

Luke 16:1-13; Churchwide Assembly Recap; Pentecost 15; September 18, 2022
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Grace to you and peace from God our parent, Jesus our Savior, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Greetings to you from myself, from the North/West Lower Michigan Synod, and from the thousands of congregations and millions of Lutherans across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the ELCA.

This past August, from August 8 - 12, I served as a voting member to the churchwide assembly of the ELCA. During the sermon, we'll be sharing pictures from the churchwide assembly on our monitors in the sanctuary and on the live stream. These are just a brief snapshot of the events that took place. Most of these photos come from the ELCA's Facebook page, with some from the Synod's community Facebook group. The primary focus of today's message is a recap of my experiences at the churchwide assembly, but first, let's take a look at today's readings.

In the new testament reading from 1 Timothy today, we have a quick reminder of who the Gospel, the good news, of Jesus, of God is for - quite simply - everyone, all humankind, all. No exclusions, no exceptions, the good news is for all and to be shared and proclaimed to all. This passage also touches on the subject of church and government, or as we often refer to it as "church and state." We are often under the impression that these two should be completely separate - the church not controlling the

government and the government not controlling the church. There are certainly some aspects of that which we need to respect, so we can have freedom of religion, to worship as we please, but it doesn't mean that church is completely disconnected from the government. It says in the reading that we should pray for our rulers and leaders, and not just prayers for guidance, but prayers of thanks. Luther has good thoughts on this, and the ELCA is working on a social statement on Government and Civic Engagement.

Moving to today's Gospel from Luke - and let's face it - we have another parable from Jesus, and this one is very confusing. In order that I have time to do a recap of churchwide assembly, I won't be able to get into much detail here about this parable, but we can glean some key points from it without having to fully understand what Jesus was getting at. And as with most of the parables, there are many ways to read them and to interpret them. And that can be the beauty of them - so much meaning in one simple story, so that it can speak to many different people across generations and provide guidance for life.

The first part focuses a lot on dealings with wealth and most of them appear to be dishonest, but at the end in verse 9, it says, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." To me, this is saying that even if we make friends using dishonest means, we are still making friends, forming connections, and creating community. Community is

important, because that will continue on, even when wealth is gone. The last part then talks about being faithful, whether it is with honest or dishonest wealth, since actions and community are what remain when compared to the actual wealth. Our community and actions will lead us to the “true riches”, which are not money or Earthly possessions. True riches are God’s eternal glory and eternal life. This isn’t saying that we earn God’s favor by doing certain things, or acting in certain ways, since the glory of God is gift to us. It is saying, that to fully be aware of this glorious gift of freedom and love, we need to share it with others, form community, and ensure that the poor and needy have what they need.

And this brings us to the Churchwide assembly recap, since we as a church, both locally and nationally, are all about sharing the gospel and doing God’s work for those in need. First, for those who aren’t familiar with the structure of the ELCA or need a reminder, a quick look at how the ELCA is structured. I like to compare it to the Holy Trinity. The ELCA is composed of 3 expressions of the church. While all 3 are separate from each other, all 3 cannot exist without the others and all are the church together. The 3 expressions are the local congregations, like we here at Faith; the synod level, which are mostly geographical regions across the country, our synod is the North/West Lower Michigan Synod, which is most of the lower peninsula, except the counties around the Detroit area; and the 3rd expression is the churchwide body, the ELCA, which works across the country and reaches out to the world. All three have governing constitutions and bylaws, they are all separate legal entities, they all have assemblies of

voting members - congregations call this their annual meeting; synods have Synod Assemblies, typically yearly; and the churchwide has the churchwide assembly every 3 years. These assemblies are the highest governing body for each organization, they make the decisions on how these groups are run. Between the assemblies or annual meetings, all three expressions have councils that govern the organizations. Our local church council, a synod council for each synod (I am on the North/West Lower Michigan synod council), and a churchwide church council.

Another important note is that each of the 3 bodies cannot directly control the other. Each has ways to encourage the other bodies to do something, but only their governing bodies can take direct action. The way congregations and synods encourage churchwide to do something is to pass memorials at synod assemblies that get forwarded as messages to the churchwide assembly for action. Many of these memorials want synods and congregations to take action, but churchwide will only recommend or encourage action, they can never require it of synods, congregations, or members.

That being said, the churchwide assembly took actions that encouraged congregations to take certain actions, so as I go through various recaps - look for times when we, as a congregation at Faith, are called to take action. Consider these, are they something you are interested in, is this something you could help lead here at Faith? If so, reach out to me, pastor, the church council, and see how we can get involved and take action.

