



Pastor Ken's Sermon

**SERMON – 16TH PENTECOST
JOHN 15:9-17 AND AMOS 7:10-15
SEPTEMBER 20, 2020
“A FAITH STORY”**

I sat in a room of a conference center in Stony Point, New York in January 1989 and wondered *“how in the world did I ever get here.”* As I sat in a circle (that’s the way you do things at retreats I’ve come to learn) listening to participant after participant tell their *“faith and call story”*, I realized I’d better come up with something pretty quick or these people will not only think I don’t belong at a Missionary Orientation Retreat, I’ve no business packing up and heading to Tanzania to *be* a missionary for the next 7-10 years!

The room was full of folks from different Christian traditions going to different places to do all manner of different work once they got to their host country. There were nurses, linguists, builders, teachers, doctors, a couple of people who I’m not really sure why they were going other than to *“be”* with folks of another culture...and one CPA! I would have just about had nothing to offer in the way of a faith story had I not been rescued by...a Lutheran pastor...there was one of those too...who in the midst of his story and perhaps as a counter point to all the stories that sounded to him (and me) so certain and so...well...planned...that he quoted John 15:16 – *“you did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.”*

That was it...that was my verse...I didn’t plan to go to Tanzania and wasn’t sure how to explain that to the others, so thanks be to God a pastor, whose name I’ve long forgotten, gave me the Scripture to hang a story on so when it was my turn a midwestern kid who’d eeked out an accounting degree from the University of Minnesota could say why he was...gulp...about to become a missionary! This had to be God’s idea! So what is my story...please bear with me because this is mine and it may not be remotely like yours or it may line up to yours in remarkable ways.

My faith story begins with the promise God made to me through my parents. I was presented for baptism at St. Matthews Lutheran Church on October 25, 1959 about six weeks after entering this world. I lived a block from that church in St. Paul, Minnesota, and whenever I went out the door of our house, that church building was in plain sight – a reminder of who I was or more specifically *“where I belonged”* – I was a Christian and a member of St. Matthews. I believed my baptism had made me a Christian, and I still believe that.

I wish the innocence of *“I’m a baptized and confirmed member of St. Matthews Lutheran church”* would have continued. My belief in God has never wavered. I can’t recall a period in my life when I didn’t believe in God. But especially during high school and college my faith was not driving my decisions. In Mark 4 there is a story about a *“sower and the seed.”* In it, Jesus describes people who hear the word of God. Some are like seed *“that is sowed on rocky soil”*, meaning they don’t have much depth, and eventually wither. Some are like seed *“that grows up among thorns”* which choke the plant.

Either could describe me in my teens and early 20’s. I wasn’t a young man of prayer and certainly not *“in the Word.”* My faith had little depth. I was *“a Christian without much conviction”* and my faith made a lot of accommodations. I was a Christian through baptism but insofar as I could tell anyway, not *“bearing much fruit.”* In truth I didn’t give passages like that much thought.

Relax...your pastor never morally “went off the deep end”. The phrase I would use to describe my life and faith were “lukewarm” – I just wanted to “*keep it between the navigational beacons*”. Change started when I met my future wife Marcella. Her faith had been nurtured in college - mine was pretty much on the shelf. After we met, I began to be asked, and ask, questions of what I believed, and more importantly, why.

In our third year of marriage and my 30th year of life, Marcella and I by our families reckoning ruined or at least seriously inconvenienced our lives by becoming missionaries of the Lutheran Church to Tanzania, Africa. This was not a “between the lines” event! Folks asked questions and I (struggled mightily) to offer answers as to why I was doing such an admirable but illogical thing. I didn’t have the language of faith or spiritual confidence to explain it. I felt honored to be going and pressed upon almost to the point of irritation to say why. “*Just accept it and let me get on with it*” was how I felt. I doubt I convinced anyone the Lord was working in me, or that I was experiencing an awakening of faith.

In Tanzania I met or was re-introduced to Jesus through reading the Bible. The Holy Spirit was, as John 14:26 says; “*teaching me all things and reminding me of everything Jesus said and did.*” I began for the first time in my life to want nothing so much as to understand Jesus and I suppose, imitate him. The story I discovered in the Bible of God patiently revealing himself to Israel became personal to me. Israel and me bore a lot of similarities – a great start in life because God chose us, a few shining moments along the way, and too many stretches of disinterest and disobedience.

Two passages in the Bible became especially important to me – Mark 10:45, which says “*For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*”, and Philippians 2:5, which says “*your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus.*” I know the pattern of my life will still include relapses into sin – I’m tempted every day to live selfishly, not selflessly. I know how deceptive and hollow sin is and I want to resist it and overcome it.

I Corinthians 10:13 says “*No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear, but when you are tempted he will also provide a way out, so that you can stand up under it.*” Stand is what I want...even as sometimes I feel like one of those meteorologists reporting from the beach as the hurricane makes landfall – leaning in other words! Still, I want to have “the mind of Christ” and his servant spirit working in me. God showed me his faithfulness by going to the cross for me, and I want my life to be an expression of gratitude for that. As God directs, I hope my life will earn a hearing for the gospel story that changed my life.

“*I was neither a prophet nor a prophet’s so, but I was a shepherd and I also took care of sycamore trees. But the Lord took me...*” So goes the testimony of my favorite prophet – Amos. I’m a butcher’s son and was a keeper of ledgers. Till the Lord took me...yes even me. That’s my faith story...and for our purposes today, my call story...or as much of it as I can wedge into our gathering today. You have one too. I hope if given the chance you can tell it to someone, like a Lutheran pastor in Stoney Point, New York did for me, and give someone what he gave me...a way to say why and how Jesus is your life.

But most of all I want, on this (belated) ordination anniversary of mine to thank you for the privilege of letting me tell the story Jesus to you, and all I hope is I get it right. Our Saviour’s and Trinity Lutheran churches of Spencer and Bristow Nebraska, and First of Minot North Dakota gave me the same privilege and to them I’m grateful too. You maybe should be too...they let me practice this a bit! May we all seek to be the sort of people that have stories someone else needs to hear – because everyone needs to hear Jesus. That is why we were chosen after all. AMEN