



**Opening of 2009 ELCIC National Convention
University of British Columbia, Vancouver
June 25, 2009**

ELCIC

*In Mission
for Others*

Sermon by National Bishop Susan C. Johnson

First Reading: Jeremiah 1:4–10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,
‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’
Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But the
LORD said to me,
‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.’
Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,
‘Now I have put my words in your mouth.
See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.’

Psalm 46 (antiphon vs. 7) or sing ELWorship #505–505 “A Mighty Fortress”

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
‘Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.’
The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Second Reading: Romans 12:9–21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Gospel Reading: Mark 10:35–45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’ And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ They replied, ‘We are able.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.’

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

What a joy it is to be gathered together. We gather together today as family, the family of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. At the same time, we all recognize that being a family has both its plusses and minuses. As with any family gathering, it is a mixed bag. There is joy at being together with those we care about, especially those we do not get many opportunities to see. There is tension because of past conflicts. And there is a certain amount of competition and sibling rivalry.

Because of this we recognize the tension that exists in today's gospel lesson. The family of the disciples is gathered and there is tension there too. Tension because two of the disciples, James and John, go to Jesus and ask for something for themselves, something that perhaps all of the disciples have thought about, but something that no one has ever dared articulate before. They ask Jesus to sit on his right and left hand side when he comes to glory. In other words, they ask for personal recognition. For status. To be important. To be a somebody.

And this request makes the rest of the disciples furious. And I think we can all understand their anger. They're angry because James and John are trying to get ahead, but mostly because they are doing it in a way that will leave the rest of the disciples behind. And so they are also jealous, and probably a little frustrated that they didn't think to ask Jesus for this recognition and status first.

And I think that this lesson points out one of the biggest temptations we face as humans, to serve self, instead of serving God.

I'm kind of a grazer when it comes to watching awards shows, but there was a moment at an Emmy Awards show a few years ago that really stuck with me. Jerry Seinfeld came out to give an award and preceded his presentation with some very telling and pointed remarks. He said something along these lines. We come together today to say to ourselves that, hey, I like me. I've really made it. I'm pretty darn great. And yes, we pay others, publicists and managers and agents to tell us this on a regular basis, but it's good to hear it one more time, said out loud in front of our peers. And there was a lot of laughter from the audience, but it was the laughter of self-recognition. And I think that we recognize what he is talking about too. We know that we can easily get caught up in self-serving, self-promoting, and self-congratulating.

And we can do this in a variety of places and settings. We can do it in our jobs as we focus on getting ahead instead of on the task at hand. We can do it in our families when we end up using our spouses, our children our parents to serve our own needs. And we can do it in our churches when the kingdoms we seek to build become our own instead of God's.

And lest some of you are sitting there saying this does not apply to me, I live to serve others, I always put others first before me, I need to point out that this is a double-edged sword. We can also turn being a servant into a kind of competition, seeing how little we can do for ourselves and how much we can do for others. In the end this kind of self-sacrificing can end up being self-serving as well.

And Jesus comes to the disciples, and to all of us in the middle of all of this self-serving and self-promoting and self-congratulating and reminds us that although this is the way of the world, it is

NOT the way of the kingdom of God. What we are called to do is to serve God by serving others. And the recognition and the glory and the focus is to be on God and not on ourselves.

These past two years have underlined that reality for me. As soon as I was elected many people started to treat me differently than they did before. This is how Bishop Michael Ingham from the Diocese of New Westminster put it in an Anglican Journal article. "I remember a day early in my episcopate when I entered a room full of friends and colleagues. I was astonished when they all stood up! In the next few weeks, my jokes became funnier, my casual observations strangely more profound, and great interest was taken in my well-being in a way never shown before. The process of distancing and elevating had begun." Of course the opposite reaction happens as well, namely that some people feel obliged to take you down a peg lest your head become too swelled.

But the lesson from Romans reminds us that we are called to live a different way - Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. This is my hope and prayer about how we will be with each other for these next few days and indeed for every day.

And sometimes it is very depressing, because no matter how hard we try to serve God, we constantly end up reverting back to our human nature and serving ourselves instead. We fail, hopefully not hugely, but we fail. Like those who are members of Alcoholics Anonymous, we realize that we are at best recovering, one day at a time, from the human condition of being self-serving.

But there is hope and there is the promise of help. In the first lesson we heard the prophet Jeremiah responding to God's call saying 'Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But God urges him to not be afraid and promises to deliver him. In the Gospel lesson we see James and John and the rest of the disciples revert to their self-serving human nature and yet they are still called to follow Jesus, they are still called to serve. Both these examples give us hope, because if God can use these flawed and imperfect people to bring in the kingdom, then God can use us too

You've heard me say before that when our church adopted the vision statement of being *In Mission for Others* it was in some ways confessing that we had sometimes fallen into ways of being *In Mission for Ourselves*! My hope and prayer for our time together in these next few days is that God will strengthen us in our outward-focussed mission, that the Holy Spirit will equip us for our ministry, and that our brother Jesus would strengthen the ties that bind us together in this church as part of the body of Christ.

So at the end of this worship service as we transition into the business of convention and hear the words of dismissal, we can joyfully respond, thanks be to God, knowing that God will help and equip us in our serving.