

This Sunday's texts:

Acts 1:6-8

Ephesians 3:14-19

Luke 14:25-35

**Our Shared Vision
Bishop Dan Selbo
May 9, 2021**

Our Gospel reading today is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 14, beginning in the 25th verse:

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus and turning to them, he said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life - he cannot be my disciple. And if anyone does not carry his cross and follow me, he cannot be my disciple. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he's not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who do not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

The Gospel of our Lord. Well, dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. It is wonderful to be with you here today and to share this time together with you in worship. Thank you to Pastor Jim and to Pastor Jonna for the chance to be with you here this day.

Before turning to our message, allow me to share just a bit about what's going on throughout the North American Lutheran Church, the NALC. As you can imagine, coming off this past year, dealing with the pandemic, it's good now to see things beginning to open up in almost all of our congregations. If they're not yet inside, in their buildings, they are almost all gathering together in person. Same with many of our continental meetings and events. Last month, I spent four days in South Dakota with two of our mission districts. I also had the chance to preach at one of the more rural congregations, which truly was a joy. Quite a challenging and productive ministry that's taking place. I just came back from a four-day gathering in San Antonio where we held our annual Pastors Conference and had a meeting of our Mission District Deans. We're also on track for our annual Lutheran events and our mission convocation the first week in August. If possible, I'd encourage your pastors and maybe even some of your lay members to attend that gathering. It's one of those times where we get together as a church and we do much of the work, business, and thinking

together and moving forward in those gatherings. I also have a couple of ordinations coming up, along with several preaching events, engagements, and Mission District events as well. Add to that the in-person meetings already booked and it's starting to feel like things are moving in the right, back to a bit more normal, direction. We're also in the process of finding our next General Secretary. Pastor Mark Chavez, who has been serving in that role for the past ten years, has accepted a call to one of our congregations and will be beginning that call this coming week. I'd ask for you to keep that General Secretary search in your prayers. It's a key position for our church body and our leadership. We need to be listening carefully and praying diligently for the right person to be raised up.

On a bit of a lighter note, you might already know this. A bit of NALC trivia, if you will. Before beginning his ordained ministry in the mid-1980s, Pastor Chavez and his parents were members here at Saint Timothy's. Pastor Mark served in the military before entering seminary and so he wasn't quite as visible here as he might have otherwise been. Nonetheless, with *this* being his home congregation, right here in this place, and my personal history before becoming bishop in the same place, the NALC has probably had too much of St Timothy's influence for its own good. Now, many of the NALC may not know that history, so don't go posting out online when we're finished here. Some things are better left unsaid.

The last thing I'll share with you before turning to our message is the simple fact that I miss being with you in this place. I miss preaching on a regular basis to people I know and I love. At the same time, I remain thankful for the years we've shared, secure in the calling I now have, and encouraged by the pastoral leadership you continue to have, as together, we seek to follow our Lord, Jesus.

Let's begin our time today in a word of prayer. Lord God, we thank you for this day of worship and for the chance to gather around your word. Open our hearts to sense your presence, open our ears to hear your voice, and open our minds that we might be transformed by the one who came to save. In his name, we pray. Amen

Let's get right into it. When Pastor Cords reached out to me a while back and asked me to share with you today in worship, he gave me the challenge of preaching the sermon, while at the same time, presenting the NALC's vision for the coming years. It's a ten-point vision, lifting up ten different components that will set direction and give emphasis to the work that we do together as a denomination over the next three to five years. Now, it's an aggressive vision. It's a vision that if it's ever to become a reality, we will need God's blessing. But it's consistent with the calling we've been given, so we are trusting that God will bless it moving forward.

The Great Commission, to go into the world and make disciples, baptizing and teaching, and the Great Commandments, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and your

neighbor as yourself, are at the foundation of what this commitment is all about. It's also a vision built upon not only the Great Commission and the Great Commandments, but also upon the NALC's four core values. From the start, our church body has had four values at the core that shape the things that we do together. Number one: we are a Christ-centered church body. The Lord Jesus is at the heart of our witness, in our shared life. Number two: we are mission-driven. What drives us is the mission given to us by Jesus to speak and to share his name. Third: we are traditionally grounded. Not traditional in the sense that we do things the same way all the time, but grounded in the tradition of the Church: the creeds, the authority of scripture, the Lutheran Confessions. And we are congregationally focused. We know that the primary work of the church happens not in some office somewhere where the bishop and staff happened to work and to live, but in congregations, where the ministry of the word and sacrament takes place, and where faith and witness and life transformation happen.

