

Lesson: Romans 11:1-2a; 29-32  
The Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
August 16, 2020

“Ministry Expansion”  
Sermon Preached by Lowell D. Nelson  
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace and peace be to you through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Thank you for engaging in summer growth through this beautiful season called Pentecost. It may be too difficult to tell, but I’m starting to grow a goatee, speaking of summer growth. It is yet a feeble stage, but basically I scoff at the heat that’s in front of us. I see more 114, 115 degree days, and I just say I’m going to go ahead and go for it and most importantly I have permission from Debbie, and so as I move forward I will just say this to you. The growth of the church is such a fascinating topic. I’ve grown up in a period, born in the 50s (I turn 63 in another week), where the church has “declined”, “diminished,” “less than.” I do this in quotes, because those comments are judgments, and I’ve always been intrigued by people who believe that their best days are behind them. That’s a dangerous trap to fall into. That’s a romantic vision of the past, romantic in the sense that it was difficult back then also. The 1950s were full of challenges: the Korean war, the challenges of our own country exploring issues of justice, and, moving into the 60s and the 70s, you know the story that each and every time period has its challenges in which God places us as people of faith, and so, yes, we give great gratitude for the past and for the foundation in which we are upon, but the foundation is Jesus Christ not our institution. It’s the good news of the Gospel. It’s the Scripture opening again and again to shape our life now, and so this Gospel story to me just bursts through about expanding ministry, that we’re always called to look forward in faith to people in need. It’s how the church grows. Membership grows because the mission grows and so with the mission vital, membership will certainly grow.

A church that is stagnant in its membership has the opportunity to re-engage with mission, and sometimes it’s so utterly simple. Jesus got out. He went to a place where he wasn’t supposed to be. He went upon the Mediterranean sea in what we would now call Lebanon, way out of his mission field, way out of the mission zone there, and as he was walking with his disciples a woman begins to yell at him. Now each and every Gospel encounter helps us shape about our current culture and taking a look back at the past cultures and you know this, that a woman talking to a man that she does not know, that’s not appropriate. Jesus does not even respond to her when she’s yelling at him to help, and she uses all the beautiful titles: Lord, son of David, and talks about her daughter being tormented, but her simple

pleas “Help me, help me ,” but social custom being what it is, that would be inappropriate to respond, or perhaps something else going on in Jesus mind. This could be the testing of Jesus, or it can be the testing of the woman. It's certainly the test for us. How do we respond to people in need? And then the disciples come up again and tell Jesus to send her away because now she's bugging us.

This woman, who is eventually rewarded by Jesus for her great faith, is the people of today who are calling for hope, calling for justice, calling in a voice that may not have been heard and we, quite rightly, who have our voice heard say we'll just lift it up a little bit higher but don't bother me. That is not right, of course. It's just that we think we're right in saying that, and it challenges us. Can we hear the voices of people who are in need? Do we invite the voices, or do we send away? And then mission focused, Jesus says this, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,” and that is a legitimate concern. We have people to call up the church, “Would you be willing to help on this? Would you be willing to help on this?” The key for a church is not to do all things for all people. You can't do that well, and the challenge for me, now being here almost two years, is to make sure that our church is connected with other resources like Lutheran social services, agencies that have tremendous resources that we can refer people to. It's important that a church does not just shut down and say I'm sorry we're not into that but to give hope and encouragement to people by being connected. Ministry expands by being connected with other ministries and so in this, this gets into the climax of this story, which is it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. I've heard this over the years that we try to soften that. I mean how dare Jesus call a woman a dog or her people dogs? It's flabbergasting, isn't it, and I heard it softened by saying well he really said like puppies. That doesn't make it any better, this description of others as less than, the labels we use, the prejudices that we have, the habits in which we engage. The Gospel comes again and again and again to be renewed by people of faith looking for help, and this is the simple request: Lord help me.

We grow up in times where we've seen a lot of things for those of us have lived 60, 70, 80, 90, perhaps even 100 years. It's easy to get a bit jaundiced. It's easy to get a bit cynical. I used to play with people. I had somebody would say good morning to me. I might be a little grouchy, and I might say why do you ask? Why do you say that? What's your point, right? It's people are just trying to be human, and so when somebody comes to you or comes to our church or in our community and says would you please help me, it's easy to have that detached position. I'm going to flip it. There are those, yes, who misuse kindness. there is no doubt about that, but for the vast majority what faith it takes to ask for help. I'm not talking about people who have diminished their selves by being beggars. I'm talking about people who need help and what a responsibility for us to have our ears open and to respond out of the compassion that Jesus Christ gives us. Ministry expands

because God's love is called for all. The Psalm 67 said it this way, “May God be merciful to us and bless us. May the light of God's face shine upon us.” That is our congregation. That is the community of faith gathered through this connection online in order so that let your way be known upon earth, your saving health among all nations. So, as we are blessed, we share. That's how ministry expands, bless and share. I appreciate Terry speaking of our ministry initiatives for 2021. We're not even done with 2020. What a year it's been, but we're looking ahead because that's what people of faith do. We look ahead and so these ministry initiatives. It would have been easier just to say you know we're not sure what we're going to do with worship, so let's not invest anything in worship, but God led us to James Gerber who after Linda Shirck's awesome experience of working with her (She is just delightful and so organized, but it's time for her to relax in her retirement.), and so James is coming on board starting the 31<sup>st</sup>. We're going to invest into the music ministry, because that's a hallmark of our proclamation, and even if we're not sure exactly how worship will unfold, we know for the long haul the proclamation of the Gospel through worship, through our music program is a center point, and we are moving forward.

The ministry initiatives to help others. I have an outrageous, audacious goal for our congregation. Now maybe that got your attention, but my hope, my dream, my encouragement for us is that what used to be called fixed income is now reframed as stable income. Our congregation is blessed by your participation. Can you imagine many congregations where 30 percent of their membership is unemployed and how will they move forward in ministry? It's God's call for us to step forward with our stability of income in our retirement years for many to be generous, and so I pray that we take steps next year to move forward from sharing five percent of our resources with the synod to six, moving up by 2025 that we'll be fully tithing to our synod and concurrently tithing to our benevolence so that we will be a double tithe congregation and all of this done with a sense of joy because God has given us these amazing resources

Pastors speak about ministry expansion, and then I use this word called debt. Debt, now debt is a tool. Debt allowed us to expand our ministry, mainly in the refurbishment and the regeneration for our physical plant, and so I'm thankful for that, but the debt that we have costs us \$168,000 per year. Now we pay off that debt of roughly \$2.2 million, we have tens upon tens of thousands, over a hundred thousand, a hundred and sixty eight thousand to invest into ministry and invest in the growth of the kingdom, and so as you hear these ministry initiatives, my final point to you is do we have to think about that, this Gospel? Do we have to listen to people in need? This is how the church expands in ministry, that we think ahead and we listen to others. It is the time-honored tradition of God blessing us so that we can bless others, and I am confident that God is going to bless our ministries even in the midst of these pandemic times. So, as we are blessed we bless others. As we hear calls and we take a step outside of our zone and we allow ourselves to

be made uncomfortable, as Jesus was with this great woman of faith, that when the plea comes, Lord help us that we are able to respond. You and me, this community is called forward at this time in this place to expand ministry in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.