

Jeremiah 1:4-12, 17-19

1 Peter 1:3-9

Luke 4:31-44

St. Timothy's

August 21, 2022

Bishop Dan Selbo

"Life's Most Important Healing"

Dear Friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. It is a joy to be with you in worship and to have the opportunity to speak to you from God's Word. After having served now for three years as bishop for the North American Lutheran Church, traveling to places I've never been and being with people I've never before met, it's a nice change of pace to be back in a place where it all feels more familiar. It brings back all kinds of good memories to be here in this sanctuary on a Sunday morning and to be preaching from this pulpit.

It's also fun for me to see some of what has been happening here at St. Timothy's, at least in terms of some of the projects and ministries taking place. The food pantry is going strong. The focus on Bible reading and discipleship remains a priority. The preschool certainly appears to be growing. And, after getting rid of the previous pastoral leadership in this place, you're making good progress on some of the building renovations we had been talking about for some time. It truly is good for me to be here.

Before turning to our message, allow me to share just a few words about what's happening throughout the North American Lutheran Church. A number of quick updates.

We just held our annual Convocation, earlier this month, in which pastors and leaders from throughout North America gathered to take care of some of the necessary business of the church. As of last year, we've moved to an every-other-year in-person gathering. This year, our Convocation was held on-line. You can go on our website to see what happened and to learn a bit more about what's going on in the NALC. I think you'll like what you find.

If you do, I'd call your attention to a 21-minute video summary that hits on some of the highlights of what we've been doing and some of the challenges and opportunities we face. I believe it gives an accurate and honest presentation of where we are as a denomination, soon to be finishing, next week, our twelfth year as a church body. That means that beginning next month we move into our teenage years, so any prayers you can send our way would be much appreciated.

As far as the overall health of our denomination is concerned, most of our congregations and pastors are doing well. We continue to grow. Last year we added 25 congregations, which brings us to 475 throughout our church body. A lot of adjustments, as you know, as a result of the pandemic, but good ministry is still happening, and lives are being touched and changed.

Now, in most cases, worship attendance is somewhat down from where it was, and many people are still hesitant. At the same time, the support is there and the opportunities for witness have only become greater. I continue to encourage our pastors and congregations to not over-think it, and to not take it personally, but to continue loving their people, reaching out in whatever ways they can, and to never forget that God has never stopped working.

Even though on our end and from our perspective, a number of things have been put on hold, the kingdom of God is never on hold and the work of the Holy Spirit never stops. That's where we need to keep our focus, and that's where we ultimately find our strength.

As far as some of the highlights, I'll mention just a few things. We're moving forward with our denominational vision, working to find creative and yet faithful ways to serve our congregations, and to expand the ministry that's already there.

We now have five seminaries in our North American Lutheran Seminary network, with a sixth and maybe a seventh in the not-too-distant future. We, also, just hired Dr. David Luy to fill one of our key faculty positions. A very well-known and highly respected systematic theologian. He comes to us as an answer to prayer. And we just, as of this past week, brought on a fulltime recruiter to help find and encourage and guide the discernment process for the next generation of pastoral leaders.

With that in mind, I'd encourage you, if not challenge you, to be challenging yourselves to encourage those here at St. Timothy's, in whom you see some gifts for ministry, to give that calling serious consideration. I truly believe it is the responsibility of every congregation, if we expect to have pastors serving us, to be raising

up pastoral candidates who can serve the greater church. We need to raise the bar on our collective efforts if we hope to stay ahead of the ongoing and increasing need.

Along with training of pastors, we're also taking steps to put in place a NALC Diaconate, training lay members to serve in supportive and much-needed ministry roles. At the same time, we're on the front end of implementing what we are calling "Ordination Under Special Circumstances." It's a path to ordination in which the circumstances, either of the congregation (smaller, rural, unable to support a fulltime pastor) or the one considering the ministry (as a second career, later in life, unable to commit to four full years of education) are "special enough" where an alternative and somewhat shorter path might be more appropriate. I'd ask you to keep these things in your prayers as we continue to expand and strengthen our efforts.

Two other things I'll mention, both related to actions of last year's Convocation, are the fact that, one, we have now put in place five area Assistants to the Bishop whose role it is to serve the Mission District Deans and Pastors in a supportive and discipling relationship. We need to be modeling with our staff what we hope to see happen in our congregations.

The five that were chosen for these parttime roles were installed at our Pastor's Conference in February and began their ministry in May. This is one of the things, as part of our infrastructure, that for the most part goes unnoticed. But I know and have already seen that their ministries are producing good discipling fruit. For that we give thanks.

And two, we're finally moving forward in establishing a centralized office for the NALC in the greater Dallas-Fort Worth area. It's taken a while to get there, but it's beginning to take shape. At this point, we have a temporary site picked out for where we're going to begin in the fall of this year, with a more permanent home yet to be determined.

Our General Secretary is already there. We will soon have a fulltime administrative assistant. We're looking to fill a key communication position. Our finance functions will be run from that same central office. And, as of the middle of next month, Mary and I will also be relocating to the DFW suburb of Grapevine. We're committed to live there for the next 12 months and at that point we'll see where God leads.

All of that to say, in spite of the many challenges we face, there are also many good things happening in the NALC. We serve a great God, and we work hard at following and serving and trusting our Lord Jesus. It's an honor to be with you. Let's begin with 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. The passage we read today, taken from the fourth chapter of Luke's gospel, is one that gives us a good look, if not a summary, of the kind of things with which Jesus was involved during his three and a half years of public ministry. It hits on some of the main areas in which he spent his time, as well as on the various ways in which his ministry impacted the lives of the people.

It also, perhaps most importantly, helps us to see and understand what was at the heart of our Lord's ministry, as well as what was in his heart as it was being carried out, and how it makes a difference and ultimately matters to us.

If you remember the details, it's quite the story. In the town of Capernaum, it begins with Jesus teaching on the Sabbath, in the synagogue. A major part of our Lord's ministry was his teaching. He was a good teacher. He was a great teacher. The people, it says, were "amazed at his teaching because he taught with authority."

If nothing else, this part of the story gives us encouragement, in the same way, to be students of our Lord, sitting regularly at his feet, and taking in what only He can give. The reality is, we shortchange ourselves, we do ourselves and our families and congregations a disservice if we neglect this crucial and essential part of what it means to be his followers.

You simply cannot be a faithful disciple, growing each day in your ability to trust, learning each day what it means to be a follower, if you fail to spend time sitting with and learning from the Lord.

We need to be fed if we're going to feed others. We need to listen and learn from Jesus, if we're ever going to speak and to share what He has done for us with the world. Bottomline, we need to take this lesson to heart.

Now, we're not going to spend a lot of time with this. There's a lot in our text to cover. Suffice it to say that teaching was a central part in our Lord's ministry. Listening and learning from him needs to be central in our own faith-walk as well.

From there, it says, Jesus casts out a demon. This man who had been possessed was set free. This man who had been controlled by an outside power, an evil spirit, was freed from that power and given back control of his life himself. And, again, the people were amazed at what the Lord could do.

Now, if this part of our story seems a bit removed from the way things are today, don't be too quick in drawing that conclusion. There are a lot of demons in the world today, even if they take on and are given a different form or name. The demonic can take the form of possession, which it had done with the man in our text. It can also take the form of obsession, which is more often found in our world today.

In that sense, anger is a demon. Selfishness is a demon. Pornography is a demon. Some demons come in the form of addictions. Some demons are abusive. Some demons grow out of mistakes or experiences from our past. Some demons find their way into things happening in the present. Demons can even be found these days on and in more positive things like social media...every chance they get.

Now, you can call them what you want. They might not appear as if they are same as the ones in the story. But they're just as real and they can do just as much harm and control a life, just like they did with this man in the story we read.

The good news is, Jesus can cast out those demons. He can free you from those demons. If there's anything there in your life needing to be addressed, this story is a good reminder that there's help. All it takes is a willingness to reach out and to ask. Our Lord is there and he's willing and he can set people free today, just like he did back then. It's not as removed as we might think.

It's quite the story. After that, it was Peter's mother-in-law who was sick with a fever. It's the first physical healing miracle we find in Luke's gospel.

Now, what kind of fever she had – it's hard to know. The Bible doesn't tell us. It must have been something quite serious – perhaps even malaria, which was common in Jesus' day – otherwise, why would Luke even have mentioned it?

From there, it says, "When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on them, he healed them."

Now, here, the application and connection are obvious. All throughout his ministry, healing was a major part. Read through the gospels. Wherever he went. Whatever else might have been happening, Jesus found time to heal.

He's the "Great Physician," the Bible says. He's the One who can make people well. He made the lame walk. He gave the blind their sight. He gave speech to the dumb, hearing to the deaf. He cured. He mended. He healed.

And not only did He do these things, but He still does these things, even today. I hope you know that. I trust you know that. Every form of healing that comes in this life is a healing that comes by the grace and the goodness of God.

Don't ever wonder about the desire of Jesus to bring healing into your life. Don't ever worry about whether our Lord is aware of what's happening and whether he cares. Jesus not only cares about your life and about my life, but also has the power to bring healing like no other. We can be confident and assured.

And then it says, and here's where we get at the heart of what this passage is all about, it says, "At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place." He went out and found a place to pray.

Now, the people kept coming. They wanted to see and to hear and for him to do more. But it says he kept moving, he kept on going, he went on to other cities and towns and synagogues, all throughout Judea, "preaching and teaching the good news of the kingdom...because that is why he was sent." That is why he was sent.

Now, let's stop for a moment and let me ask you a question. All kinds of things Jesus did. All kinds of ministries in which he was involved. Teaching and healing and casting out demonic forces. The people were amazed, and the crowds continued to gather.

But it says, "he kept on moving, he kept on going." And the reason he did, it says, was because there something more important to which he was called, and an even greater purpose for which he was born.

Let me ask you. Raise your hand if you've ever had a prayer for healing turn out the way you had hoped. You prayed for healing, for yourself or for someone else, and it happened. (Raise your hand.)

All right, now, raise your hand if you've ever prayed for healing and it didn't happen. You prayed for healing, and the healing never came. (Raise your hand.)

Now, if you raised your hands in both cases, you're in good company. Because God doesn't promise to bring us healing every time we ask. There's not a person who has ever lived who, every time they've asked, has received the healing for which they've prayed. It's never happened, and it probably never will. And why? Because it's not a promise God made. It's not a promise He's given.

Now, why is that? Is it because He doesn't care? Of course not! We've already said that He does. And so why doesn't He heal us every time we ask? Because Jesus didn't come into our world to heal. Jesus came into our world to save. Jesus didn't come into our world to make us better. Jesus came into our world to make us whole.

Again, remember the story? Not far into Luke's gospel and there were more people lining up for healing than Jesus had time to give. Now, could He have stayed in that city and kept on healing? He could have. But He didn't. Because it's not why He came. It's not what His life was all about.

Luke tells us that Jesus got up early in the morning and He prayed. Now, what was He praying about? We don't know. All we know is what happened next.

And what happened next? Instead of hanging around Capernaum and setting up a clinic, Jesus gathers His disciples together and continues to do the things He came into this world to do. He preached. He taught. He pointed people in the direction of God. And it says, He kept on preaching, and He kept on teaching, and He kept on pointing back to His Father all the way to the cross.

Talk about clarity of purpose. Talk about being clear about why you're here. Jesus stayed focused in life. And how did He do it? He got up early in the morning and He prayed. He listened to what His Heavenly Father had to say. And He kept that focus all the way through life. He kept that focus all the way to His death.

How many Christians start out on the right track, but along the way end up losing their focus? How many followers of Jesus, they get busy with other things and forget to find time to pray. They get sidetracked with other commitments and fail to make time to read God's word. They get so busy with living, that in the process, they lose sight of the meaning of life.

Let me tell you something. Do you know what Satan wants? He wants a busy Christian. He wants the Christian to be so busy with things that don't finally matter that they forget about the things that do.

Do you know what God wants? (Satan wants a busy Christian.) Do you know what God wants? God wants a focused Christian. God wants a follower of Jesus that understands why she's here, and what his life on this earth is all about.

A focused life is an effective life. In fact, the more focused your Christian life becomes, the more effective your Christian life and witness will be. The disciples were busy. They saw many things needing to be done. Jesus was focused, with one purpose and priority that He placed above everything else.

Let me tell you something. If I had been Jesus, it would have been very tempting to hang around and continue to heal. After all, people's lives were being changed. People's hurts and pains taken away. And not only that, but the popularity poles were moving in the right direction. The whole town was rallying around Jesus.

But I'll tell you something else. If that would have happened, the people might have found healing for their bodies, but they would never have found healing for their souls. They might have been relieved of the physical ailments facing them in life, but they never would have been cured of the spiritual separation facing them in death.

Now, did that mean that Jesus loved the people less, because He decided to move on to the next town and to stay focused upon the cross? Of course not! Does that mean that God loves us any less when He decides not to give us the physical healing in life for which we long, but to call us, instead, to a living faith and to a spiritual healing that, ultimately, leads to an eternal life with Him? Not a chance in the world! God doesn't love us any less. If anything, it's a sign that He loves us more!

We could talk about this all day. I don't know why God acts as He does. And I don't want to pretend, this morning, that I do. What I do know is that God continues to heal people, even today. What I do know is that God cares deeply about what's happening in your life, and He wants nothing more than to have you eternally as His child. And what I do know is that those who look to Jesus, who place their trust in him, will find the healing and strength and wholeness that only He can give.

And so, let me close with this. On the occasion of my visit with you here at St. Timothy's, a few weeks away from the beginning of your fall ministry season, today's story is a powerful reminder of the difference Jesus can make in life and the reason he has called us together as he has in the Church.

His teaching, his healing, his ability to cast out demons and set people free – it's as real for us today as it was for the people back then. Trust it. Believe it. Put your faith and your life in his hands. He loves you and he cares about you, more than you might ever know.

But don't ever forget why Jesus came into this world. Don't ever forget what your and my and our world's greatness need is. Jesus didn't come to heal us. He came to save us. He didn't come to make us feel better. He came to call us to faith in Him, and to make us whole.

My friends, Jesus knows your struggles. He knows your life. He knows the things you face. And that's why He came. That's why He died. And that's why He rose again...for you and for me...Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you and we praise you for the work you have accomplished for us in Jesus and for the hope and the assurance and the certainty we have in him. We thank you for calling us as your people and for choosing us to be your messengers in this world.

Help us, as we live out our faith, to stay focused on the things that count. Fix our eyes on Jesus. Shape our hearts to be formed and conformed to the heart of Christ. Fill us with faith, assure us of your love, that our witness to the world might be centered in Jesus and that our hope in this life and for the next would be securely rooted and grounded in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.