

SERMON

First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

Ephesians 4:1-16
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
August 5, 2012

Dear Friends in Christ, "**Mission Possible**" has been **accomplished**. Our twenty youth and adult leaders are back from a life-changing mission trip to Mississippi and to New Orleans. One of the adult leaders, **Kathie Smith**, wrote about their service adventures - removing invasive species, demolishing abandoned buildings and cleaning up blighted lots left vacant after Hurricane Katrina. Kathie highlighted their nightly worship with 35,000 other Lutheran Christians in the **Saints' Super Dome**. She said, "**We heard amazing stories of people who lived a life of drugs, alcohol, AIDS, jail, etc. and then became pastors. The message we walked away with was CHANGE. We CAN make a difference. Thank you to all who supported our mission! YOU made it possible!**"

Maybe "**Mission Possible**" will continue back up north here? Will we, you and I, here at First Lutheran, **encourage and support** these bright and passionate Mission Possible Kids and their leaders to become **cheerleaders, workers** and even **leaders** among us here and now? **What change is needed? Can the kids help us to see God's will for this place?**

By the time I'm done today, you may think that you've tuned into the evening news more so than listening to a sermon.

Our Mission Possible friends encountered some barriers to their service while down in Louisiana. Kathie writes, "**We attempted to clear home lots that were overgrown with 8 foot tall grass and shrubs, full of garbage such as tires, car bumpers, fish scales, etc. The smells and numerous fire ants didn't stop the determination of our group.**"

"**Fire ants**" – I just read an article about fire ants in the August issue of "**Homiletics**" magazine. Here's what I learned. Fire ants, found in South America and now in the Southwestern United States, have developed a method to survive the tremendous rainfalls and flooding that sometimes hit their nest areas. If you drop one fire ant into a pool of water, it will die. If you drop a tea spoon full of fire ants, they will survive, up to two months even, by **clinging to each other** with **jaws and claws**. Whole colonies form a **waterproof raft** that traps air beneath the surface so that even ants

on the bottom side can survive. The strength of their grip, measured by scientists, is equivalent to a human being suspending six elephants above the ground. **Are you hanging onto anybody for life? Is anybody hanging onto you?**

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he writes that **first God in Christ loves us into new life** as children of God. **Then Christ unites us with God and each other.** The word "**one**" is used seven times, (the perfect number for the Jews,) to describe the "**unity**" that is ours together in Christ. We are **family in Jesus**. In this family, Paul writes:

- We are all united in **common faith and cause.**
- Every person is **gifted for service in faith family and world.**
- It all happens because **Christ is always at work in and through us.**
- God uses this plan to **equip the saints** (us and all believers) for life and mission, and to **build up the Body of Christ** – that would be First Lutheran Church here in this place.

What can we sisters and brothers in Christ learn from the Fire Ants?

- The **individual lives to help others.**
- What appears to be **personal sacrifice is actually service.**
- One's **service only has meaning when others use it**, accept it or take advantage of it.
- **Nobody can survive and thrive without the help of others.**

There have been a lot of young parents coming in and out of this building during the past week of **Vacation Bible School**. Fifty some little ones have been sharing a wonderful week together. **Being a parent is a more than huge responsibility.** Raising healthy, self-sufficient children, maintaining family relationships, paying the bills, facing a sometimes dangerous and frightening world – tough work! At the closing VBS picnic I observed people who serve in this world as lawyers, police officers, teachers, business owners, government workers, service employees, homemakers, health care workers, etc. Real people, real challenges, real world – they brought their kids to learn about God, to meet Jesus... Those parents presented an open door for God to once again bring love, hope and newness into their own lives and family. What was the Bible School theme? **"With God all things are possible."**

Fifty some little people had the chance to learn that **God not only creates us, dreams us into existence, but also faithfully walks with us, loves and cares for us every day and forever.** Do you want your kids to know that? Do you know and believe that God walks with you in your own daily life and actions? When shooting kills a dozen people in a Colorado theater, when a bridge collapses in Minneapolis, when an old man disappears in Leader, when the unemployment level refuses to drop – who is hanging onto you and your kids? How will you **not only stay afloat, but live and thrive in the peace that God alone can give?**

