



'Together We Do More: Wrestling with Priorities'

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
8:30 & 10:45 am, September 18, 2016

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16:1-13

Hello, I am Pastor Liz Polanzke, and I am a gift planner for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Foundation. Now if you never heard of it, that's okay, because a year and a half ago when I took this position I had never heard of it either. So I have had kind of a big learning curve but I am going to tell you in a nutshell what I do as a gift planner: help Lutherans plan and be disciples with all of their wealth, both their current wealth and the wealth that they hope to pass along to their family and friends and to their church when they die. So that's what I do in a nutshell. And so it's a ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and you'll see I am wearing my Nawakwa lanyard which I got a million years ago, I don't actually remember when I got this. I am actually a partner with fourteen Lutheran ministries in Central Pennsylvania including the Lower Susquehanna Synod and the Lutheran Camping Corporation, but also Spirit Trust Lutheran, or Daikon one of those two you may have heard of once or twice. Also what is now to be known as United Lutheran Seminary, it used to be called Gettysburg Seminary and Philadelphia Seminary, the new name in case you hadn't heard is United Lutheran Seminary. Also, in my partnership are Gettysburg College and Susquehanna University which is up in Selinsgrove, for those of you who never go up in that direction, it's up the Susquehanna a bit. So I have a number of partners that I work with and I get to support in the ministry that I do in addition to all the ELCA ministries that we offer.

I was invited to share with you some words about stewardship and I was given "*Wrestling with Priorities.*" Now I am going to just tell you right off the bat that I am going to mess with the title because the first thing I thought of when I saw *Wrestling with Priorities*, is the following. As Christians I think our priority is obvious. We have one priority, one and we all hold it in common, Jesus gave it to us. It is first, to love God and love our neighbor, and then that is expressed in the Great Commission, to go into all the world to baptize and to teach and tell everyone what has been done in the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit and to remember that Christ is with us to the end of the age.

So in terms of wrestling with priorities, I don't know how much of wrestle that is. Maybe in some ways that's really pretty obvious and that's an easy thing to do and that's easy to live by. But the more I thought about it the more realized yes, we have some

conflicts with that priority and the way that those priorities get expressed in our lives get a little tangled maybe with the way that we live our lives.

When I was in seminary I was kind of a poor graduate student, so if any bodies been a poor graduate student you may know what's involved there. But one of the things that's involved when you're a poor graduate student today is do-it-yourself furniture. You know what I am talking about right, it comes in a flat box, you pull out all the directions, there usually in Spanish or Chinese and you're supposed to figure out from the pictures how this thing that you chose to build is supposed to go together and look like the picture that you bought it for. So case in point, bookshelves, right. So how many have you bought the do- it- yourself furniture or am I alone? Am I the only person who has done this, right, okay.

So I have a problem with do-it-yourself furniture and I will say five years ago I had said to my husband after the last piece of do-it-yourself furniture that we bought, I said I am never doing this again. I don't care what we need to do, buy an antique or just hire someone, I am never doing this again. Because I have a problem, and that's not that I don't follow directions, I am actually pretty good at following directions, but for some reason, no matter how well I follow those directions, when I get near the end maybe there's two or three steps left and the whole thing is almost completely put together, that's when I discover that one of the pieces is in backwards. Without fail, and if you don't believe me go visit my last congregation Luther Memorial Church where I put together a file cabinet and look at the back, you'll see it's on backwards. I just gave up. So that's my problem with do-it-yourself furniture.

But in theory it's supposed to be like a puzzle and I am pretty good at puzzles, you know it's supposed to be if you put this together then this logically follows this, and this logically follows this, and this logically follows this, and everything is supposed to flow together so at the end you have this great thing that worked. That's what we call ontology. This is a word I learned in seminary by the way but I really like it. The word ontological means that you have a characteristic that is innate to who you are and without it you are not you at all. So when we talk about God the ontological nature of God is God is love. Not that God has the characteristics of love, not just that, but God in God's self really is love, and that Jesus Christ is love incarnate. And that every cell of his being and every breath that he gave was all a part of that love.

God is joy. God is peace. God is the fulfillment of hope. God is salvation. That's who God is. You take any of those pieces away and you no longer have God. That's it in a nutshell. Now that sounds easy to say especially when we're at Christmas and we have those four little words around the wreath, do you guys have those, I've seen a lot of churches with those.

