

This morning's sermon has been prepared for us by Bishop Michael Pryse. This morning, Bishop Susan Johnson and Bishop Pryse will preside at the concluding worship service of our Synod Assembly, along with the approximately 350 delegates and visitors who have gathered this week in Toronto, Ontario.

Grace and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It's a privilege to be able to be part of your worship services this morning and to bring you greetings from the pastors, diaconal ministers and lay delegates who are with me today in Toronto, Ontario as we conclude our 16th biennial Synod Assembly. I hope that these words will in some way help you to feel a sense of connection to your wider church family - a family that our Assembly delegates have experienced quite tangibly during these four days of shared worship, study, prayer and decision making.

As I pen these words, I cannot presume to know the outcomes of this important gathering. Much of that will be determined by what our delegates, led and guided by the Holy Spirit, bring to our shared deliberations. I do, however, anticipate that we will experience a number of significant moments in our time together.

It will be our great privilege to welcome The Rev. Dr. Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and President of the Lutheran World Federation to help us explore the assembly theme, Liberated by God's Grace. The Rev. Leroy Nicholson, President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Guyana will also be present at this year's

Assembly. How blessed we are to have these international church leaders with us, particularly as the global Lutheran family looks ahead to commemorating the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

I am also looking forward to engaging in a review of the Biennium Reconciliation Initiative; our synod's commitment to seeking renewed and right relationship with our indigenous neighbours. Chief Ava Hill from the Six Nations of the Grand River has been one of our important partners in this initiative and will join us in this process. We will consider "things done and things left un-done" and prayerfully consider what next steps we will take to help advance this important agenda for both our church and our nation.

At this year's Assembly we will take time to reflect on the state and health of our life together as a synod. Delegates will be invited to help craft a Strategic Plan for the Eastern Synod and we will conclude our assembly business session with an extended committee-of the-whole conversation about how we are - and aren't - living into the Covenant Concerning the Life of the Eastern Synod.

All this will take place in the context of an Assembly agenda that will be filled with rich worship experiences, presentations from wider-church partners, and the consideration of resolutions about our synod's life and ministry that delegates will bring for our deliberation. Over the course of these special days we will nurture and care for the life of our Eastern Synod faith community. This is holy and good work that I wish every member of our synod could have an opportunity to experience.

St. Paul, of course, devoted his entire ministry to the nurture and care of the church of his day. In this morning's second lesson, drawn from a letter to the Christians in Galatia, Paul describes the unique freedom that we experience in

the person of Christ Jesus. Christ has “set us free” and “called us to freedom!” But this freedom, he continues, is not given for the sake of self-indulgence, but rather, for the sake of love. Indeed, the whole of the law is summed up in a single commandment, Paul writes. “Love your neighbour as yourself.” “Through love, become slaves to one another.”

Paul’s call is unabashedly radical. Its spirit is echoed in the Lutheran World Federation Reformation Anniversary theme “Liberated by God’s Grace,” the theme that has guided the deliberations of our Synod Assembly this past week. God’s grace both liberates and compels us to be radically loving in our discipleship; to embody the unqualified discipleship that Jesus calls us toward in today’s Gospel; a discipleship that leaves little space for “ifs, ands or buts.”

In today’s Gospel we read that as Jesus and his disciples were going down the road toward Jerusalem, someone said to Jesus, “I will follow wherever you go.” Some others said the same. “But first let me go and bury my father.” “But first let me go and say farewell to those at my home.” And our Lord is quite clear, indeed stern, in his response; perhaps more so than we would like! “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Now I don’t for a moment believe that the gospel writer was telling us that Jesus was dismissing what I assume to be the honest and sincere desire of these folks to tend to their families, to bury a father or bid farewell to spouse and children.” He was, however, articulating the absolute primacy of Jesus’ claim upon those who would seek to be his disciples. Jesus has no patience

for “quasi-discipleship.” As Paul says, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” You cannot be liberated and set free by half measures.

This same challenge, of course, comes to us today. I doubt that we are much different from the folks Jesus encountered that day while en route to Jerusalem. There’s much about our discipleship that is also conditional. We’re not quite sure we want this Jesus who challenges and pushes; this Jesus who makes radical demands; this Jesus who cannot, and will not leave us as he has found us!

And so we avert our eyes and bury our noses in our hymnbooks. We rather blithely go through the motions, content to focus on what is tried and true, that which seems easiest and most comfortable. But in doing so, we risk ignoring the life-giving and world-shaking presence of a Saviour who dares come to us in the ordinary stuff of life; in water, wine and bread, in the needs of our neighbour; only to make the extraordinary possible!

There are not many congregations in our synod who are not experiencing significant challenges to their continued health and well-being. Fewer people are participating. Resources are being stretched thinner and thinner. The things we did in the past to meet these challenges no longer seem to be working in the ways they once did. And it’s in the face of these challenges, that today’s call to a more radicalized discipleship comes, not as a mere proposition, but as an imperative.

If you’ve ever ploughed a furrow, you will have no difficulty understanding the concluding image of today’s Gospel lesson. “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” You can’t plough a straight furrow if you’re constantly turning around to check your tracks. Ask

any farmer! Instead, you need to pick out a spot such as a tree or fence post at the end of the field and never take your eyes off of it. Keep focused and never look back.

We've got to stop looking back over our shoulders and focussing on the past, solely focussed on doggedly maintaining the structures and institutional expressions which may have defined our life and ministry in the past. As important and good as they might have been, those things were merely tools - ploughs if you will - that only have value to the extent that they help us engage the primary task at hand, whether that be the work of ploughing a field or that of making disciples.

We need to lift our eyes up from the furrows of our churchly life and re-focus ourselves on the Gospel imperative to love, radically and extravagantly. We have been liberated from the old yoke of slavery and made free. We have been liberated by God's grace and empowered to help fulfil God's mission to love and save the world. God is calling us to expand our ministries beyond the perceived safety of our churchly lives and to go out into the world in extraordinary ways! We are being called to help people see and meet Jesus; to throw off the shackles of a too-domesticated religion and throw ourselves into a life of faith, into the life of a Saviour who refuses to be domesticated; into a life that is never predictable and certainly never safe.

In the Gospel that has been revealed to us in Jesus; God tells us loud and clear that his intentions toward the world are so good and so loving that he is willing to die for us. He then invites us to live in relationship with him; to grow and live and in the power of his love; and then to go forth serve our

neighbours in the same self-sacrificing way that we ourselves have been served.

In this morning's lessons, we are challenged to live in such a way that God's reputation in the world is enhanced; to live as people whose relationship with Christ is radically visible. Those who would claim the greatest truth in this life must also seek to demonstrate the greatest love!

As those who proclaim Jesus to be the truth and the way and the life, we must always opt for the way of radical grace, of abundant love; confident in the knowledge that there is no more powerful means for us to communicate the essence of the one in whose name we gather and serve.

Thankfully, we are not left to try and manufacture this spirit and orientation on our own! Indeed, the very love we are called to share comes to us also as a gracious gift; freely granted and freely given as a gift from God for the world's salvation.

As followers of Jesus whose discipleship is expressed, in part, through the life of the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada; may we freely and extravagantly share that gift with others. And may our faithful acts of loving discipleship help the world to more fully know this God whose loving intention toward the world is so great and vast as to be beyond our ability to fully imagine or comprehend. AMEN