

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota
 November 27, 2016

Matthew 9:35-38
 Matthew 14:13-21
 Colossians 3:12-17
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

You perhaps read it in this week's Aitkin paper. **Twenty percent** of the high school students in Minnesota had **signs of depression** during the last two weeks. **Twelve percent** of 11th graders **seriously considered suicide**, up from 9.7 % in 2013. **Aitkin students** were a part of this survey. **Twenty five percent** of our **9th graders** answered "**yes**" to the question of whether they have **had any long-term mental health, behavioral or emotional problems** that have **lasted 6 months or more**. (Aitkin Independent Age, November 23, 2016.)

Advent is here. The longest and darkest time of the year is upon us. Yet, Advent is a hopeful, expectant season. In ancient times, our Scandinavian ancestors prayed for the **return of the Sun** to northern skies. Since two thousand years ago, Christian people pray during this time of year for the **second coming of the Light of the World**, Jesus, the Son of God. The world was often cruel and dark when Jesus first came. It still is today and so we **await Jesus' final coming to make all things right**, to make all things the way that God and God's people long for them to be. In the meantime, with the Holy Spirit's help, **we watch** and we **work together** to be God's hands and feet of love and compassion.

Jesus, the Light of the World, first introduced God's kingdom of love and compassion in Galilee and in Judah. Here's what Jesus promised God's kingdom would look like:

- Jesus, **Servant King** will be a **loving and compassionate Lord**.
- **God's Good News** of love, mercy and salvation will be proclaimed to any and to all who will hear it.
- **Disease** of body, mind and soul will be **healed**.
- **Hungry people will be fed** – body, mind and soul.
- Jesus' followers **will carry the new kingdom** with them.
- **Jesus will carry his followers** wherever they go.
- Jesus will **provide everything needed** to do God's kingdom work.

Did you notice in our Gospel lessons?

- There is **always more love and caring needed** in this world.
- There are **never enough workers** to reach every need.

- Jesus **honors his disciples by working through them** to feed the hungry people.
- The disciples **don't think they have enough** and Jesus shows them that they have **more than enough** to feed the people, and with **plenty left over** when they are done.
- The Gospel, **God's Good News** is **not about how poorly I am doing** or how little I have. The Gospel **is about how well God is doing** and about the **abundance God wishes to share** with you, me and anyone who wants and needs it.

I heard it on Minnesota Public Radio Saturday morning. There was a feature on about "**mentoring**." I missed the source of the quote. "**Society grows great when people plant trees under which they will never find shade**." They talked about how our most senior members of society have the gift of time available to mentor younger people. They said that those who mentor others are **three times more satisfied** with their lives. I have been more than amazed by the number of retired folks who serve in various kinds of teaching/mentoring roles here at First Lutheran Church. Here in this church, our kids literally choose these seniors to mentor them. Some were their teachers way back in Tiny Tots or Sunday school days. These mature folks, long beaten up by our tough world, **plant seeds of love, compassion and hope** in young lives.

My wife, Jennifer, and I have been planting seeds all of our married life. That includes literally planting pine seedlings, fruit trees, gardens, etc. It also includes investing in the lives of our own children. It includes investing in our community and most of all in our faith community. For many years now we have **donated 10%** of our after-tax-income to the mission of our church. Our **will is written to share 10%** of whatever is left when we die with our beloved Bible Camps and Luther Seminary. And as long as I am alive, I will continue to **advocate for families** trying to raise kids in an often dark and difficult world. I will continue to **advocate that our church family stretches to invest in the future life and salvation of our kids** and of the kids beyond our doors in Aitkin and the world.

I have heard from several young adults who have joined First Lutheran since I've been here. Many have told me that they used to envy the kids from First Lutheran when they were growing up. First Lutheran had so many things going on for kids and their church didn't. This activity, this caring for kids, is what **convinced these young adults to join this**

church and raise their own children in our midst. Each year for the past five years, we have **grown together in membership, worship attendance** and in **contributions**. Each year, as we've stretched to strengthen and grow our ministry, we have **come up a few thousand dollars short**. Again this fall, we are trailing about \$20,000 in cash flow.

It is **my hope and prayer** that we will finish **2016 in the black**. It is my hope and prayer that we will be able to **grow our income in 2017** sufficiently to add **additional staff** to **not only maintain**, but to strengthen and grow our ministry in support of children, youth and families. **Pastor Melissa** did a great job of leading our confirmation ministry. She wished that she could have done more with children's ministry. She never had time to develop a ministry with our high school youth other than attending their events. We need to invest time and energy in **recruiting** more adult mentors, leaders and teachers. We need to put more energy into **training, facilitating** and **empowering** our members in ministry to youth and families. We need to grow our ministry to all of our members via developing more **adult Bible studies** and **Christian living classes**. I believe we need a **full time children, youth and family worker**. And we need **at least a half time pastor** to assist me in carrying on pastoral duties that can't be handled by lay people. The **ELCA** advocates that for churches to "**maintain**" their ministries, they should have **one full time program person** serving for every **100 average worship attendance**. We averaged **325** as of last year. **When Pastor Melissa** was here, we had about **2¼ full time** program people. Right now, with me and part time Pastor Bob, we have **1¼ program staff**. We should have **3 ¼ to maintain** and **more to grow**. I pray that we will be able to **stretch for God's kids**.

Years ago I learned that Baby Boomers are motivated by **community, compassion** and **hope**. We want to be a part of a **caring community**. We want that community to be **making a positive difference** in our world. And we are looking for the kind of **hope that will enable us to live our lives to the fullest** in this world and the next. God is the Potter and we are the clay. God has been about the business, individually and as a group, of shaping us into that sort of people and place here at First Lutheran.

This is a **vital, life-giving, life-changing place**. Do you feel good about being a part of what is happening here? There are many wonderful stories of how God's Holy Spirit can be seen to be moving mightily amongst us and through us. You have heard some of them today. You can come here

for any worship service, or most any day of the week, and witness God's love, compassion and grace touching, healing and enriching lives.

Community, compassion and hope. Thanks for the part you have been playing in this being a **compassionate, life-giving place**. Thanks for your part in our **shared mission with Jesus** - via your time and talents shared, via the financial support that you give. **Together, we are making a Godly difference** in Aitkin and the world beyond.

First Lutheran is not about me. It is not about any one of us. **We are gathered here because our amazing God has been moving mightily** for all of us and through all of us together **to love and save this world**. Individually we can do a little, more with God's help. Together, with God moving through us, we have done and will continue to do miraculous things in Jesus' Name and to the glory of God. Thanks be to God.

There are **kids right here in Aitkin High School who desperately need what we have to offer**. **Some** of them are already **members** here. **Some** of them have **never tasted the love of Jesus**. How will God's love, compassion and grace move through you and me in the year ahead? **Come, Lord Jesus**, and **empower us** in your service. Thanks be to God. Amen.