

Installation of Samuel Zeiser as Bishop of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod
Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson
September 26, 2008

Mark 10: 35-45

Isaiah 42: 5-9

Paul 12: 4-5

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus, amen.

It is a great joy to participate in this service of installation. I greet you on behalf of your sisters and brothers in Christ in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and throughout the Lutheran Federation.

I have just returned from Germany and the launching of the Luther Decade in the castle church in Wittenburg. For ten years we will be celebrating the Lutheran Reformation as we lead up to 2017.

But more than greetings, I bring gratitude. Gratitude to each one of you for how you live out your baptismal faith in your daily life. Gratitude for the ministries of the congregations of this synod and those specialized ministry settings. Gratitude for the work of your synod and the partner agencies and institutions. And deep abiding gratitude for our ecumenical partners. Thank you for the financial support that undergirds the work of this synod, churchwide ministries, and those partners. I know it's a challenge not to keep all that money at home, but it does great work.

I also want to say a special word of thanks today. If you are a member of Christ Lutheran Church in Allentown, would you please stand? (Applause) Thank you. (More clapping) Thank you for giving your pastor to be this synod's pastor and now treating your interim pastor with great loving care because, as you know, he has been an outstanding bishop and he will serve you well.

Well, Bishop Zeiser, what will be the marks of your leadership as a servant bishop? In a few moments, I will remind you what this church sees as the marks of this office as I ask you the following questions: "Will you be diligent in your use of the Holy Scriptures and in your use of the means of grace? Will you be faithful to the Holy Scriptures, the Confessions of this Church? Will you be faithful in your witness in the world? Will you guide and support the ministers and leaders of congregations in this, their ministries?"

But in light of the three texts, I'm going to offer you three more marks of your servant leadership. The first is that I hope your servant leadership as bishop will be marked by evangelical improvisation. Now to get there, I've got to go back to the beginning of this section in Mark's gospel. As you recall, Jesus is engaged in a conversation with James and John. They ask Jesus a favor: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."¹

And Jesus answered, "What is it you want me to do for you?"² Now, Bishop Zeiser, if you're not aware of it already, that will be a dialogue in which you'll frequently find yourself. (Laughter) When colleague pastors and lay rostered leaders come to your office and you have a conversation, the conversation may lead to the recognition that they're a

¹ Mark 10:35, NRSV

² Mark 10:36, NRSV

little restless in their current call. You, with bishop-like sensitivity, will say, “Well then, what is it you want me to do for you?”

And they will say, “Duh, give me a new call.” (Laughter)

Or when you go to meet with a congregation or a congregational council—and I know this is a very rare occurrence in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, but other bishops seem to report it occurring frequently—you will get around to hearing them describe conflict on the staff or a little tension in the congregation. If I were a betting man, maybe about sexuality, just to pick out something. (Laughter) You think about it, become Jesus-like, and say, “What is it you want me to do for you?” They’ll look at you like, didn’t you take this class at bishops’ training? (Laughter) Resolve it.

And then when colleagues from churchwide or seminaries or social ministry organizations or colleges come to you, we won’t even wait for you to ask us what we want you to do for us. (Laughter) We’ll say, “Increase mission support. Increase your giving. We’d like you to be a good partner.”

James and John were very clear with Jesus about what they wanted him to do for them. “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”³ And in response, Jesus engages in a bit of evangelical improvisation. For Jesus was willing to define the limits of his authority, the limits of his call, then turning the conversation to an invitation to follow Jesus on the way to the cross and to participate in His suffering and death.

And therein lies the art of evangelical improvisation today, not just for bishops, but for every one of you colleagues in parish ministry and rostered ministry. Please don’t think that I underestimate what I’m asking for. There’s great pressure on pastors today, for we live in a very consumer-oriented, competitive, market-driven religious culture, don’t we? The expectation is so often, “You pastors, if you don’t meet my needs, hmmm. I’ll go look for someone that does. If your preaching isn’t dynamic, ... If your confirmation teaching isn’t spell-binding, ...” (Laughter)

You are supposed to have a winsome personality. You’re supposed to be at the hospital at five a.m. to pray with Ethel before she goes into surgery—never mind that no one told you Ethel was having surgery. (Laughter) And what happens if you fail to do what people feel you need to do for them? They’ll go look for someone who does.

So in this kind of cultural context, what shall be the marks of our servant leadership? I hope it’s one of evangelical improvisation, which means we—like Jesus—need to be very self-defined about what we will not do, what we cannot do. But then we turn the conversation to what God in Christ has already done for them, for you, for us, inviting that person into a life of faith and participation in the mission to which God calls us and for which God sends us.

Jesus was absolutely clear with James and John. To sit at my right hand or my left is not mine to grant. Rather than granting their request, Jesus moves the conversation to what is about to occur to him. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”⁴ In other words, to grant positions of power and authority is not Jesus’ responsibility, but it is to invite James and John to the way to the cross and toward what God is going to do for them and then—through them—for the world.

³ Mark 10:37, NRSV

⁴ Mark 10:38, NRSV

Think how radical such evangelical improvisation is in our culture. In our culture, those who draw all the attention—not only in the United States but throughout the world—are prosperity gospel-preaching evangelists who have succumbed to the demands of the culture. They say, “Yes, accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior and you will find great material wealth and economic prosperity.” Haven’t heard many of them preaching from Wall Street this week, by the way. (Laughter)

And what are we called to say? We are called to engage in the kind of evangelical improvisation that Bonhoeffer did in the midst of the tyranny of Nazism and Hitler. He invited people to come and follow Jesus, but he reminded all of us that when Jesus bids us to follow him, he invites us to come and die and live in Christ and through Christ for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of the neighbor. Christ turns us away from our self-preoccupation with positions of authority and power and turns us toward the neighbor. Christ turns us toward the neighbors who lack any legal documentation, granting them the right to be here—never mind that we still want them here to roof our houses and wash our cars and mow our lawns. Christ turns us toward the neighbors who live in poverty and toward the neighbors whose sexual orientation deems them unacceptable in the church and culture. In Christ, we are turned away from our fears of the other that have caused us to want to fortify borders and erect barriers to keep them out. We are turned instead toward a life of extending generous hospitality, just as God in Christ generously and mercifully welcomes us into God’s loving arms.

John Thomas, president and general minister of the United Church of Christ says, “God’s mission in the world and in the church needs leaders who are poets, literal poets in some cases, but perhaps most often poets who are persons who are equipped to use language and symbol, liturgy and song, ritual and sacrament, silence and dance to help us imagine a world that is more than a marketplace, to claim a life that is profoundly connected and communal to see the world and one another as mystery to be worshiped rather than objects to be consumed. Poets and liturgists are today’s evangelists who enable us to sense the improvisational God revealed in Jesus Christ and lure us into the company of those who are no longer satisfied with consuming or with living as competitive strangers to one another.”⁵

Sam, may that be a tone of your improvisational evangelical leadership. Be a poet in the midst of the people who have called you to lead them. It’s my hope that your servant leadership as bishop also will be marked by evangelical perseverance, born out of your trust in God’s faithfulness to God’s promise.

There are two constant challenges we always will face in leadership. One is proving ourselves trustworthy and—sadly—that’s a daily challenge because of how many people in the clergy have violated trust. Second, people will want you to cast a vision for this church. You know, most vision statements and mission statements sound more like the preserving of the institution than proclaiming a vision of what the Holy Spirit might be up to. They seem more about preserving what is than being open to God’s promised future.

Be a servant leader who grounds your evangelical perseverance in God’s promised faithfulness. Did you hear Isaiah speaking to a weary people? He said, “Thus says God,

⁵ John Thomas, *Pontiff, Prophet, Poet: What Kind of Leaders Will We Require?*, address delivered to the annual consultation of the United Church of Christ in San Antonio, Texas, February 2002, p. 7.

the Lord.” Now just in case in your exile in the wilderness you have forgotten of whom I speak, Isaiah says, the one who’s about to speak to you is the one who gives you the breath of life. Then Isaiah said to look out over the majestic Pennsylvania hills, cast your eyes out over the sea, look to the prairies. The one who is about to speak to you is the one who has given you the grandeur of God’s creation. Now that you know who’s speaking to you, listen to God’s word of promise, “I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness, I’ve taken you by the hand and kept you.”⁶

I don’t for one minute underestimate the challenges every one of us baptized believers in Jesus has in seeking to be faithful to God’s promise. I don’t underestimate the challenges of a congregation that worships 25 or 30 seeking to preserve what has been rather than persevering into God’s promised new future for them. I have no doubts that sustaining vibrant ministries is a challenge, let alone having evangelical perseverance for new images of what it means to be the body of Christ today.

If our mindset in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is preservation rather than evangelical perseverance, then I’m afraid that we will be a stagnant church. We will be a church suffering from nostalgia, longing for those good old days when Sunday School classes were full and pews were full and people seemed to be centered in the life of the church and we were growing as a denomination instead of losing 50,000 baptized members a year. So in the face of almost insurmountable odds, it’s no small thing to say that God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, calls us to evangelical perseverance and not just preservation. But God, when God spoke to those weary exiles, didn’t only speak God’s word of promise, but also God’s purpose. So God said to those people in exile not only “I am your God” but also, “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”⁷

What if every congregational meeting, every Synod Council meeting, every Synod and Churchwide Assembly, instead of fussing and feuding about resolutions, asked each other, “So who are those to whom God is sending us today? Who are those who are imprisoned—literally incarcerated—including the incredibly rising number of young African-American men in prison? Who are those to whom God is sending us who live in the dungeon that our white racism creates for people of color? To whom is God sending us to be a light to the nations?”