Having said that, because we cannot do everything all at once, it's important for any congregation, any church body, if it's going to be effective in its calling to divide that greater calling into more manageable parts. And that's what we've done with our vision. Our vision gives us some short-term tasks that are manageable and reachable, as we seek to be faithful to the greater and more far-reaching call we have in Jesus. The vision is on our website. If you want to do a little checking and reading on your own, all ten components are outlined with a description of each. They're all important and significant. I can talk for quite a while about each of the ten, but I realized that if I were to do that here today, a ten-point sermon, I might never be asked back. What I've decided to do instead is to condense this bigger 10-point vision into three broader categories. That's how the sermon today is put together.

Before turning to the vision itself, let me share with you two truths that are at the heart of this vision and how we see it moving forward. The first, number one, unless the vision is of God, it has no hope. Unless the vision is of God, it has no hope. The psalmist says "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."¹ If this is only of us, it's not going to happen. If it's something we've thought up and it's not of God, it's already dead. But if it is of him, and we believe it is, then we know it has a future and we need to give that future everything we have.

That leads to the second truth behind this vision, the fact that God will only do through the church what the church is willing to do through Him. God will only do through the church what the church is willing to do through Him. Saint Augustine said it well. He said, "We cannot do it without God and God will not do it without us."² Now that doesn't mean that God cannot and will not work outside of the church and us.

¹ Psalm 127:1

² Variation of St Augustine, Sermo 169, 13

Thankfully, He has and He always will. But to think that God will work in and through us, if we are not willing and ready to sacrifice and work through Him, that's a hypocrisy of the greatest kind.

Now we can stop right here and say nothing else this morning and apply what we just said to every area of life, including my life and yours. To think that God will bless your career or your studies, if you don't entrust your studies and career to him, it's not going to happen. To think that God will bless your marriage or your family, if you don't do in your marriage and in your family the things he has called you to do, you're only fooling yourself. To think that God will bless your finances, your friendships, or your future without giving and entrusting them to him and doing your part? My friends, this is not a genie-in-the-bottle relationship we have with God. It's a relationship built upon sacrifice, the sacrifice of his only son on the cross and raised from the dead to give us new life, and the sacrifice of his followers in response in and through the church that moves God's saving vision forward.

When it comes to this vision, both of those truths stand. We believe this vision is of God, so it has hope and it is not in vain. And we fully acknowledge and accept our part in making it happen. If we are not willing to sacrifice for him, how can we expect he will respond and work through us? The answer is we can't.

So let's talk about the vision we've been given. I hope in doing so you will begin to see how you here at Saint Timothy's through the NALC are involved in something that goes far beyond your own community. Ten components to the vision. For the sake of simplicity, as I've said, we've reduced this to three basic categories: deepening our spiritual growth, expanding our gospel reach, and strengthening our church body.

Let's start with the first, with spiritual growth. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3, says, "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."³ The Apostle is praying that we would grow spiritually in our faith-walk with Jesus and that in growing spiritually, we would be strengthened to keep our eyes on, in all things, on the risen Christ. Now, this is basic to the Christian life, but it's essential if we're going to be faithful. Keep your eyes on Jesus and your life will be used for his glory. Take your eyes off of Jesus and go through life on your own, and you might go through life on your own and accomplish a great deal in the eyes of the world, but the great deal you accomplished will never last.

Three vision points are part of this first category: disciple-making cultures, pastoral support, and continuing education. Let me say just a few words about each, starting with disciple-making cultures. Now I know this has been happening here at Saint Timothy's for a number of years, the vision to know, grow, and go, along with the work you're doing in and through your grow groups are all tied to the same commitment. I applaud you for doing what you're doing. And I encourage you, if not challenge you, to never stop. We never

³ Ephesians 3:16-17

arrive in our discipleship-walk with Jesus and we are never finished in helping others do the same. It needs to remain a top priority in your life, as well as in your congregational life. In our vision, the ten points are not offered in order of priority. In this case, however, it's not coincidental that this first commitment comes first. Our first priority is the same first priority given to us by Jesus. We do not exist only for ourselves. Even though much of what we do supports the calling we share and the discipleship path to which each of us is called. We exist also for the world, for the sake of those who do not yet know what God has done for them in his son. Now with each of these components, you'll see we've set a goal, along with a timeline. The goal for discipleship is to have more than two hundred of our congregations intentionally developing disciple-making cultures by the end of 2023. We currently have 50 to 60 moving in this direction. A good start, but a lot of work left to do.

