

First Lesson: Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9
The Gospel: Matthew 5:21-37

Sixth Sunday of Epiphany
February 16, 2020

“Adapt and Overcome”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Gary Garvey
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

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

First, I want to start by wishing you all a happy Valentine’s day, and hope it was special for you, the best ever. A time to especially love your life’s partner and let it be known with an endearing card or a special memory making moment. Poor Pastor Lowell is at home on the mend from the flu today. Please remember him in your prayers. I see Debbie and son here, remember them in your prayers as well as the family walks through this journey together. He totally expected to be here today, but then the unexpected happened, and he couldn’t. It’s okay, we love the pastor and family and we can adapt and we can overcome. Overcome to take care of things here while he is on the mend.

When I first arrived here with Diane this season, Pastor Lowell and I were walking around the church. Pastor Lowell let it be known that he was up to his eyebrows in having made a lot of decisions that day. Dennis Kellar came up. Dennis is definitely a bright light in this congregation, definitely not hiding under a bushel. He wanted to know about fixing the lights here in the sanctuary, and we had a church function coming up. Lowell looked at him with a “really?” and I volunteered, “Well, you know what, we don’t have the resources available right now, we don’t have the ladder, we don’t have the scaffolding, we don’t have the lights, and we don’t have the ability to fix that right now, and the church must go on. We are going to have to table this until another time.” We need to adapt and overcome, and move along. Pastor Lowell said, “You know what, that concept has biblical implications.” I can see these things happening, and the experience of faith that there are times when we need to adapt and overcome. The church had to go on in a very timely fashion, and of course, it did. There are biblical implications.

We just got back from Texas. I went on vacation to Texas to see my son the missionary. My son, his wife and my granddaughter, have been missionaries in Papua, New Guinea, in Ukarumpa. Say that three times fast. Anyway, my granddaughter incurred a seizure disorder called epilepsy. I want to thank all of you who knew and prayed and such. As a result of that, they couldn’t be out in rural New Guinea anymore, they have been brought back for a placement in Dallas, Texas. I went over and saw my son. Diane had another concern, her girlfriend who was having surgery, came out from the Southeast alone, so Diane went over and held her hand and helped her through that and the follow-up care and that sort of thing. So we had those things going on, and then the text came forth from Pastor Lowell, can you preach. Boom, I was in the car headed home. I love to be with you people at American Lutheran Church in Sun City, you are just too much fun. It is always good to be here, it’s good to be with you.

Pastor Lowell is preaching a new vision, he is preparing you, he is preparing all of us for the vision, the new vision of American Lutheran Church of Sun City, a beautiful church with a valiant history and great things happening. Our vision has been the renovation project, and of course we are way down the road on that one. Benevolences are coming into the church, and there are thoughts and dreams and preparation to be done for the new vision of the American Lutheran Church of the future. That’s God guiding him, of course. But when it

comes to my sermon today, I thought about Lowell when we had that talk about the lights. I talked of Dennis about adapt and overcome, and he thought that it had biblical implications, we ought to have a sermon about that. So here we go, the time is right.

Then I read the text, yuck. I mean holy cats, have I got a list of problems to work through here. What makes this a daunting task is that although I am not angry, I not a product of a close family of origin either. I have always thought of the church and back in the day the military is my family. I have been a war fighter, a chaplain, I have been a lot of different things. I have been divorced and remarried. Count on me to be a saint and a sinner, like a human being, like we all are. But then we are into Valentine's day. A beautiful day, a time when we reflect on things like love. I know you are blessed by God. You have significant people to love and be thankful for. I am thankful to be blessed by God who has walked with me even when I didn't notice. You know what that means. I am especially thankful for Diane who came into my life over 20 years ago and became my family. It has been quite a ride since then, as she will tell you. Sweet Diane and I married in September of 1999 where I was serving as the Senior Chaplain at the Los Angeles Air Force Base, space and missile system center. Shortly after that, I would be a first responder at Pentagon's 911, and then back to Iraq again. We had a beautiful wedding in San Pedro, California, overlooking the harbor. For the first time, when I would return from hostile fire zones or teaching new chaplain pastors to be a part of lifetime readiness, worldwide readiness community, I would come back and it would always be a sweet reunion. Somebody there welcoming me home. Sometimes gone for months at a time, the reunions were always sweet. Happy Valentine's Day you all.