When young people affirm their baptism in the rite of confirmation, what are they saying yes to? They are saying “yes” that when God binds God’s self to us in baptismal waters, God is also giving us a purpose. And the pastor asks those confirmands, “Do you intend to live in this purposeful covenant?” And then the pastor describes the purposes to which God calls us: “Will you live among God’s faithful people?” Hello. The Christian life is a communal life. It is not a privatized, individualized spirituality. “Will you hear God’s Word and share in the Lord’s Supper.” Hello. Twenty-eight percent of ELCA members seem to believe that part of God’s purpose since that’s how many are in worship each week.

I met a pastor who has a colleague in ministry who is not in worship on Sunday morning once a month. He goes out and rings the doorbells of inactive members. He said, “Are they ever shocked!” (Laughter) And then he said the first response is, “Oh no,

⁶ Isaiah 42:6, NRSV

⁷ Isaiah 42:7-8, NRSV

pastor. Who died?” (Laughter) And his answer is, “No one that I know of, but I’m afraid you might be dying. You must be starving. We haven’t seen you at the table of the Bread of Life for weeks. Are you okay? May I come in so we can talk?”

The third mark of baptism that young people affirm is that “I will proclaim the Good News of Christ through Word and deed.” That means that every one of the baptized is called to be an evangelist. I am sick and tired of ELCA members tripping over the first word in our name, *Evangelical* Lutheran Church. We say, “But we’re not like those other evangelicals.” (Laughter) Instead of defining how we are not like someone else, we are to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. That’s what it means to be evangelicals. And frankly, you can’t be Lutheran without being evangelical because we understand the church to be where the Gospel is proclaimed in Word and sacrament. God sends us into the world to share that story of Jesus. It’s time to break the rule that too many Lutheran congregations have: “In the church, we’ll talk about Jesus. In the world, we’ll talk about justice.” Go into the world and talk about Jesus. In the church, let’s talk about justice.

The fourth mark of the baptized is, “Serve all people following the example of our Lord Jesus.” Thank God that we do that quite well as Lutherans. There were 9.3 billion dollars in social ministry done by Lutheran social service and health care providers last year.

The fifth mark is, “Strive for justice and peace in all the world.” That one we trip over. It doesn’t mean we must agree about what will bring peace in Iraq or Afghanistan, or between Israelis and Palestinians. It doesn’t mean that we will agree on what are the marks of a just immigration reform. But what is not open for debate is that baptized believers in Jesus who follow the way of the cross will be about striving for justice and peace in all the world.

And just when we begin to think, “Whoa, this guy is putting a load on us today,” we hear wonderful words of promise from Paul to the Romans. “For as in one body we have many members and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.”⁸ So our evangelical perseverance is born out of God’s faithfulness to God’s promise that God will gift each one differently, and those gifts will be gathered up for the sake of the Gospel and the sake of the neighbor.

I remember a pastor in Detroit who told me he was serving in an urban neighborhood and the community was very discouraged by its decline. The congregation felt it was taking on the decline of its community, so they trained the members of the congregation to go out into the neighborhood and interview everyone within a four-block radius. Their question was, “What gifts and passions do you have that might be used for building up this community?” Well of course, people initially said they didn’t have any. The visitors teased it out, however, and then invited all the people in the neighborhood to come to the church. In the sanctuary they’d hung long banners on which they had written all of the gifts, all of the talents, all of the passions that they had heard from the people in the neighborhood. Then they invited a communal conversation: “Given all these talents, how might we use them together to revitalize this community and bring new life to this congregation?”

I hope that’s the kind of evangelical imagination you invite this synod into. I am so delighted that we are worshipping in a United Methodist church. For the United

⁸ Romans 12:4-5

Methodists last summer voted to establish full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I trust that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will vote similarly in 2009. That will mean that we will have six full communion partners. I think we have not begun to be imaginative about what those relationships might mean, not just for the preservation of our church, but together for the proclamation of the Gospel, for our evangelical witness in the world, and for our work in God's mission of restoring people to community.

A final word: evangelical improvisation, evangelical perseverance, and evangelical resistance. When the late Will Herzfeld came back from his last trip to Africa, he described the tyrants he had encountered, not unlike those Jesus referred to: the tyrant of an HIV and AIDS pandemic that was taking its toll in every community, the tyrant of civil wars that were destroying African nations, the tyrant of the mutilization of women, and the tyrant of church divisions over the ordination of women. But he also witnessed courageous people who engaged in evangelical defiance, people who in the name of Jesus were willing to stand up and cast out demons, who were willing to engage in truth and reconciliation for the sake of bringing lasting peace, who proclaimed the crucified and risen Christ present there, and who worked tirelessly to end the stigmatization of HIV and AIDS.

So Pastor Herzfeld said before he died, "Oh, may the Holy Spirit give every one of us marked with the cross of Christ in baptism the courage to engage in such evangelical defiance, such evangelical resistance in the face of all the tyrants that seek to destroy life, to devour our lives, to destroy the humanity of another in God's very creation." For this, Christ gave his life and rose again, a ransom for every one of us, calling us and sending us. Sending you, Bishop Zeiser, to engage in evangelical perseverance and resistance and improvisation. For this Christ has set you free. For this, this synod calls you to be its servant leader. Amen.