In the same category, spiritual growth, are commitments for pastoral support for every congregation and a challenge to each of our pastors to continually be growing in the development of their skills. As far as pastoral support, the goal is to have support for every one of our congregations by the end of this year. Now, this is basic and so natural for many of our congregations, including your own, but for some of our smaller congregations who are struggling, it's not so easy. To do this, we need to be creative. For example, we're going to continue using some of our retired pastors, who are willing to serve in part-time roles. We're going to be helping congregations work together perhaps, in calling and sharing a pastor. We're looking seriously at a diaconate, a lay ministry, as well as in some cases, enabling and authorizing lay leaders to preach and administer the sacraments. It's not going to be easy, but it needs to happen. We simply cannot say to our congregations that are smaller and struggling "we're sorry and good luck." That's not a good answer. They deserve better and more, and we're working to make it happen.

In terms of continuing education, we'll be doing exactly what the goal indicates, expanding, coordinating, and promoting the opportunities we have available. We need to resource what's already in place and expand the resources, and at the same time, encourage and challenge our pastors to take advantage of what's there. Now, this is where I need your help. I need you to make sure you are offering support, in terms of time and finance, for your pastors to take part. I know you were when I was here and I trust you are still doing the same, but I also need from you is to make sure your pastors are doing something each year to increase and sharpen their skills. Most pastors, if we're honest, are not good at that. They say they are too busy or can't find the time, and maybe they are and that's why I need your support. I need you to give them the time, to encourage them to make and take the time, and if they don't listen, then give me a call. I'll call them and tell them that you want them to leave. Not leave, but to leave and to take some time to learn and to grow and to be refreshed. This is basic to the strength of any organization. If we're going to be

growing spiritually as a denomination, well-equipped to reach a challenging and changing world, we need to commit ourselves to be growing each year. Each pastor making and taking the time. Let's keep moving.

The next category: expanding our gospel reach. The theme verse is Acts 1:8. "You will receive power [Jesus says] when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in all Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the Earth." Those words were spoken by Jesus right before he ascended into heaven. The Holy Spirit is coming. You will have the power you need and you will carry a message the world needs until the day I return. In the NALC, we are taking Jesus at his word and committing ourselves to do the very things he's asked us to do. Three components are part of this commitment: congregational multiplication, technology and communication, and our ecumenical relationships. As a Christ-centered and a mission-driven church body, this is fundamental to who we are. Driven by the mission we share in Jesus, we need to be expanding, if not multiplying, the number of congregations we have. We're challenging ourselves to begin 45 new mission starts by the year 2022. That represents a 10% growth from mission starts alone. Now, for us as a denomination, that would be huge and not only in terms of numbers, but in terms of the commitment. To have 45 new starts well on the way in the next few years might require us to start 50 or 60 or more to see it happen. Not every mission start makes it. Now to pull this off, it'll need to be a shared effort. In fact, I have challenged our 37 Mission District Deans to bring this to their mission districts and to be praying about where God is opening new doors. What are the possibilities? Who are the people willing to help? If it's going to happen, we need to help make it happen. One from each Mission District and we're almost there.

As far as technology and communication and our ecumenical relationships, our commitment is to leverage them both for the sake of the Gospel. Now here in San Jose, I don't need to tell you the impact we might have as a church body if we begin to use technology in more creative, efficient, and effective ways. Much of what comes second nature to many of you is not so second nature to everyone else. We're making the commitment to better resource the resources we have at our disposal, for the sake of communicating the gospel message of Jesus to a dying world.

We're also working to ensure that the relationships we have with our ecumenical partners are serving to advance the gospel through our local congregations. With that in mind, we're building on the relationships we already have in place with Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, the Lutheran Church in Canada, Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC), and the Anglican Church in North America. I have to tell you that I'm encouraged by the commonalities we have, and the common and shared desire we have to speak and to share the name of Jesus. A lot of good things are happening, in terms of expanding our gospel reach.

