

Lesson: Ephesians 2:11-22
Psalm 23
Gospel: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

8th Sunday after Pentecost
July 18, 2021

“The Center of Encouragement”
Sermon Preached by Rev. Lowell Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace, peace, and encouragement at the core of your life, be to you through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The center of encouragement is the love of Christ, the love of God in Christ for us. It's a love that starts at the beginning of our life, for our dear precious granddaughter Evelyn in her first week of life. It's encouragement for us in our middle years or beyond, heading toward the finish line known as our death and rising to eternal life. Love is at the center; we cannot escape this beautiful love. Through the power of the Holy Spirit in this Pentecost season I encourage you to be a person of encouragement.

Good news! It's good news that I'm a grandpa and I'm willing to share that with anybody I meet. It's kind of funny that our church is named the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. 'Evangelical' means sharing good news. Statistics show that to share the good news of Christ with someone, like inviting them to church, usually takes two or three invites. Was Pastor Chuck ever good at this! He's been retired for awhile now, but he is legendary. He's the person who would come to the front door and if you didn't answer, he'd go to the back door. He wanted to share the Good News and invite you to be a part of this church. The statistic is that the average Lutheran will share their faith with another person such as inviting them to church, two times *per lifetime*. So where are the evangelists? Sure, some people have a gift to make people feel comfortable and have a way of pacing life. The love of God for them is present and they're able to pace-pace-lead, meaning they get to know someone and then take a gentle step in leading them to Christ. But for all of us, Christ is at the center, and the center of encouragement is love.

Psalm 23 is a beloved psalm, used at weddings, funerals, family gatherings and individual devotions. It's at the center of encouragement in our lives because it speaks in such beautiful ways of God's presence. Even in the midst of life's journeys, wherever they may be, even surrounded by enemies, we understand God's hospitality, "preparing a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Now those are encouraging words! Encouragement means to strengthen the heart, and I tell you brothers and sisters, there is no need to strengthen God's heart for you. His is total love and divine focused love for you. Yes, we have days that are better than others, seasons of our life that are better than others, and we need to be filled with the love of Christ.

Ephesians 2 says it so beautifully again: "Christ at the center, for He is our peace" or another translation is wellness. He is at the center of health of all aspects of our life – our social life, our physical life, our emotional life, our financial life—every aspect of our vocation. He is at the center and breaks down any walls that separate us. The passage continues "He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who are near." That means sharing the Good News with people far away, and those who are near to you. For those of you who are world travelers, there is no separation of God's love, no matter if it's near or far. We can share this Good News because we all have access.

In the phrase that we're "citizens with the saints" we're encouraged that we are united with those who have passed; we are citizens with those who are in the Lord's presence. I tear up just thinking about it, that our new granddaughter bears her great-grandmother's name, my mother Evelyn. So Evelyn is part of this continuity of life. (In fact, in our extended family we have two Evelyns, Evelyn Rose and now Evelyn Clare.) It touches my

heart to see the younger generation impacted by those who have loved before. Thank you, Mom. We are citizens with the saints but also members of the household of God. So the current life that we have, extended through eternity, unites us with the saints.

A key word from the Gospel lesson is compassion. And that helps us with this center of encouragement in our life, that our worshiping community can be a center of encouragement; that this online expression of worship can be a center of encouragement for your life; that wherever you may be, centered in the love of God, you can be a person of encouragement. Jesus had compassion for people, like sheep without a shepherd. We have a good story to tell. It's a strange time for me to proclaim the Good News of Christ as atheists are trying to share the good news of atheism, of being against God, or that there's a total irrelevancy of God's love. Sharing the Good News of Christ's love is a confusing time for people who are outside the faith. But it's as simple as remembering the encouragement that you have received and to share it with someone else. And I know you; you're not like a preacher I remember back at the University of Arizona. His ministry was to cajole and just be absolutely rude, so as people were walking by he would say "you're going to hell." As a preacher's kid, I guess I had a special badge of encouragement each day, so I said "You don't even know who you're speaking to. How dare you condemn without knowing and loving someone, and having compassion!" He and I got into an interesting debate as onlookers watched and listened.

Take the time to defeat all the negative media presence, have compassion for someone else and simply take time, even for just a few moments. One of my images for the center of encouragement with Christ at the heart of our life is golfing ministry. I've started to play a bit more golf and I'm going to have a couple of these ALC brochures in my golf bag. For you who don't play golf, it's amazing all the things we talk about when we play a round. We have hours together to talk about lots of things. So, when I join up with another group, they often ask what I do and I tell them I'm a Lutheran pastor; you know, that can bring the party down. So I'll add "I've got Good News, I have a great church; I love the people we're with; we're sharing the love of God. We use the word 'proclaim' but it just means to claim the love of God. We're striving to work together so we can be a blessing to others. Come and see! Come and join!" Now that didn't take too long, did it? It's not too difficult for you and me to do.

What helps us to see that our church is a place of encouragement and that you are agents of encouragement with Christ at the center? (We're not going to make a value judgment that they're lost, but we are encouraging people who seek to connect them with the love of Christ.) It's that spark of *compassion, Christ's love*. It's also a spark of the revival/renewal of the Holy Spirit. You heard in today's Gospel that wherever Jesus went, people were coming out to see him; they knew He had a good message. All the sick were begging to simply be in His presence. Wouldn't that be refreshing? You walk down the street, and someone asks "Man, do you know a good church? Man, I'm hungry for the Lord; do you know where to go?"

I'm praying for spiritual revival, the gift of the Pentecost season, and re-engagement with our congregation as we're coming off the pandemic. Yes we're making progress but it still just struck us with a thunderbolt of changes. This is our season; our hearts are strengthened by this Good News of Christ's love. We see people who are experiencing bad news and we have the maturity to share the Good News, not as "Look what I've got" but rather "God loves you!" We bring as best we can the full news of Christ's love into others' hearts. Then together we are "citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." We are united with Christ at the center of encouragement, showing compassion for someone else, because *passion* is at the heart of Christ's compassion. We use that word compassion throughout this season of Pentecost, but for now I'm going to use it at the center of our life – love, passionate love through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Be a part of this community; be a part of this movement of God and share the center of encouragement in your life with others. Amen.