

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota
March 24-25, 2012

John 12:20-33
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
“TIME TO PLANT”

Kids' Message

Kids, I have here a **“Prayer Shawl”** that was given to me by the people back in my old church on the last day that we were there for worship. It was made by a lady who knew that it would be given to somebody who was going through a **tough time or a big change**. While she was making this beautiful prayer shawl, she was **praying** for whoever would receive it.

When the people from my old church give these to people, they drape them over their shoulders like a **big hug from God and from God's people** who make the shawls. Then they say, **“Remember God loves you and so do we!”** I have been using my prayer shawl almost every day since I received it. It is a wonderful reminder that I am loved. God loves to hug and care for us through other people. And do you know what, the people here at First Lutheran also make prayer shawls. They also pass along God's love by sharing them with others who are going through tough times.

Have any of you ever moved to a new town? Have any of you ever had to start going to school for the first time, or to a new school? Have any of you moved to a new church? Have you ever been sick? Been very sad? Are those good times to get a hug from God or one of God's people?

Everybody goes through tough times. Everybody needs God's help and love every day. Do you have to be **good enough** for God to love you? Do you have to **believe exactly the right stuff** for God to love you? Jesus even loved the people who yelled at him when he was hanging on the cross. He even loved the people who hung him up there. Jesus loves us so much that he even died on the cross to show us how precious we are to God.

How much do your parents love you? This weekend we have two baptisms of little babies during worship. I told their parents that they have a very important job to do with their babies. They need to teach their kids that **God loves them even more than their moms and dads do**. Can you imagine that? God loves you even more than your parents do. Wow! Do you love God too? Thanks be to God! Amen.

Adult Message

There is an old story about a man who was thrown into prison because of a bank robbery. Shortly after he got there, his wife sent him a little note.

“Dear George, Now that you’re in prison, I’m going to have to grow some food to feed the kids. I want to plant some potatoes in the back yard. When is a good time to plant potatoes? Love, Alice”

He quickly sent the following replay letter.

“Dear Alice, Don’t plant potatoes in the backyard. That’s where I hid the bank loot. Love, George”

The next week a second note arrived from his wife.

“Dear George, The prison guards must have read your letter. The police came and dug up our whole back yard. They didn’t find any money. Love, Alice”

George wrote back.

“Dear Alice. Now is a good time to plant potatoes. Love, George.”

It’s spring. People are thinking about planting. Every spring Dad would bring our family out along the edge of our fields and together we would plant Norway pine seedlings. Now fifty plus years later, those beautiful trees tower high over our old home place. There was an article in this week’s **American Profile** that came in our Aitkin Independent Age. It was entitled **“In the Pines”** and recounted a long heritage of pine planting down in Georgia. In that article, one of the tree farmers, **James Morgan** said, **“I am 98 years old, so I’m not likely to see any development of the evergreens, but my great-grandchildren will.”** At 98 he keeps planting. I want to live my life that way too. How do you want to live your life?

Jesus said, **“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”** Here is God’s plan. God took what appeared to be the absolute disaster and defeat of Jesus’ death on the cross and turned it into a harvest whose fruit looks like us gathered here today. God turned death into life. God turned human cruelty and injustice for Jesus into God’s love, forgiveness and salvation for us all. Jesus said, **“...When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”** Jesus was lifted up on a human cross and again in a Godly resurrection from the dead. A Godly seed planted in the earth rose up to gather you, me and all the saints who have ever lived and who are yet to come. Jesus died to clearly, once and

for all, reveal the true heart of God to each and to all. Then he rose to gather his precious people to himself.

Jesus and his disciples had come into Jerusalem for what turned out to be the last time. Some Greeks, likely non-Hebrews, maybe even Gentiles, approached one of Jesus' followers and said, "**Sir, we wish to see Jesus.**" When Jesus is told of their request, he says, "**The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.**" It was time to plant potatoes. The ground had been prepared. Everything was coming together. Now even the foreigners, non-Jews were being drawn to Jesus.

All through the Old Testament accounts, people tended to be **fearful of God**. From the earliest creation stories God gave God self away for humans. God created and gifted them. God promised to love and care for them. Then God simply asked them to trust and love God back, like parents do with children... If those people could trust God to take care of them, that would set them free to love and take care of each other and the world God gave to them. They never could trust God enough, so they became afraid and ran and hid from God, again and again... You know the stories... We struggle to trust God to this very day. How well do you trust God? Do you ever run and hide from God? Do you ever forget that God is there for you? I do, again and again.

So Jesus had to die. Jesus is God's last and best way to show us how much God loves us, just the way we are. Do you see the heart of God hanging there on that cross? Every so often my actions shout out, "**Crucify him!**" Every so often my words say, "**I don't know Jesus.**" All too often my thoughts deceive me into thinking that there is no loving God in my life. But then, thanks be to God, I feel Jesus' loving embrace. I hear his words, "**This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins.**" I hear him say, "**Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.**" And then God helps me to believe and to come home to God's peace, joy and life-giving hope again.

Now is the time to plant potatoes. God has been busy preparing this place of worship and community for at least 125 years. Long ago those early Swedes and Finns built little churches here, shortly after they built their houses and maybe even before they built their barns. Ninety two year old Dale and his buddy Roger clean this sanctuary every week. Pat has been teaching kids about Jesus here for the past 42 years. Jan and her crew

come again and again to set the table of the Lord, to provide the waters of baptism. On Thursday, as I sat amongst the retired guys who meet for lunch and Bible study, Maurice, 90 something, asked, **“Is there any more that we can do Pastor?”** We went on to talk about all the young bucks who are trying to be husbands, fathers and followers of Jesus in a very tough world. They could use the support of some older, more experienced guys. There are plenty of young women who could use some mentors as well.

One of our young women, **Doug and Sue Landsverk’s daughter Jaime**, has been working with **Invisible Children**, an organization that is rescuing children from the vicious warfare in Uganda. The wicked, rebel forces have long raced into villages, killed parents and then hauled the children off to become boy soldiers or slaves. Recently the leader/founder of **Invisible Children** had some sort of a mental breakdown and exhibited some very bad behavior in public. The press has gone wild. Critics have cast doubt upon the work of the organization. Yet, all the faithful members of Invisible Children continue their work to keep rescuing children.

Guess what? God works with less than perfect people. The first twelve had **all kinds of problems** and **not much faith**. Yet, were it not for God continuing to work in their lives, we wouldn’t be here today. What about those of us who call ourselves Christians here at First Lutheran? Can any of us claim to be walking perfectly in the footsteps of Jesus? **No**. Are we faithful to Jesus? **Sometimes**. Are we God’s beloved people? **Always**.

Jesus won’t stop at a cross, grave or resurrection to heaven. Jesus won’t let our brokenness, doubts and fears stop his mission of love and care for our lives and his world. God’s own love, this very day, in this very place – flows through the adoptive waters of baptism, through the Living Word of the Gospel, through the Lord’s Supper of forgiveness and healing. When we exchange God’s peace, that very peace travels from one to the other to embrace and lift us. When we fellowship together, Jesus sits at the table. When we serve or reach out into this community, Jesus works shoulder to shoulder with us. **When God hugs the Body of Christ, God is hugging us and we are hugging each other...**

What do you think? Jesus said, “...**unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.**” What do you think? I believe that God is planting seeds

among us again right now. Today we are God's fruit, and again tomorrow, and forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.