One of the themes of this assembly was repentance and confession. The ELCA is the whitest denomination in the US, and we often have sinned, knowingly or unknowingly, against many minority groups. The assembly included a special session for an Apology to Iglesia Luterana Santa Maria Peregrina. This is a big issue going on in the Sierra Pacific Synod (in California) that revolves around racism and harm that was done. As we often confess in our service “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins.” This is true not just at an individual level, but at an organization, and systemic level. Many of the worship services also focused on confession, forgiveness, and healing for the sins against many groups including women, Native Americans, BIPOC, Asians, and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

A total of 78 memorials were received by the churchwide assembly from synods. Most of these were dealt with *en bloc* or all at once without discussion, while others were considered one by one. I cannot cover all of them here, but all are available to read online. Some of the high level topics covered were Diversity; Nuclear Weapons; Salary Equity for women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and other minorities; LGBTQIA+ Welcome; Substance Abuse; Roe v. Wade; Parental and Family Medical Leave; Holy Communion Practices; and Child Abuse and Protection.

Now a slightly closer look at a few other memorials, one being on Greenhouse Gas Reduction - this one I bring up because one of several similar memorials on this topic came from our Synod, and not only our synod, but many people here at Faith signed onto the memorial so it could be brought up at our synod assembly. Several of the approved actions are around churchwide working to reduce greenhouse gas usage and to advocate for it, it also calls on congregants, rostered ministers, and bishops to commit themselves to education about the urgency of the climate emergency. I'm proud of our congregation for taking action on this and living into this message, especially shown by our recent approval for our solar project.

The next memorial is called "Landback" which deals with recognizing that we all live on land that was originally Native American and was taken from them. This memorial had many actions that I feel our congregation could look into and take action on. With the rich Native American history in Okemos, I think it would be great if we could connect with that history, possibly working through the Nokomis Learning Center. Some of the actions that congregations are encouraged to take, are: to include land acknowledgements which center Native voices as part of their public gatherings; become educated about the Indigenous peoples who thrived, prior to European contact, on the land they currently inhabit; and support creative programs of restorative justice in partnership with Indigenous people, which includes returning land, when no longer in use, to the native people, or if direct return of the the land isn't feasible or wanted, to return proceeds to Indigenous led ministries or organizations.

Another major memorial was about the Restructure of the Governance of the ELCA. The ELCA was created 35 years ago, with the constituting convention held in the room where we held worship at this churchwide assembly. 35 years ago the ELCA was a lot larger and had plans for growth. This has not happened, we have shrunk in size. One thing that has remained the same is that we are still very white. We have tried changing our governing documents here and there, we have made commitment after commitment to change and become more diverse, and yet it hasn't happened. While people at the churchwide assembly and beyond may disagree about the exact reasons we need to look at the structure of the ELCA (you know, the "Holy Trinity" of 3 expressions that I talked about) to determine if this is the best structure for the church we have today, the vast majority of voting members agreed it needs to be done. A Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church will be formed to look at our structure over the next 3 years to bring recommendations to the next churchwide assembly as to the best structure for the church, so we can be sure the Gospel, the Good News, the work of God is best accomplished.

The last memorial talked about revising the social statement, passed in 2009 - the center of the "2009 decision", called Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust. This is the social statement that allowed LGBTQIA+ individuals to be ordained, married, and welcomed in the ELCA and congregations. This memorial focused on revising some outdated language and to update parts of it to reflect that same sex marriage is now legal across

the states (at least for now, and hopefully continuing). However, during a pre-assembly hearing on memorials, and what I read into this memorial and others; there are people, including myself, that want to see the “4 bound conscience” positions revisited and revised as well.

Since this memorial wasn’t “written correctly,” this memorial couldn’t be used for that, but a resolution was submitted to talk about revising this social statement to look at the 4 bound conscience positions.

