

Rev. Lynne Ogren
October 8, 2017

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, Montana
18th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Philippians 3:4b-14

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Yesterday morning I read about an exciting new development at one of our Lutheran universities. Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington is starting a program that will help some of their graduates repay their student loans. It is geared toward those who will enter into work that pays less than \$40,000 a year.

Why would an institution whose mission it is to educate people even consider the possibility that after receiving all this knowledge and experience that their graduates would land such low paying jobs? Because, they say, often those are the positions in our society here and around the world that are the ones that fall in the areas of service, investing in people and communities.

This university sees its students as a vineyard that needs tending so that it will bear good fruit that nourishes and feeds others.

In both the reading from Isaiah and the gospel today we have the image of the vineyard. Isaiah used it as a metaphor for the nation of Israel. It's likely that the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day did not miss that correlation when he told two parables in a row about vineyards. God's people were known as God's garden. God tended them, pruned them, and nurtured them so that they would bear good fruit. God gave them all they needed to grow, including leaders and teachers, prophets, priests and kings who served as God's gardeners.

But whenever they bore good fruit they did not recognize that the fruit was not theirs to keep. God intended for Israel to feed others, to share the love and the care they had received from God.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul outlines all the things he had going for him, his good fruits, like his ethnic heritage as a pure blooded Hebrew man, his education and position as a Pharisee, and even his zeal, that passion for keeping and promoting the law of the Jewish church.

If Paul lived today he would have gone to PLU not for some low paying job that would make student loan debt impossible to pay back. He would have chosen to become an attorney or a politician or a powerful businessman. All of these, of course, are noble and worthy professions that can make a difference in the lives of people and communities, but they are also tempting paths for people to follow because of the financial benefits.

PLU recognizes that there are other professions that don't provide that same kind of wealth but that contribute to the world like teachers, social workers, community organizers, and addiction counselors.

When Paul encountered Jesus, everything changed. All that seemed valuable and important became as "rubbish", as the New Revised Standard Version so genteelly puts it. More

literally, all that Paul had going for him was poo, dung, crap. But let's think about that for a minute. What if we changed those words to something like manure! Then, what once was waste becomes something that feeds and nourishes and contributes to bring forth life!

Paul let go of all those things when he recognized they were not what gave him his value or worth. It was only his relationship to Jesus, the love God poured into him through knowing Christ that gave Paul his sense of identity and purpose. It was then that Christ turned Paul's old life into gifts that could feed God's vineyard.

All that passion, all that drive, Paul's privileged position and education and self-confidence, Jesus Christ turned into fuel to move the gospel forward into new places where it was needed to feed and grow more disciples.

Our texts this morning can lead us into a time of reflection. What do we have going for us? What are our assets, our resources, or our gifts? And are we relying on these things for our own good and blessing, especially at the expense or neglect of others?

As a congregation our assets might include our building and property, our staff, our financial resources, our gifted members, and our passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

They might also include our heritage as Lutherans with this denomination's focus on God's Word as our source of faith, the emphasis on God's grace, and the mission to carry that grace into a hurting world. These are not just gifts for Zion Lutheran's growth and benefit. They are meant to feed us so that we will grow in ways that feed and bless others.

Last Sunday in our adult forum class we heard from Emma Wickens who serves as the director for Katie's House, a transitional residence for women who have successfully completed an addiction rehabilitation program. Emma told us about some of the help they could use.

First, they need people. They need a fix-it person who can be called upon to take care of basic needs around the house. They need people to lead Bible studies or discussion groups to help the women grow in faith and apply that faith to the challenges they'll face as they prepare to go out on their own.

Katie's House needs a few good men. That might seem surprising to you, but these women have been hurt most deeply by men. They need to meet and get to know men who are honorable, faith-filled, and trustworthy so that they can be open to recognizing and forming healthy relationships with men in the future.

Katie's house also needs financial support. It costs \$3200 each month to provide for their residents. The women contribute \$300 each, so if all five rooms are filled that covers less than half of this ministry's expenses. To help offset those costs they will accept some donations of paper goods and basic household supplies. But the consumables and the food, in addition to the utilities costs, come around again and again.

The house itself is in need of new windows. The original single-pane windows let in quite a bit of cold in the winter. Each window costs \$700 and they have about 30 windows altogether, but they will begin to replace them one at a time in the bedrooms first for the women's comfort and for energy efficiency.

This is just one of the ministries in our community we pay attention to as a congregation. We are still recruiting candidates for Stephen Ministry. Are you still praying about that? If not for you, have you told someone else that you see the gifts of listening and caring in them?

There are homebound folks who are longing for visitors. The Sunday School and youth groups are in need of caring adults to spend time with them. And I continue to be grateful for the ways you bring your financial gifts to support these and so many more ministries that promote the gospel of Jesus Christ.

All that we have is a gift from God, our abilities, our resources, and our passions and creativity. When we release our grip on the assets we think belong to us, God takes them and turns them into gifts that bring life and hope to the world.

God's vineyard, the church, is where we are fed with the word of God, tended with the love of Jesus, and nurtured with the inspiration of the Spirit. From these we grow to bear fruits of the kingdom that feed the world with life and hope and blessing.

Thanks be to God! Amen