In 1988, my family then was being reassigned from Anchorage, Alaska to Washington, D.C. I remember I drove all the way from Anchorage to Washington, D.C. I drove from Anchorage to Minnesota alone, slept in the car, played music. A lot of times I played one of my favorite songs, Are You Still in Love with Me by Anne Murray. I am going to recite those lyrics for you today, but I am going to ask you to take a little creative journey with me. Something creative, something just a little bit different. I want you to think of this as a communication with God and you. You are a human being with a long past of successes and failures too. We all are. The lyrics will reflect on marriage to prepare you for the listening. I give you the words of Hans Kung, who is a German theologian and wrote a documentary on the church of all things. When he referenced the Holy Spirit, he wrote "Who knows when God sleeps with his bride, the church." Essentially, according to Doctor Kung, so often the Holy Spirit is at work in the church, at work with his bride, and we are too busy to even notice. To better clarify the bride imagery, the bride is you, the bride is the church, and we are married, first to God and then to another, and then to one another. It is a beautiful thing. Now the lyrics, Are You Still in Love with Me? It begins with God watching you sleep. When you become serious, then you become carried away with faith. It is a beautiful thing. It's an energy and it becomes you. It goes like this.

I can hear the cars out on the street as I lie awake and watch you while you sleep. It seems like that it was only yesterday when you took my hand and carried me away. Here's God seeing you every day. Here's God seeing you. But is our faith the same, or has it changed over time with experience? God, do you still love us? Do you still love me? Am I still worthy of your love, in spite of my changes? Now everyday I look at you and I think of when you married me, is it still the same for you, as good as how it used to be? Oh, I wonder, are you still in love with me? Every day we look at God and think of times past and the changes that have transpired, am I meeting you the same way God, am I meeting you the same way as when we started, do you still love us, do you still love me? Our children are the garden that we have grown, God I see so much of you in them I know. The house is filled with memories of the past when no one thought that you and I would last. Now we have children, children that we have raised, children we have raised in the faith, perhaps they reflect that faith. We have great memories. Many thought that you and I would not keep the faith, now every day that I look at you and think of when you married me. Is it still the same for you, as good as how it used to be? Oh I wonder, God are you still in love with us, are you still in love with me? Now after all this time we have been together, did you ever think the right one could be wrong? I know you said you would stay with me forever, I just can't believe you would last so long, after all of this time, did you ever consider giving up on me? You said you'd stay, God, God's love is infinite,

and he is with you. Oh, so now I think I'll put my fears away, if not for love you never would have stayed. Forgive me if I feel this way again, but I need to know you love me now and then. I know you love me Lord because you stayed, please forgive me because I have my questions and concerns now and then, because every day I look at you, and I think of when you married me. Is it still the same for you, as good as how it used to be? Oh, I wonder, are you still in love with me? I guess I wonder why you are still in love with me.

Oh, we think of those beautiful people who have lived long lives, those finely woven people who have vested themselves into the finely woven tapestry of our being here at American Lutheran Church, Eleanor, and so many others. Pastor Ulrich read some magnificent names of people who have passed on to their great reward and we have known them and they have enriched our lives and we are better for knowing them. These people that come along, God has been in our lives. God's love is infinite and he stays with us. In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus exhorts his followers to embrace standards of righteousness that exceeds the legal requirements and the traditions. We are all saints and sinners according to Martin Luther. This is also in Deuteronomy's text where he says the way to the promised is to seek his righteousness and emulate his way of thinking and being, to follow God, to not do so, to be a part of disobedience not so much. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, right? Love your neighbor as yourself. Matt Skinner, one of our Luther Seminary theologians, raises the question about an alternative reality world where we are all concerned about our neighbors. Oh, my gosh.

Pastor Lowell makes a strong point that outreach is best performed by you. They expect pastors to do it, and they don't listen the same way. Best performed by you. When you invite someone to a worship experience here at the church, or a church event, and you say, "We'd like to bring you along", and they'd come. The former pastor used to say the church grows at the speed of relationships. We always want to grow the church, we want them to become a part of our new vision as we move forward at American Lutheran Church. There are strong issues that are presented here in Matthew's Gospel today. Issues like anger, killing, family dysfunction, adultery, divorce, and promises made.