But the thing is that we often want to pick and choose which pieces of God apply in which situations and at the end of the day what we end up with is a God with pieces

of furniture that aren't quite put together right. For example, we say that God is love. We say therefore, when we are called as Christians, baptized and claimed, we are then those who love. But that's our calling, to love God and to love our neighbor. The problem we run into is that it clearly does not apply to those people, and you know those people, whoever those people are in your world you have those people. Maybe it's if it's in my world, it's the neighbor who doesn't seem to be able to take care of his bushes no matter what kind of instruction or help we give him. Or maybe it's ISIS, or maybe it's the Muslim neighbor, or the Jewish neighbor, or maybe it's not a religious neighbor but it's a neighbor of color or socioeconomic group, or maybe their family has just broken apart and we are configurations that we can't figure out. There's always those people that we find ourselves a little bit less able to love.

Now we know that we're called and claimed by a God who is love, but should that really apply to everybody and to our neighbors, and to our enemies. So we kind of find our way negotiating around these characteristics of God. We do that with joy. We say God is joy, except for when I am really hurt or grieving. That in that place of darkness God can't possibly be joy, and so we negotiate around our pain and our anguish and we slice and we toss around the pieces of God that we like to fit are given situation or context. And we do that also with our own lives and our relationship with God.

So at one point we're in church and everything feels good, and doesn't it? I would say the greatest thing about worship is that it is the one place I think, for at least an hour, I might not be sinning. Now that's a great theory except for one small problem, what's the problem? Guess what? I am a sinner! So you take the sinner out of me and what do you have left? I am ontologically a sinner, so there's no way that I can take that out of me. I can't cut in parts and say sometimes I am really awesome and have no problems and some days I am really horrible and I'm a sinner. It all goes together, it's all part of a mixed up piece that makes me who I am. Called and claimed by God and at the same time broken and shattered and completely unable to fulfill those things that I know God wants me to do.

And so today we're asked to wrestle with priorities and we think, well if I am not even strong enough on my given day to keep all of these pieces of God in one bucket and all these pieces of me in one bucket, how in the world am I supposed to keep any priorities straight? How am I supposed to remember that God is first and to love God and love my neighbor is first? How am I supposed to keep anything in order? How can that be and how will it work?

So we fight, we struggle, we get angry at ourselves and our neighbors. We get frustrated, and we retreat into dark places in our souls and pray to God that no one ever sees that part of ourselves. We do everything that we can to fight this sense of a lost priority in our life for God and God alone. And the fighting is where we fall apart, the wrestling, is where it all comes apart. Because we are not called to wrestle, and

this is where I am going to mess with the title, somebody's going to have to forgive me this weekend. Because we aren't called to wrestle. We're not called to wrestle with priorities. We know what our priorities is, we are called to surrender to our priorities. When Christ follows the way and shows us the way of God we learn how to surrender to that which is God's will. When Christ is in the garden and he bears witness to God's will to redeem the world, to be salvation for the world. When Christ is in the garden recognizing that part of himself and he asks that the cup would pass him by. He doesn't get up and fight. When people were taunting him as he is hanging on the cross and say, "Hey, you're the Son of God, save yourself and us." He doesn't get down. Do you think he couldn't? Do you really think the Son of God couldn't get himself off the cross if he wanted to? He surrenders. He surrenders for love and who he is. And in the surrendering God's will is done. We spend a lot of time fighting, fighting ourselves and our neighbors and fighting the world, fighting the bank and the sports teams and whoever is pulling us in sixteen thousand different directions. When the truth is, that to surrender to the priority to following God and allowing God's priorities who God is, love, and joy, and peace, and salvation. To allow that to be the instruction for our life. Then everything kind of follows out of that and what you get is a redeemed sinner. God has made us that. We are this thing that has been called and claimed and redeemed and the only thing that is asked of us is not to wrestle with the various priorities that come up in our lives, but to rather let God be the priority and then to live that out in our lives. To let God be God and to do our best to follow what God's will is for the world.

The temptation will always be there to want to get revenge or to declare war, or to be angry, or to fight. But that's who we are. For we aren't just that. God followed a path of redemption forgiving sins.

In our story today we hear about a guy, he's called the dishonest manager. But it is actually God's way. These people owed a lot and the manager said hey, cut it in half. Let you and me have the relationship, lets the two of us be close and be bound together because I have forgiven your debt. Let me find a home with you because of what I have done for you.

Yea, it's a little dishonest because if we were to pay what we owe, I don't know that we could. Is there enough of me, do I have enough to pay God back for all the crummy horrible things that I am? Am I capable of buying myself back from the depths? I am pretty sure I am not. I must rely on the one who steels me away from my sin and cuts my debt and redeems me from the grave, and I must follow that path and that priority, not just for my sake, but so that my neighbors and my enemies will follow as well.

Amen.

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