

**Installation of Bishop William “Bill” Gafkjen
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
St. Luke’s United Methodist Church
Indianapolis, Indiana
September 11, 2010**

Isaiah 42: 5-9

Psalm 113

2 Corinthians 4: 1-12

Luke 10: 1-12, 16-20

Grace to you and peace in Jesus’ name. Amen.

How good it is to be back with you after participating in your synod assembly in June. What a joyful occasion for this synod, for you, Bill, and members of your family, for the entire ELCA and, I trust, for ecumenical and global partners.

It is good just to be together in the Lord’s name. It is good, is it not, to be together at Jesus’ invitation at the Lord’s table!

So I’ve got just one thing to say: GO! Go on. Get out of here. I mean it—unless, of course, Jesus didn’t really mean it. But it is a bit presumptuous of us to doubt Jesus, wouldn’t you say?

So go, Gafkjen! You, Bishop Gafkjen, off with you! Jesus said it, so do it. All of you, get on your way. GO! [extended pause]

I see that you are not leaving. Are you worried Bill might be offended if you just get up and go before his installation? Perhaps you are waiting to be fed at the table of the Bread of Life? That is understandable since many of us are famished for a taste of God’s mercy in the Bread of Life.

I am curious. What does hold us back when we hear Jesus’ clear words, “Go on your way. See, I am sending you...?” (Luke 10:3, NRSV). Seriously, what is holding us back, you back, your congregation back, this synod back, the entire ELCA back? What is holding us back from GOING, from being a sent church? Turn to someone near you and discuss one thing holding you back personally from the community of faith to which you belong. [Discussion]

Are you held back because you are feeling inadequate, not up to the task? I’m sorry, but that will not grant you a pass to stay indoors seeking refuge in the church. Paul was as clear with the Corinthians as he is with us. It is clay jars Jesus sends out into the world, earthen vessels, cracked pots.

If you don’t believe Paul, go back and take a quick read through the Gospels, paying attention to whom it is Jesus calls and sends to be his disciples and how they did along the way, following him to the cross and beyond. A fearing, abandoning, doubting, denying and disbelieving band, not exactly what one might describe as qualities for the top graduates in Jesus’ school of discipleship!

Nevertheless, Jesus is clear to them, “Go on your way! See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves (Luke 10:3, NRSV). I have news for you—those cracks in your life do not disqualify you. Not one of what Parker Palmer describes as the shadow-casting monsters that loom over us and within us gets us off the hook. Not the monster of insecurity about our identity and worth or the monster of feeling the whole universe is a

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battleground or the long shadow-casting monsters of our anxieties and fears. Not even that monster that causes so many cracks, especially in us called to leadership, the feeling that responsibility for everything in the church rests with us. Not one of those crack-creating, shadow-casting monsters will disqualify you from being sent.¹

Or do we stay back not so much because of what is inside us, but because of what looms out there? There is a post-9/11 world out there that is not exactly conducive to identifying oneself as being religious—a person of faith. My goodness, look at the controversies surrounding religion: burning the Koran, building a mosque near Ground Zero, polarizing issues of morality and the reality that the fastest growing segment of the American population are those who say that they have no religious beliefs or practices.

So why would we want to be sent out into that kind of world, identifying ourselves as followers of and believers in Jesus? Sorry, but do you really think that Jesus, who was crucified by a violent world, is going to give you some kind of free pass to stay put in the sanctuary of your church or house? Jesus knows what kind of world he sends us into. “I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3, NRSV). Paul was equally clear about what we will experience, “We are afflicted in every way, [but not crushed;] perplexed, [but not driven to despair;] persecuted, [but not forsaken;] struck down, [but not destroyed]” (2 Corinthians 4: 8-9, NRSV).

So then let’s be honest. Weariness from the controversies that have followed the 2009 Churchwide Assembly won’t be accepted as a reason for hunkering down and staying put, tending to ourselves and healing our own wounds.

The ELCA mission statement is “Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered and sent for the sake of the world.” SENT! Because every one of you has been claimed by God’s grace in baptism and gathered into the community of Christ’s body, the church is sent and commissioned by Jesus to GO! We go, but not alone, for we go two by two, sent in the community of the church.

But why go? Why do we go out into the world? Why do you go? [Discussion]

Do we go because we have need of something that’s out there? More members? More money? More recognition, even attention for our congregations, synod, denomination? Do we go so that we can feel better about ourselves, less alone, less frightened about our future? After all, we often hear dire news and forecasts about the ELCA or the viability of a strong Lutheran presence in North America or maybe even about your congregation or this synod.

The implication becomes a kind of unspoken expectation that puts great pressure on leaders. (Sorry, Bill, but unspoken expectations are resentments in waiting.) The implication is that if we don’t do something, “our congregation,” “our synod,” “our church (ELCA),” or “our faith”—as if they were all ours—are going to disappear and die. I am here simply to remind you of what I believe you know but what, in this climate, it is so easy to forget: that is “Go on your way,” (Luke 10:3, NRSV) because you lack nothing. You have all that you need. You have this treasure in clay jars.

What is this treasure we have been given to bear to the world? [Discussion]

You bear the treasure of God’s own word and God’s promise of mercy and love. You bear the treasure of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is from God who created all things in the world, beauty and love, and still preserves them. “[God] who gives breath to the

¹ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 86-89.

people upon it (the earth) and spirit (*ruach*) to those who walk in it” (Isaiah 42: 5, NRSV).

Perhaps, before the assisting minister concludes the liturgy with GO! Go in peace: serve the Lord, share the good news, remember the poor, Christ is with you, we should invite the assembly to engage in some deep breathing, encouraging them to repeat that breathing throughout the week as they are sent. Breathing in the *ruach*—the wind, the breath, the Spirit of God—whose treasure, whose word of promised mercy and love in Jesus Christ you carry. Even the earthen vessel, the clay jar that you are.

Go on your way! For you are not lacking in what you need. You may be thinking you lack some spiritual gift, some ability, some charisma that will draw people to your leadership. Or you may be thinking that your congregation or the Indiana-Kentucky Synod or the entire ELCA is lacking members, money, motivation.

Good news, friends. You have all that you need for your sending because you are not sent to proclaim yourselves or your congregation, but Jesus Christ as Lord. You have this treasure of God’s word and the promise of mercy and love in Christ.

And you have power. But I suspect we are more familiar with—dare I say comfortable with—the passages in Scripture that call us to empty ourselves, deny ourselves, lay down our lives for the sake of the gospel. Then do we hear and believe those passages that promise we will be given power?

Before his ascension, the risen Christ promised his confused, questioning disciples. “[But] you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8, NRSV). Paul reminds the clay jars in Corinth and we cracked pots in Indianapolis of the same promise, “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Corinthians 4: 7, NRSV).

When Jesus says GO and sends you on your way “as a lamb amidst the wolves,” you go with his power, the power of Christ’s cross and resurrection. Yes, at times you will be challenged, perplexed. You may suffer, even grow discouraged by what you experience. Nonetheless, you have the power of Jesus’ own word and resurrected life, which has prevailed against the forces of sin, death and the devil. You are sent with that resurrected power, that power of the Holy Spirit making all things new.

Alice Walker said, “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.”² Have too many of us in the ELCA given up power because we think we don’t have any when we have been claimed, gathered and sent by the God who is powerful in mercy, in reconciliation, in peace. That is the power you have. So GO! You lack nothing!

Still, you may wonder if you have any permission or authorization to exercise this power. You may wonder whether you have permission to go anywhere, to any home or household, to any family of any shape or size and announce the Lord’s peace on that family, that home, that shared life.

Some are saying loudly that there is a crisis in the ELCA, and it supposedly has been brought on by those who proclaim the Lord’s benediction on homes, on families, on relationships where they should not, where they have no authority to do so, as if Jesus

² Alice Walker, in *The Best Liberal Quotes Ever : Why the Left is Right* by William P. Martin (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2004) 173.

himself would not go there or that he would never authorize such wonton proclamation of peace in his name.

But is it true? We need to keep asking and struggling with that question. Is it true? Is it true that God gives the treasure of the gospel and grants the power to proclaim peace but withholds the permission, the authority, by setting limits on who may receive it and who may not?

Or is it true, as some seem to suggest, that God's *real* power, the power that really brings the kingdom's arrival, is the power of judgment and condemnation. And so the church's power, authority, and responsibility is the prevention and control of such wonton proclamation and ministry of reconciliation.

What is true? Jesus sends you with the power to proclaim God's peace and God's blessing with the expectation that in the world (yes, the world we too often fear and flee) God's peace will be received and graciously returned to you. The temptation is for us to think of the world as such a hostile place that it should be avoided at all costs, that Christians must withdraw into safe sanctuaries, and that the most we can do is offer hospitality to others. But Jesus is clear. God's Holy Spirit is at work in every corner of the world—especially in places we might think improbable or impossible. Go there said Jesus, you just may experience godly hospitality and God's peace in all kinds of homes, all kinds of families, all kinds of community. Yes, Jesus gives you not only the power, but the authority—the permission—to go into the world and be at home in it with God's peace, rather than always being at war with it.

God's kingdom is not a static, distant destination, some unrealized utopian dream—like a gated community into which only the privileged few may enter—with God hidden there unwilling—unable—to move out into the world to embrace the ones for whom Jesus died.

That is not true. God's kingdom is God's powerful grace and mercy on a rescue mission, entering into and moving throughout the world. God's search and rescue mission is to find all humankind, to embrace each one in the forgiving love and mercy of Jesus. God is not sleeping and neither are we. God has not forsaken you or abandoned the ELCA.

God is on the move. Jesus Christ is risen and ascended. Harvey Cox says, "The ascension in its simplest terms means Jesus is mobile."³ This God claims you, forgives you, and sends you for Jesus' sake. This Jesus sends you, goes ahead of you and meets you in the world.

Jesus gives you permission so that when the Lord's peace you bring is met with rejection, when others choose to sling the mud of their anger, resentment, bitterness and condemnation, insisting that you take that mud with you. You have permission to say, "I am not going there. I am not taking your mud with me. I am not swallowing the resentment, not wearing it on my sleeve."

Jesus gives you permission to shake it off, wrap yourself in the baptismal covenant of Christ with which you are clothed, and be on your way. You have the power—the authority—to say, "I am moving on, rejoicing—rejoicing in the hope of the Lord's peace." We are moving on together, as the ELCA, as disciples of Jesus Christ, offering nothing else than the promise of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Collier Books, 1990), 50.

We are moving on, carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be made visible. We are moving on, bearing the treasure of the Good News of Jesus Christ of God's peace and mercy so that in every nation and land, in every home and family and heart, in every language and society, in every race and class, it will be said, "The Kingdom of God has arrived!" So what are we waiting for? GO ON! Get out of here!