As I reported earlier, we had been on vacation in Texas. As I was coming home I stopped at the National Cemetery at El Paso because I wanted to visit a friend of mine who is now deceased, he was gone at 82. Jesse Nunez, he is in a columbarium there. So when I got there I found out where he was placed in the National cemetery and I went to that spot. I took my shadow with me, my dog Buck. We walked around and we found that columbarium. I immediately was missing Jesse and went to prayer. Buck was interested in something on the complete other side of the columbarium, and he was pulling on his leash. He was pulling me around and I was getting annoyed, I was thinking, "Gosh, I wish I'd have left you in the car." He pulled me around and what I saw there will stay with me forever. What he was doing, as there was another long line of columbariums, all the way down and at the very bottom was a row of columbariums. There was a man laying there, full spread on the sidewalk. He was in tears, and Buck was licking his face. He was a Latino man by the name of Franco, tears in his eyes, the lowest place on the floor. His name was on the door, and his son's name was underneath. The name of his son was Xavier, and below him, there was a sidewalk, but between the sidewalk and the columbarium there was the Virgin Mary, there were memorial artifacts in honor of the son Xavier. I apologized for Buck. He said, "No harm done." I asked, "Did you lose your son in the service?" He said, "No, my son was only 15 years old. I was in the service and that's why my son is here." I said, "What happened?" He told me the story. The story was that apparently somebody with an automatic weapon in August of 2019 went into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, 21 people gone, 24 injured. One of those 21 people was his son Xavier, and he wept. I pulled together some of my work from critical incident stress debriefings and diffusings, we pulled together and we spent about an hour and a half together. We had prayer, I counselled, and I tried to pull the emotions out of him, hoping that he was going to be able to over time put his life back together. Just the most horrible thing to lose a child, there is nothing worse than that. For over a time, we did these things and he would tear up. We prayed and we spent our time together. Of course, healing here would mean at some point this man is going to be able to forgive the shooter. Think about that. That would be the healing.

There are times when reconciliation means doing the things that are the hardest in the world to do, to forgive. To seek forgiveness for yourself at times, to forgive others. Anything else is to generate stomach acid, that wrecks the best game in town. That's the game of a quality life. A life inspired by Jesus, his righteousness and his promises of a better day and a better tomorrow. It's going to be awhile before Franco is able to do that. I so wish I had gotten his phone number, but I was so caught up in the moment. I remember the prayers and the time we had, I wish I could talk to him again.

My gosh, we have problems like lights and there are times when we adapt and overcome. When we were getting ready to go to Texas, I got a letter in the mail from the Catholic Tribunal of Fargo, North Dakota, where some friends of mine were devout Catholics. They were divorced now after 20 years of marriage and two adoptions, and they were seeking an annulment. To me, I think it is kind of silly, in many respects. We certainly don't do that in the Lutheran church. I know the priests that have worked for me in different places that I have been, have done this annulment process and I watched it. I watched it closely, and what I found was, there is a ministry component to it all, and it brings about some healing. Obviously that doesn't mean that the marriage never existed. Some of these things that are said about such a process, but the healing component was interesting. I filled out the paperwork for her, then I sent it in. I can only pray that she is able to reconcile whatever she wants or needs to reconcile as a result of this relationship gone south. Reconciliation, healing.

We all have had a life. One time, I was in a church and I asked for a show of hands of people who had grabbed the hand oh so many years ago, and are still holding on to that hand and that person, even today. I was shocked and amazed to find out that was less than half of the community. I am not going to do that today, I mean life goes on. We have won and we have failed, and the best game in town is life in Jesus. We want that life in Jesus and there are times when we need to go after it. We need to be reconciled and we need to fix some things in our life, we need to adapt and overcome. Not like fixing the lights, but it is the hard work of the things that tug at the heart, mending dysfunctional family issues and relationship issues, and trying to live with wars fought and some of the craziness that we find ourselves in in this new world that we are getting ourselves into. That's the way of it.

At one point, the Lutheran Seminary theologians were talking about our new and changing world and our new and changing church. They reported a male dominant world was the culprit of all the problems that we have today. The ladies quickly agreed. The boys rallied that adultery and divorce are not relegated to men exclusively anymore. The ladies, not so fast to respond, but all agreed it was an exclusively male thing in ancient times. All agreed that the world is changing. The world is changing, the only thing that you can count on every day in your life is that there is going to be change. God loves us, he has not left us, he is alive and well and living in the year of our Lord 2020. He has given us neighbors of all races, colors, and creeds. On our pastoral team we foster a spirit of team-ship. We work together to get it done. When one needs help we adapt and overcome. We care for the people of American Lutheran Church. We ask you to care for each other. Amen and Amen

Now, may the peace of God that surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds on Christ Jesus. Amen