Did you see these **giant airplanes** here at the front of the sanctuary? These beautiful eight foot by eight foot models are made from Styrofoam. I can see maroon paint, gold duct tape, pvc pipe, dryer vent hose, and maybe garbage can lids, plus more. Do you see all of the different, unusual parts that went together to make wonderful VBS airplanes? The young dad who built these planes would maybe never dream of teaching a class for little ones, but look at the planes he created! **God is good at using all the parts.**

Our **Bible School** came together through the work of planners, recruiters, facilitators, teachers, shepherds, storytellers, prop people, crafts, snacks, games, singing, registration, advertizing, and childcare people. We also needed to purchase resources which many others helped with. And it wouldn't be VBS without students, parents, grandparents, friends and neighbors. And together these kids provided **mosquito nets** to prevent malaria way over in Africa, **food** for our local food shelf, **blankets and pillows** for our community women's shelter and ambulance service.

See how little parts come together to make wonderful things happen?

In some distant place, I hope and pray, some other grandma or grandpa is giving of their love, time and talents to help **our grandchildren** to **experience the love and trustworthiness of God.** And here, there are lots of grandma and grandpa types who are doing the same for someone else's precious grandchildren.

Right now, here in this place, there are different parts of the Body of Christ meeting to plan, staff and carry out the very best Confirmation, Sunday School, Milestone and Worship ministries that we can possibly do. There are folks considering how we can best use this wonderful facility to care for

the faith family that gathers here and to care for the community that we come from. There are folks focusing upon the physical, emotional and spiritual health and well-being of our membership and even for those in far distant parts of God's world. There is a church council working long hours, to pray, listen, discuss, discern and to act upon God's good and gracious will for this place and all of the people who call this their faith home.

Today, Jesus calls upon each one of us to **step up and respond** to the love of God at work among us. Today, Jesus calls us to **fully claim the gifts of faith and life** that God gives to us. Today, Jesus calls us to put our faith, life and **gifts to work** for the **equipping of the saints** and for the **building up of the Body of Christ**. If we are to follow Christ boldly into the coming year, it will take a huge number of us to make things happen. Some will teach, while others mentor. Some will care for babies, others for older members. Some will prepare meals, while others clean up. Some will plan a fun event, while others will chaperone. For some, a start toward deeper and richer life might be just to show up for worship, Bible study or for fellowship events like a VBS picnic...

This fall, God will be about the business, along with us, of knocking down the kinds of barriers that keep people – children, teens, young adults, young families, older members – of knocking down whatever barriers keep people from being in a life-giving, hopeful, joyful relationship with God and with the Body of Christ which gathers here at First Lutheran Church in Aitkin. Will a Wednesday service help? Will Sunday school offered during worship help? Will a share-a-ride program help? Will confirmation happening later on Wednesdays help? Will short-term commitments to teach/mentor help? What will help more children, more youth, and more adults to grow deeper and richer in connection with God and with each other?

In our Ephesians text, the Apostle Paul, speaking from prison, said:

- Christ is at work to give life in the Church right now.
- Christ is moving to bring about ongoing growth right now.
- Christ intends to use each and every person to bring about that growth.
- Everything good happens because God loves and cares for us.

By the time I'm done today, you may think that you've tuned into the evening news more so than listening to a sermon. But, do you see? This

is God's evening news! This is God's answer, through us, to all that is evil, hurtful, and life-sucking in our world. This is God and God's People united in worship, fellowship, loving and serving. This is God moving to bring about good, healing and life-giving in God's world, in our lives.

God is the Good News that we have been gifted with and that we share together with each other and with our world. May God continue to richly bless, guide and empower us in being the hands and feet of Jesus in this place and time. Thanks be to God. Amen.