. Say anything negative about me and you could be sure a technical foul was coming. As I matured in my faith, I stopped and asked myself, what is the worst thing that could be said about me? I am a worthless sinner deserving death. That verdict has already been offered and accepted. Jesus agreed to handle my case and by his grace has paid the price. By accepting the worst possible judgment on my life I am free to let you add any other criticism or judgment; it can't be worse than what I have already accepted. It is the absolute assurance of Jesus' love that frees me for such honesty and transparency. As I dealt with irate coaches, instead of avoiding them I would get close, put my arm around them and say, "Coach, what did you see?" (Value their perspective.) Then I would say, "If it happened the way you saw it, I must have missed it." (Admit you could have made a mistake. Confess even if you are unsure.) I would follow up with a comment like this: "Coach, those young people need us both to do our jobs, and I promise you I'll give them my best." (Point to the greater mission and focus for why we are here.) Once I adopted that methodology, I never compromised a relationship with a coach, and we left the building as friends regardless of the final score.

3. Jesus commands us to talk about the concern just between ourselves. We are not to gloat over their mistake or pretend to be self-righteous (as though we never make such mistakes). Talk about the problem privately, with a sense of love and

respect, valuing the relationship. Most of the time the issue is resolved and the relationship is not only repaired, but even stronger. This is reconciliation at its best.

4. However, there are some circumstances where the denial, anger, pain, sense of loss, guilt and fear run so deep that a person will reject the initial attempt to heal the relationship. The next step is to bring along one or two other people. These should be people who were direct witnesses, people who care about both of those involved. Bringing close friends who have only heard your side of the story and pre-judged the other person is not helpful and may only drive the other person further away. The witnesses should be aware that a first attempt was made to heal the relationship. We must understand that it is often difficult for people to accept a verdict that they have sinned. (Prison chaplains say the majority of people doing time contend that they are innocent.) Hearing a perspective from other people who also love and care about both individuals involved can help us to accept the truth and take the next step in moving forward. That is especially true when all involved value the relationship and long for it to be restored. This is also reconciliation at work.

5. Occasionally, but rarely, there are those situations where the offense must become more public, when the elders of the church or church leaders must weigh in on the matter. This assumes that the offense is so egregious that it will have an effect on the community of faith. The motive must never be to control or engage in self-justification. The motive must still be Christian love and care. The purpose is still to restore the relationship through reconciliation. If the person listens to the advice of the elders, then the matter is settled. This is still reconciliation that points to the nature of relationships in Christ, in which there is mutual accountability and responsibility. (Paul's description of the nature of the body of Christ in which all the parts or members are connected and mutually interdependent.)

6. However, there are some occasions when all else fails and from that point onward the person is to be treated as someone who is no longer in the community. Jesus says they are to be treated as

pagans and tax collectors. Now, I know this sounds harsh and cruel — it is certainly not the politically correct language of inclusivity and acceptance — but it is possible to put yourself in such a position that you are outside the support of a community of faith. You have refused the grace that the Body of Christ has to offer.

7. There is one more perspective that we need to remember in interpreting this text. Jesus spent most of his time and energy reaching people who were on the outside looking in. He was criticized by many for reaching out to pagans, tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners. I believe Jesus is saying to us that, when a relationship in the church reaches this level, we need to start over again and help that person to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We must be persistent in showing them the reconciling love of Jesus Christ, because it is clear that it did not sink in deeply the first time. Perhaps they came to Christ but remained immature in their faith. Perhaps no one disciplined them so they never grew in their faith. We must never abandon or forsake anyone who is lost but instead pursue them with the same love that pursued and saved us!

The early Church used this formula for reconciliation. You see it in Paul's handling of the man living with his father's wife (*1 Corinthians 5*) and in Acts 15 in the Council meeting in Jerusalem, when a potential schism in the Church is prevented as Barnabas and Paul present a case for their ministry to the Church elders. In the other epistles there is plenty of evidence of the growing Church's struggle to maintain the unity of the faith. To keep reconciled brothers and sisters at peace with one another requires patience, tenacity, courage, forgiveness, and unending love.

Friends, discipleship requires this kind of loving and caring Christian community in which there is love demonstrated in mutual accountability and responsibility. While the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ is an inexhaustible supply, it is love that is relational and demands the mutual nature of such a relationship, including the expectations of willing accountability and responsible behaviors. It is important to point out that Jesus' teaching about the primacy of forgiveness surrounds the context of this passage.

Reconciliation can only be achieved if we are willing to forgive. If we are not willing to forgive, then we are not serious about Jesus' teaching. Even in the Lord's Prayer there is the conditional petition: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Our failure to forgive not only interrupts the reconciliation process Jesus creates but it places us in jeopardy in our relationship with Jesus. Our failure to forgive others is evidence that we have not fully accepted our sin and Christ's forgiveness in our own life.

There are many people today suffering from diverse physical and emotional symptoms from which they cannot be cured, because their real disease is an unforgiving heart. Their bitterness has poisoned them. Their illness could very well be fatal. Only if they relent and forgive can they be cured.

The good news is that through Christ this healing and reconciliation can be complete by his grace. Jesus has accomplished this for us in his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection. It is ours to accept and embrace as we follow his teaching, living in his reconciling love in every relationship in our lives. So may it be for you and for this congregation.

In the name of our Risen Lord Jesus. Amen.



