

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota
November 3, 2013

Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

ADULT MESSAGE

I could see where a bullet hole had pierced through the cross atop the steeple as I stood outside the old, white, frame, church building. The foundation was sagging. Some of the arched, plain glass windows were broken out. Inside, pews were overturned and scattered about. The old pump organ was gone. The picture of “Jesus, The Shepherd”, which had always held my child’s eye, as it hung over the altar, was now tucked into a corner behind the piano. As I walked around inside, looking here and there with deep sadness in my heart, I spotted a Sunday school attendance chart left hanging there on the kitchen wall from some forty or more years ago. As I ran my finger down the list of names, I found my own... I was standing in the former “**Bethlehem Lutheran Church**” in **Alborn, Minnesota**. It was my church. That day, a piece of my life story seemed to be wrenched away.

Is the “Church” dead? No! The Church that formerly inhabited that building has simply left and moved down the road, to the neighboring township of Culver. There two congregations have built a stronger, more vital congregation with the power to effectively reach out and care for both communities. You see, no one has ever been able to stop the Church. The Romans of Jesus’ day tried and failed. The communists tried – didn’t work. Our prosperous, every man for himself society tries – no way. The Apostle Paul put it this way in his first century letter to the Roman Christians, “**Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.**” Nothing - and just think of the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lives that have been touched by that same love flowing through Christ’s Church, even just here in this community, in your community – through First Lutheran... How many lives can a church touch?

Sonja Hagestuen, retired teacher and our choir director received this letter from Park Rapids, Minnesota recently.

Dear Mrs. Hagestuen,

I graduated from Aitkin High School 49 years ago. Through the years I have on many occasions thought back to people who influenced my life. We have a small group study in our church. In one of our studies recently, the author was discussing the value of life and how people can have a profound effect on others by things they say or do. Very often when this topic comes up, I think of you and decided it is time to tell you about it. You were such a positive force in my life when I was in my teenage years. You always were encouraging and supportive and, of course, fun! I always appreciated you so very much and have continued to appreciate that early encouragement throughout my life. I just want you to know that you contributed to any success that I have had. Thank you so much for encouraging a young girl!

Margi Nicko Taggart

How very nice for Margi to write back after 49 years to thank Sonja for the positive impact Sonja had on her life. This is **All Saints Sunday**. Each year at this time, Christians all over the world pause to give thanks to God for those **countless people**, and for **some specific folks**, who have made a life-giving difference in our world. On this All Saints Weekend, I invite you to spend some time recalling some of the people who have been significant in your own life and faith.

You see, there are teachers to thank... I'm thinking about the people who worked to equip me with faith, hope and love – who have shared “life abundant” with me. In his first letter to the **Corinthians**, the **Apostle Paul** said, “**Faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.**” Paul was talking to people who, even two thousand years ago, lived in a crazy, changing world. And, Paul was talking about a loving and compassionate God who could be counted on no matter what that change might bring. So, what do Paul's words from scripture have to do with **Dick Tuominen**, **Russell Pickering** or **Magda Hansen**? Those words are a promise that was made ages and ages ago by God. Dick, Russell and Magda **received that promise** from someone and then **helped to pass the**

promise along to me. The “promise?” Nothing can separate us... Gift... God can be counted upon... Jesus will abide with us... Even through death and to eternity – For all the saints...

Who told me this? I can remember **Reverends Thelander, Anderson, Nelson, Barnard, Gulsvig, Pastor Wahl, Pastor Forrester** and **Don Hogquist** our lay preacher. Each man played a role in shaping the faith community that I grew up in, in shaping the faith of a little boy growing to adulthood among the rolling hills, miles of swamps and breath-taking lakes. But, it’s not just the professional teachers that I learned faith from either...

My faith has roots also, in the lives of my grandparents, parents, brother and sister, aunts and uncles, cousins... I owe thanks to the **Ostmans, Pickerings, Nelsons, Johannesons**, to the **Elwyns, Orvins, Adolphs, Coras, Harriets, Jennies, Anna Margarets, Florences**... and on and on in the story of the church... These are the ones who week after week sat in those church pews with me, taught Sunday school, played the organ, led youth events, cheered for me at high school football games and greeted me by name in the stores scattered across the area.

In our text from Paul’s letter to the **Ephesians**, he is speaking to a motley collection of early Christians who gathered together in house churches. They had no church buildings. Sometimes they had to gather in secret anyway. Those folks were a tiny percentage of their ancient population, often persecuted for being Christians. Yet somehow they were able to believe that they were the **start of God’s plan to save and bless the whole world**, every nation, and every person. Somehow they believed that our **risen Savior Jesus was faithful** and that they **could follow him as God’s people into a hurting and needy world**.

Somehow God’s people have been believing that and passing along the faith for 2,000 years now. Those folks built **Maria Chapel** and the other little churches that dot our countryside to this very day. They built the little church that I grew up in. They came early to start the stove. They cut pulpwood to pay for the fuel. They gave food to those less fortunate. They set aside from their meager wealth

some money to pay the pastor and to send away for missions. They introduced me to Jesus. I will be eternally thankful to them for these things. Now, you and I are part of God's plan to love, save and care for this old world and its people.

One of my heroes of the faith is **Dr. Gerhard Frost**. His last quarter of teaching at Luther Seminary was my first quarter there. I was fortunate to have him for one class. He has been my faith hero ever since. Dr. Frost wrote:

"TAKK FOR ALT"

(From Bless My Growing, Augsburg, 1974, p. 96.)

She was not quite ninety-seven when she died. One who waited at her side heard her say it: "Takk for Alt." "Thank you for everything." It was her home-going word to God.

Like a good guest she addressed her Host. She spoke as one well-taught, well-taught by life, by memory and expectation!

To be gift-conscious is to be wise; to know whom to thank is grace indeed. To know the gift and love the Giver, to have learned life's dearest lesson, is to be rich toward God.

I thank God for Dr. Frost. I thank God for my grandparents, parents, for my Sunday school and Vacation Bible School teachers. Our ancestors sometimes risked and even gave their lives in order to pass the Good News of God's love, mercy and faithful care on to the next generation. Our own grandparents settled in this new land and not long after building houses to live in, built churches to thank and worship God in.

This very day, the saints of this church, you and I, continue to worship and pray, to work and serve, and to contribute our hard-earned money to enable the Good News of Jesus to be spoken, heard and lived out in the lives of our children and all others who come through these doors. We are stretching in our own day to enable Pastor Melissa to come among us as a leader and equipper in children, youth and family ministry.

Your presence here has happened because somebody else first received the love of God into their own lives and then generously passed God's love along to you. Who do you thank? Who are you remembering this day? Thanks be to God, and thanks for the saints who have gone on before us. Amen.