The last category has to do with strengthening our church body. As Jesus called his followers to count the cost and be prepared, so we are preparing ourselves for the work he has called us to do. Continental restructuring, the development of our seminary system, and solid and secure financial strength are all part of this commitment. Now there's a lot I could say about each of these areas. Suffice it to say today that we are in our 11th year as a denomination. We are still young as a church body, but we are growing and we are growing up. As a result, we need to do things differently today than we did in those early years. Two things are worth noting in terms of restructuring. One will be dividing our church body into four geographical regions, adding part-time support for each. Not surprisingly, Saint Timothy's will be in the west, but by the beginning of 2022, we will have chosen a person from the western region for that supportive role.

The other thing we're doing is to change the way in which we function and interact as a staff. For the first ten years, for the most part, our staff has worked remotely. Advantages, to be sure. Downsides, without question. Moving forward, it's going to be a bit of a hybrid approach. Starting in January of next year, a majority of our staff, including the bishop, will be working from a centralized church office. For the sake of efficiency and effectiveness, communication and support, along with accountability and clarity of roles, we're taking this step as we continue to grow and grow up. The site chosen for that office is the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area. Key to the selection of that area was the central time zone and an airport with many direct flights across North America. As much as Mary and I would have preferred to stay right here, we are honored to be part of a church body that is looking forward and working to be faithful.

As far as our seminary system, it's like the hub of a wheel and the spokes that go out. Our seminary offices are at Trinity in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, just outside of Pittsburgh. That's where our seminary president, Dr. Eric Riesen, lives and works. But it's not the only place we have a seminary. The spokes on the wheel continue to be added. We have partnerships with Concordia Seminary in Alberta, Canada, with Beeson Seminary in Alabama, with Sioux Falls Seminary in South Dakota, and are actively pursuing relationships with Gordon-Conwell in North Carolina, The Institute of Lutheran Theology also in South Dakota, and with Fuller Seminary which has campuses throughout the west. The reason we are going after this in such a serious way is because of the growing need we have to raise up the next generation of pastors. 70% of our pastors are the age 55 and older. Now that includes some of our retired pastors, so that skews the number a bit, but regardless, the need is there. Our goal is not to simply find warm bodies to serve our congregations, but to raise up and train 300 well-formed, faithfully-grounded pastors in the next 10 years. It needs to happen.

I think about Saint Timothy's and I could call out the names of several of our young people who have the gifts to become wonderful pastors. I could also do the same with some of you who would need to change careers, but who have the spiritual gifts. Now I'm not going to do that here today. But if you are hearing or

sensing a call from God, don't fight it. Listen to it. Talk and pray with some trusted friends. Give me a call if you like. I'd be happy to share more. If God is calling, you need to listen.

The last area has to do with finance and with moving forward in such a way that the concern for money gets set aside. We work hard at being good stewards and that will never change, but we need to raise our NALC-wide stewardship game, if we're going to be able to go after the vision God has given to us. More information will be coming out in the months ahead, but we are moving forward with the 3-year appeal to raise upwards of 7 million dollars over the next three years. Above and beyond what is already being given. It's going to take sacrifice. It'll take commitment, but we are sacrificially committing ourselves because of the sacrifice and commitment God made for us in Jesus Christ.

The last of the ten components I'm not going to touch on much here today. It's a commitment to review our vision each year and to adjust it, as time and circumstances change. That's essential to any vision. We need to always be willing to take a step back and ask the hard questions, even as we take steps forward to carry out what we believe we are being called to do.

A God-sized vision, based upon our core values and rooted and grounded in the Commission and the Commandments given to us by Jesus. This is where we are heading in the coming years and this is where I and we will be placing our priorities, as we seek to be faithful to Christ. I ask in sharing this today. I ask, in closing, for your prayers and your support in helping turn this vision into a reality. It will obviously not happen without our prayers and it will certainly not happen without God's blessing. Neither will it happen without a shared commitment from all of us to see it through. I believe it with all my heart unless the Lord builds the house those who build it labor in vain. The success of this vision depends 100% upon God's blessing and equally true, God will only do through the church but the church is willing to do through him. He gave it all for us when he sent and offered his only son for our sin and now he is calling us, in response, to sacrifice and commit to the work we've been given in Christ.

Let's bow in a word of prayer. Lord God, we thank you for our years of history in the NALC, and for the clear calling and commission we've been given in Jesus. We thank you for your Holy Spirit and for the guidance we receive each day in following your will. We lift before you the vision we've just shared, trusting that this vision is not only for us, but from you. We pray that you would use it to guide us and that in guiding us, that we would be used by you to reach the world with the saving message of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.