2017 NALC LUTHERAN WEEK

HOLDING FAST

BEING (RE)FORMED

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-18

NALC Youth Leaders Symposium
Monday, Aug. 7 - Tuesday, Aug. 8

Women of the NALC Annual Gathering
Tuesday, Aug. 8

Braaten-Benne Lectures in Theology
Tuesday, Aug. 8 - Wednesday, Aug. 9

NALC Convocation and Mission Festival
Wednesday, Aug. 9 - Friday, Aug. 11

In your hearing

Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” — Luke 4:16-21

As I am addressing your questions about ministry, leadership and the NALC, I received another question about preaching. Obviously, this is important to members of the NALC, and rightly so! Within the first five months of 2017, two questions have been about sermons. This month, however, I run the risk of disappointing you, as the question is about how pastors prepare sermons.

I think it is a worthwhile question, as the more hearers understand and consider the preaching task, the more they will value and take to heart the Word of God preached Sunday after Sunday.

My answer may be disappointing because my guess is each pastor approaches preparation for preaching differently. Ask 100 preachers how they prepare their sermons, and you will surely get 100 unique answers. Realizing that, there are still several things that can be said about sermon preparation.

It must always begin with prayer and the Word of God. The preacher who relies on himself or herself runs the risk of presenting, not the Word of God preached, but one’s own thoughts reflecting one’s own agenda or ax to grind.



Ministry Matters

Pastor David Wendel

Assistant to the Bishop
for Ministry and Ecumenism

Beginning with prayer keeps the focus right — as the preacher prays, “Thy will be done, Lord, through me!” At the same time, the preacher is praying that God would open his Word to us so that we keep to the biblical text and only the biblical text.

The lack of focus on Scripture is, perhaps, the greatest weakness in preaching today. There may be several reasons for this, but one is surely the fact that, for the last decade or so, preachers have been encouraged to begin with the biblical text, but to then let imagination take them in other directions. It is only a short hop, then, from beginning with one’s own imagination and creativity, to handling God’s Word of truth only peripherally, or as an afterthought.

Martin Luther mentioned this when he said: “Let him (the preacher) take care to keep to the text and attend to what is before him and make people understand that. Those preachers who say whatever comes into their mouths remind me of a maid going to market. When she meets another maid she stops and chats a while, then she meets another and talks with her, too, and then a third and a fourth, and so gets to market very slowly. So with preachers who wander off the text, they would like to say everything at one time, but they can’t.” (*“Conversations with Luther,”* Smith and Gallinger, Pilgrim Press, Boston, 1915)

The reason that preachers should stay with the biblical text, preach only biblical sermons and help people understand Scripture, is because it is only the Word of God that touches hearers, convicts

Continued on Page 15

hearers, drives hearers to the Savior, and, finally, sets them free through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

A preacher may be a fine wordsmith, an entertaining speaker, an engaging storyteller or a passionate, persuasive political crusader — none of which will save and redeem, heal and restore the broken, the lost, the sinful, the struggling. Jesus is the only way, truth and life. Jesus alone saves. Again, Luther points to this in an Advent sermon, writing:

“A minister of Christ is a steward in the mysteries of God. He should regard himself and insist that others regard him as one who administers to the household of God nothing but Christ and the things of Christ. In other words, he should preach the pure Gospel, the true faith, that Christ alone is our life, our way, our wisdom, power, glory, salvation; and that all we can accomplish of ourselves is but death, error, foolishness, weakness, shame and condemnation.”

Because we Lutherans believe that the Word, written, read and preached is a “means of grace,” through which God gives us forgiveness, grace and salvation, it is not enough for a sermon to be a message dealing with a contemporary topic or concern or a video presentation that is of a generally religious nature.

It is also not enough for a sermon to be “about” Jesus, “about” God or even “about” the Bible. A faithful biblical sermon communicates Christ, presents Christ, makes Christ present — as the Word made flesh to dwell among us, to bring grace and truth to the hearers!

In the passage above from Luke 4, we see that Jesus reads a passage from Isaiah — about preaching good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, setting free the oppressed, announcing the Lord’s favor. Jesus reads the biblical passage, but then he proclaims that this is all happening “in their hearing!”

In Jesus’ very presence in the congregation, these things are taking place — people are hearing good news, those in bondage to sin, death and devil are

being set free, the blind are seeing, and all are being blessed by the Lord.

Jesus is not saying that the good news is “about” him, but that he *is* good news! He is God in the flesh! When Jesus is present with us, these things happen, by the power of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, on the Word being proclaimed.

In every sermon, these things should take place, in the hearer’s hearing. This is the meaning of preaching — Jesus is present, the Scriptures are opened to us, the Good News incarnate falls on our ears, is received in our minds and goes straight to the heart! And we are set free, redeemed, forgiven, transformed.

Only Jesus, Son of God and Savior, Spirit-anointed, can effect change in the heart and life of sermon-hearers. This is why the preaching task is so critically important, and why the preacher must begin with prayer and deep involvement with the Word of God. This is why, in every sermon, the preacher must “take care to keep to the text and attend to what is before him and make people understand that.”

While this may not answer the question, “How do pastors prepare their sermons,” I hope we have provided some insight into the preaching task, rightly begun and properly focused.

If you have questions or topics related to ministry in the NALC that you’d like to have addressed in the Ministry Matters articles, please email me at dwendel@thenalc.org.

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NALC News

Published by

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Hilliard, OH 43026-7770

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