Time for a quick lesson for those not familiar with the ELCA’s social statement on Human Sexuality. This was approved in 2009 by the churchwide assembly in response to how would our church handle LGBTQIA+ people and same sex relationships and marriage. In short, we couldn’t agree, so we agreed to disagree. One of the big issues some more progressive and inclusive people have with this document are what we call the 4 bound conscience positions. For those not familiar with them, here they are, this is what the ELCA officially states as to what we as a church believe. As a trigger warning for people, some language here is quite harsh to members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Taken in reverse order of how they are included in the social statement, here is a summary of the 4 positions that are all “On the basis of conscience-bound belief”

- Some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage.
- some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and lifelong loving and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are honored and held to high standards and public accountability, but they do not equate these relationships with marriage
- some are convinced that homosexuality and even lifelong, monogamous, homosexual relationships reflect a broken world in which some relationships do not pattern themselves after the creation God intended. While they acknowledge that such relationships may be lived out with mutuality and care, they do not believe that the neighbor or community are best served by publicly recognizing such relationships as traditional marriage
- some are convinced that same-gender sexual behavior is sinful, contrary to biblical teaching and their understanding of natural law. They believe same-gender sexual behavior carries the grave danger of unrepentant sin. They therefore conclude that the neighbor and the community are best served by

calling people in same-gender sexual relationships to repentance for that behavior and to a celibate lifestyle.

Over the years, this has led to people, individually and through systemic and organizational ways, being allowed to discriminate against LGBTQIA+ people and allow harm to be done. During discussion on the resolution, the Bishop of the Southeastern synod, who is gay, shared that sometimes when he shares communion and says “The body of Christ broken for you,” the response he gets is “not from you Bishop”. I spoke in favor of this resolution as this has become a passion of mine to guide our church as a whole to be more inclusive, since not all parts of the ELCA are like our congregation, and it means people like me have to be careful where we go to church, since just because it is an ELCA congregation, doesn't mean I'll be fully welcomed there as I am. This resolution passed by a large majority and will be looked at, following the revision process for social statements, over the next 3 years. During this process, there will be time for study, reflection, and input from individuals, so that is something our congregation should follow and look toward leading studies and conversations on.

This is the same for the Government and Civic Engagement social statement that is being prepared. For more information about the social teachings and documents of the ELCA, please talk to me for more details, otherwise we'll be here all day if I get into it now.

Other items that passed were budgets and income projections for the next 3 years, constitution and bylaws changes, and various other resolutions thanking people for their service in the ELCA. The changes to the constitution and bylaws include changes to the models for congregations, so once the updated models are released, we will work here at Faith to ensure our constitution and bylaws are up to date with the needed changes.

In addition to electing people to the churchwide church council and various other committees, we elected a new Vice President of the ELCA. The Vice President is the highest lay leader of the ELCA. They are elected every 6 years by an ecclesiastical ballot, a process that allows room for discernment and the Holy Spirit to guide us. After 5 ballots, Imran Siddiqui was elected as the new Vice President. Just as “last words” are often important, I think first words are important too, so thus I share with you the first words of Imran Siddiqui after he was elected as the next Vice President of the ELCA - and I quote; “Holy Crap, Ya’ll”.

Throughout the assembly we also had various reports from different parts of the ELCA and their ministries, various guests, including various interreligious guests from various faith backgrounds.

Several fun items from the assembly include having someone with a melodica playing random church songs while we waited in line for the elevator at our hotel; me learning what “Um, Ya, Ya” is all about (if you want to know - ask Deb); and having the last day

of assembly coincide with Maturicon, an Anime and Video Gaming Convention, where we had a nice wide diverse group of people all walking and mingling together.

One thing I noticed at this churchwide assembly, compared to what I remember at past ones, is that more younger people are getting involved and speaking out, there is passion there to ensure the church continues, in whatever form. I'm not sure if more young people are getting involved, or I'm just getting older and I consider a wider range of people "young", but it was good. While at other assemblies we've talked about the change we need to make to solve the issues of racism, our severe lack of diversity, etc., this time I left with a better feeling of "we are actually going to do it this time" which I certainly hope is true. However, if we are truly going to do it, minorities need their allies to speak up and help lead the change. So often when we were talking about issues impacting women, it was primarily women who spoke up; when it came to racial minorities, it was typically BIPOC people who spoke up; for the LGBTQIA+ issues, it was members of that community. We need the allies to speak up for us as well and work to take the action, don't leave it to the minorities to do all the work to reform the church.

One other thing that I noted, is that while we did a lot of confessing and working toward greater diversity, we still excluded talking about people with disabilities and ensuring activities, including the churchwide assembly, were accessible for them. We need to do better. This is a good time to remind you about our Synod's Disability Learning Day on October 22. Information about this learning day is available on a table in the narthex

after the service, where I'll be as well with other materials from assembly, including a copy of *All Creation Sings*, the newest hymnal supplement, which we've been using songs from here at Faith. Some of these items are for you to review, others are available for you to take as we had extras. I invite you to stop by after the service to pick up some items or ask questions for more details or to be directed where you can get more info.

All this work we do in the name of Jesus, our guide as to how to live life and to share the good news of God's love for all God's creation. Amen.