

2012 SYNOD ASSEMBLY SERMON
Bishop Steven L. Ullestad

“We Are the Church”

Grief is a powerful thing. