



Grace Lutheran Church
Valentine, NE

MAIL MINISTRY

Mission Festival
September 17, 2017

Pre-Service Meditation: Psalm 98

Hymns: 767; 773; 566; 507

Scripture Readings: Genesis 40:1-23
Philippians 1:12-26

Topics: Evangelism, Mission Work, Salvation

In Nomine Jesu!

Text: Matthew 28:16-20 (ESV)

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Greetings brothers... sisters. I appreciate this opportunity to speak before you today. Today I come before you not as an ex-con, who is also a Christian, though it's true. I was released from my third prison bid little over a year ago. I come before you not as a Democrat, who is also a Christian, though it's true. I'm a staunch supporter of the Democratic Party. Nor do I come as a black man who is also a Christian, though I am black, not just ethnically but culturally as well. I come to you today, as your brother in Christ, as a Christian, one part of the Christian body—different from many of you, but in the most important way, as a fellow receiver of His Grace, the same. Good morning, my name is Yella Hensley.

Pastor Paul asked me to speak today about the prison ministry we have been involved with, and by extension you in the CLC have been involved with as well. It is small. We are currently in contact with just 52 inmates. If one counts those who have been released, we have touched the lives of around 100-120...a small drop in the ocean of humanity. We at Immanuel Lutheran have reached out through weekly sermons, books, email contact and some visits to plant seeds of hope in the lives of men. This ministry began with one man answering the call and entering a small county jail to do weekly Bible studies. Unknown to him, he was the answer to a prayer to our God from a man seeking answers for himself, and redemption for his family. The man that came was Pastor Paul, the man that prayed was myself. Both of us ignorant of the journey we were about to undergo, oblivious to the bridges that God was going to build that would span the gap of culture, race, politics and a lifetime of counter understanding. Over the next 40 months Pastor Paul sent books to answer questions and stimulate thought. He visited monthly sharing the Word and hope of the gospel. He and his wife manifested Christian love by paying for the education of my son in the private school that is provided by Immanuel Lutheran, giving refuge to my most

cherished possession. Bringing the gospel to life in vivid color to a man that only knew shades of grey. As the Word unfolded before me, my heart filled with wonder, and amazement flavored my understanding that my God was real. He lives. And the love of the Nolting family was but a small reflection of His own. Outspoken I began a Bible study there, in prison. At first I was just parroting the things Pastor Paul spoke to me. But as my own understanding grew, I began to fashion my words, guided by the Holy Spirit to fit the ears of the men God brought into my circle—men such as myself, who were broken young and grew up crooked. It began with two men and grew to 12 and 15...far larger than the prison authorities wanted us to congregate. The men ever changing, but all with that same hunger. Upon my release I left those walls with 29 names of men that wanted continued mentor-ship. Most of those men have been released, but the hunger behind those walls for a living God has persisted. Names have been added to replace names lost, and the work of our Lord continues in this most humble fashion.

A feel good story. When Pastor Paul asked me to speak on it I wondered aloud to my God, what was it I was really being called to do? What would He have me say? I believe He has put it on my heart to give you what I have, which by myself isn't much, but by the strength of His word has been and is everything.

It was easy speaking to those men behind those walls. White, black, red, brown and yellow—we were men of shared experiences....men who had dined on bitterness, and kept warm at fires of rage. In one form or another we had all taken what wasn't given, in our hopelessness we had become what had broken us and succumbed to our personal heartbreaks. In a broken world with no God in our understanding, insanity was perfectly sane in the land of the mad. These were things I could confront with confidence. I understood well how blood and tears could mix and be drunk down to the bitter dregs until one could laugh darkly at one's own doom, because the tears had ran out and all you had was defiance left. The struggle for me has been personal assimilation into this small portion of the body of Christ that our God has called me to join—my place in the CLC. It's the human condition to want to surround oneself with like-minded individuals, and we have separated ourselves into so many categories...by race and culture, politics, social standings. And we the Body have grown apart.

This is as natural as the state of naturalness I spoke of earlier. The very world is against us. The fact that we believe in the Bible as it is written makes us fanatics. It is a struggle combating the world in the minds of our own family and friends, those that we love, relate to, are close to. So we do our best to pull them close, surround them with an atmosphere of understanding that will benefit them in this fallen world. And when our understandings differ we splinter off, each into its own comfort zone. But my brothers and sisters, it was never our understanding that we were to conform to, but the understanding of our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus. He has called us to do the unnatural! He has called us to

make disciples of ALL nations! He is not concerned with our comfort zones. He is concerned with our Salvation! He sent the Hebrew of Hebrews, the apostle Paul to speak to the Gentiles as testament to that fact! And far more simply he sent Pastor Paul to me. Even more simply me to you. The only conformity He asks of us is our conformity to Him. It is the Holy Spirit within that we trust to surmount the things that divide us. It is in our faith in Christ we are to be one mind. I remain in the CLC because it is here that I see my faith reflected. And just as I needed the Nolting family to fully see people across the divide of politics and culture, I believe so too does the CLC need me. Brothers and sisters I have not been assimilated into your culture, but I have gratefully accepted the grace given by our Lord. And as we face this hostile world together this makes us more alike then anything that might separate us, and I gratefully accept my place at your side in his Body.

So today I'd like to challenge you to step out your own comfort zones, and look to outside your particular church body, and do what you have been commissioned to do by our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus—making disciples of ALL nations. As I traveled here from Minnesota my GPS showed me a large portion of my map that said "Rosebud Reservation", practically at the doorstep of our church. When I asked our Pastor how many Native Americans were members of Grace congregation, he said he did not think there were any. This resonated in me because I recently received an email from a native American who was, at the moment he was writing me, losing the battle as it came to his faith and his culture. This is a struggle I understand well. God changes us. The struggle comes from our misunderstanding of that change. As I read his email and listened to him try to justify to me his heritage, that needed no justification, my heart cried out to him in understanding. Was I not born an African American? Was I not taught by the world that my true sin was my brown skin, and being a descendant of slave genes? Did not my own struggle with this false reality lead me into resentment, hopelessness and despair? I read on, listening to him as if he was in the room with me, asking me why did God make him Native American, if God did not want him to be Native American? The devil lives in these false narratives. Three native men came to his cell and beat him for his faith. He fought back, a losing battle, and was ultimately placed in the hospital. As his time went on he got transferred to medium custody. When he arrived the Natives were waiting for him. They told him they had been informed of what had happened before and asked him who would he stand with here—his people, or the white man's God? In fear of another beating he said, his people. His turmoil was real. These are his words written to me. "I'm a nobody and nothing to Him now. I showed dishonor and a huge lack of loyalty to Him (Jesus), so now He'll show it back.. Like in the Scripture that says on the day of judgment those who say, 'Lord, Lord' before Him, He'll reply, 'He never knew them.' What if it's like that for me? Even though I believe in Jesus, even though I repent, even though I was blessed by Him to be a light to help lead people to Him, even though I spread His good news and words of wisdom and instruction, will I still be "not known" for saying my heart was with my culture? If I won't be, then why did He make me to come from

Native American Lineage?

This struggle is as old as the beginnings of the Gospel. As the good news was spread to the Gentiles you had some “Judaizers” saying “believing in Christ” wasn't enough. One must become a Jew as well, following their traditions, customs, and physical and dietary laws. Who did God send to combat this heresy but the apostle Paul, self proclaimed “Hebrew of Hebrews,” once a Pharisee by practice, and a man who could trace his lineage back to the very tribe of Benjamin! And Paul came with the righteous fire that was the gospel! The culture that was to be changed was not one culture of man to another culture of man, but the culture of man to the culture of Christ! So I've come today to challenge you, members of the CLC, possessors of the great and freeing knowledge that is the gospel, to bring that gift of light and salvation to our brothers that are lost at the very doorstep of our church...our neighbors in fact, not just theory. Yes, bring that gospel not counting on your understanding of the culture of man, whether it be yours or theirs, but in full faith in this precious gift—the very culture of God! Don't worry if your efforts will bring forth fruit, but simply plant the seed that leads to faith in the Lord who saved us.

I leave you with these verses:

1 Corinthians 3:6-7

“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.
So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything,
but only God who gives the growth.”

John 4:35

*“Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’?
Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.”*

Thank you for your time.

--Mr. Yella Hensley
Director of Prison Ministries for Immanuel Lutheran Church—Mankato, MN
To God alone be glory!

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