

SERMON – 3RD PENTECOST
MATTHEW 4:12-25 & I CORINTHIANS 1:10-18
JANUARY 25, 2020

“THEY SHOOT OLD LUTHERANS DON’T THEY?”

When I did my internship in 1998, I was assigned an “internship project.” Basically, it was supposed to be applied learning – trying to walk the fine line between theological innovation and congregational practicality. My internship supervisors at Luther were chomping at the bit for something “new different and exciting” from their students in the field and I was trying not to flat out confuse the members of my congregation St. Olaf Lutheran in Grenora, North Dakota. So for my “project” I decided to do two things – introduce a new (at least to them) liturgy by John Ylvisaker (I figured a name like that would go over pretty good in a solidly Norwegian congregation) and do a congregational practices survey.

The new liturgy went over so-so. When the survey results were in, I gathered my internship committee together to discuss the results. I’d inquired about youth ministry, liturgy, bible studies, and possible cooperation with other congregations in worship or social ministry. I asked what the group thought. After a rather long pause, Avis Kuhlman cleared her throat, looked at her husband Lloyd, and said “*well, I always thought it would be nice if ushers escorted you to and from your seats before and after the service like they used to.*” Another member of the group, an old bachelor farmer named Timon Heide (it was pretty thick with Norwegians out there – Timon had a half-brother named Ragner Slaan) said to me “*well, I just want a hot meal at funeral receptions – none of this cold sandwiches and salads!*” Well, if you’re gonna come all the way into town...

The Bible gives us lots and lots of incentive to think new thoughts in the church. The most famous example is Paul’s words in II Corinthians 5:17; “*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed the new has come.*” In I Corinthians 5:7 he says; “*get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast.*” Well, evidently a district of the United Methodist Church in Minnesota latched on to the passage in a pretty stunning way recently. The district recently announced to one of its small, aging congregations in Cottage Grove, a suburb of St. Paul, that the membership was too old, and they were shutting it down so that they could re-open in the fall with a newly decorated sanctuary, a young pastor, new hymnals (or simply no hymnals), and a single minded focus on reaching only young members.

What to say? Seems a bit rash – especially when the district asked said older members if they’d mind tending to custodial work, snow removal and lawn care till the fall when all the hoped-for new members would be descending on the facility! There’s more to story of course. The Methodist district is dealing with the some of the exact same issues we are – evangelization of a new generation of believers – i.e. fulfilling the great commission, and maintaining congregations in a culture where “none” is the fastest growing response to survey questions that ask religious identity or affiliation.

“New” is common biblical theme. I cited but 2 of 286 references to it I found. Our text today from Matthew describes a “new thing” – if not in so many words. Jesus is starting his ministry – it’s a brand-new thing in Israel. Except that it’s not – and Matthew takes great pains to remind us that what Jesus was doing

is what Isaiah the prophet had foretold 700 years earlier. Jesus was bringing light to dark places – but in order to do so, Jesus needed to expose darkness.

So he did precisely what Isaiah and all the prophets did – tell folks God called his own, Israel, to repent, which means “turn around”, leave the life style you are leading, or in the oft-repeated words of the prophets “hear O Israel...return to the Lord your God.” Then Jesus did a second thing. He called others to join him in such proclamation – he called them disciples. Again, a new thing – except that it was not, for God had used his prophets of old in the same way. They were to speak and live as God commanded. Finally, Jesus did a third thing – establish he had authority to preach repentance by performing miracles.

Except this wasn't new either – it just hadn't been seen in a while. God in the Old Testament parted the Red Sea, fed Israel with manna and water from rocks for 40 years, and gave them victory against overwhelmingly superior nations in order for them to have a place to live...all to establish that God's commandments were to be followed.

What does that have to do with us? I'm doing something today I rarely do – give you homework. In my annual report I discuss results of reflection and prayer our council and I had this past year. Relax – we've decided not to ask anyone to leave. I am however presenting a set of six core values I believe manifest who we are as a congregation plus slightly revised vision and mission statements. I believe and hope you find they portray us as a congregation grounded in tradition but mindful, with scripture, that “old yeast” must be changed out sometimes.

These statements, which I will ask you to read, in summary say'

We are and will remain a Lutheran congregation which embraces the rich biblical and liturgical practices of that tradition.

We are committed to fulfilling the Great Commission of our Lord – articulated in our lesson from Matthew today to preach the kingdom of heaven as well as Matthew 28.

We are devoted to being generous, compassionate people, seeing and healing the world where it hurts, as our Lord did.

We are family focused – all families. We believe the fulfilling of the great commission starts in the home.

When we hear our Lord tell us to go and heal the world, we also include our common home – and devote ourselves to being caretakers of creation.

We live in the 21st century – a world quite far removed from the 1st, but we still believe the bible is the only source for faith and life we can rely on.

We'll say more next time. In the meantime, please read and pray about them. The call of a disciple is to be devoted to Him above all things. Nothing became so important to Jesus first followers as that. The description of the disciple has not changed – and we'll not either. But we live in Christ, who also makes all things new. Between them, we will give Christ alone the glory...AMEN