Sermon to be read in congregations the Sunday of the Synod Assembly

Third Sunday after Pentecost June 5, 2016

If you are listening to this, it means that your pastor--your regular preacher--is at the Synod Assembly, along with 300 or so others. And someone from the congregation has volunteered to read the sermon prepared for you by the Bishop.

The Synod Assembly is the legislative body of the Montana Synod, and meets every year to conduct business, hear inspiring speakers, learn about the ministries of the Synod and the ELCA, and gather in smaller groups in workshops. And of course there is worship. The Synod Assembly ends on Sunday morning with worship. Just as we are worshiping in our own congregation this Sunday morning. So let us begin.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

The Bible is full of stories of healing. The Old Testament lesson (I Kings 17: 8-24) and the Gospel today (Luke 7: 11-17) are both stories of extraordinary healing. The story of Elijah and the widow of Zaraphath is longer and more complicated. Elijah is commanded by God to go to the home of a certain widow. He meets her in the town gate, gathering sticks. This widow was not the most prosperous person in the city of Zaraphath. Far from it. There were plenty of others who had far more resources than she. But God chose this widow, and Elijah went along with it.

First, he asked her for something to drink. (Actually, he didn’t ask her, he told her.) Then, before she could even get back to him, he added, “And bring me some bread, too.”

This was a problem. She had no bread, and barely enough ingredients to make a mouthful for herself and her son. She said, “I am now gathering sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, so that we may eat it, and die.” They were literally starving to death. But even that doesn’t stop Elijah, who insists on his demand, though he tempers it a bit with “Do not be afraid,” and adds that there will be enough for herself and her son. And it is all true.

But then an awful thing happens. The son becomes terribly ill, and the mother assumes that it is the fault of Elijah—he must have brought bad luck. So Elijah confronts God with the unjustness of the boy’s death, and God listens. God listens, and the child lives.

The Gospel version is briefer. Jesus enters a town just as a dead man is being carried out. He sees the bereaved mother, a widow, has compassion, and touches the bier, and commands, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” And he does.

There are other healings in the Bible. There are other raisings from the dead in the New Testament—Jairus’ daughter, Lazarus. But this story in Luke is about Jesus’ compassion for the widow. Same as with Elijah—although the healing is on the young man--it’s about the widow.

Scripture is full of admonitions to care for widows and orphans. They were society’s most vulnerable, and part of our ethical tradition is to insist on communal responsibility for the care and protection of the most vulnerable. How a society treats its widows and orphans has traditionally been a measure of the society’s moral consciousness. There are so many special provisions about the treatment of widows and orphans in scripture, because they were so vulnerable. Without a family to provide for them, they had few options. Hunger, poverty and worse were the frequent lot of widows and orphans.

So, who are the most vulnerable in our society today?

A couple of weeks ago many of us were awakened in the middle of the night by a cell phone making an ungodly noise. It was an amber alert. The message was that a little girl—Kenzley Olson—was missing, kidnapped. A baby, really, just one year old. Missing from Poplar, Montana. Less than 2 months earlier four year old Maci Lilley was abducted and assaulted in Wolf Point. The stories are achingly familiar It is happening all over Montana and Wyoming. .

Maci lived, but Kenzley did not. They join hundreds of other child victims in our states, where there seems to be a drug-induced epidemic of child abuse and neglect. These are our society’s most vulnerable. Their fate is an indictment on us as a society, as we fail to provide protection for our most vulnerable. We can and we must do better.

There are others who are vulnerable—immigrants, the working poor, people who are squeezed out of small businesses because of unfair competition, children in foster care, people who suffer the effects of environmental degradation. People fleeing from fires, from violence, from prejudice. People who are addicted, who are trafficked, who experience family violence. These are some of the vulnerable people in our society. These are some of the people who need special attention, special protection, because they are so vulnerable. I am sure that you can name others. These are the people that Scripture admonishes us to care for—regardless of what is popular, regardless of our many excuses.

Jesus raises the young man from the dead, but it is his mother that he focuses on. He has compassion for her and he tells her not to weep. Jesus has compassion, and gives her back her son, alive, at least for now. Was he thinking about his own mother’s upcoming grief at his own cruel death? We don’t know. We know that he had compassion, and that he restored purpose and meaning to this woman’s life. Not many widows could fathom as much.

Today, this very day, at the Montana Synod Assembly, our church is going to celebrate the lifting up of a widow in our midst. Tonia Fisher, a widow, will be ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I don't know how much you know about the formation of pastors in our church. It is a long process, a thorough process, and really, a multi-faceted process. Some people go to college, go to seminary, live on campus, finish up and get ordained. Some people wait a year or two, or a decade or two. Some do much of their academic work online, or in periodic visits to seminary, accompanied by intensive study and practical work in between sessions.

God calls a variety of people in a variety of ways. Did you ever think that God might be calling you, or someone you know? Think about it. Look around and think about it. Tonia Fisher did not follow the boiler plate track to ordination of a previous generation. She married, had children, did a variety of things, went to a variety of churches. She was a legislator, and a drama teacher. She was an LPA, and a widow. And slowly, gradually, she heard God’s call. And she saw a way forward to answer that call. And today, in the presence of God and the Synod Assembly, she will be ordained into the ministry of Word and Sacrament, a widow transformed by Christ’s love.

There is a special place in God's heart for widows, for all the vulnerable. After all, God was willing to give up power and privilege to become vulnerable in Jesus, born a vulnerable infant, raised a humble child, executed as a member of a minority group. God has a heart for the vulnerable, because God knows what it is to be vulnerable.

Starting with Mary, a poor peasant girl, not yet married and with inadequate health care, God chose the unimportant, the insignificant, the unimpressive, to do a new thing. Mary, after initial astonishment and disbelief, got it. And she sang the Magnificat, reminding us of the song the prophet Miriam sang when the Israelites successfully crossed the Red Sea and escaped the Egyptians:

 My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

 for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.

 For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;

 For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

 And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.

 He has shown strength with his arm,

 He has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts,

 He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree;

 He has filled the hunger with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.

 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

 As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever.

God risked everything for us, because of our vulnerability, because of God's love. And God continues to be with the vulnerable, with the downtrodden because that's how God is. It is no wonder that the poor and the sick and the outcasts flocked to Jesus--they understood his unconditional love for them, and they were transformed. It is no wonder that some of the earliest Christian converts were slaves. They understood the message of hope and salvation from a God who would take risks for them. And they were transformed.

Tonia Fisher, who is being ordained today, has been transformed by Christ's love. She understands suffering and loss, and she understands the deep joy of serving others and sharing the good news.

Her ordination, like every ordination is a reminder of our baptismal call to be servants of Christ, vulnerable to one another, and to the world, for Christ's sake. It is a reminder to us all to seek out and serve, not just the comfortable and the familiar, but the stranger and the alien, the least and the last, the lost, and the most vulnerable.

It is her calling, and it is ours.

Amen.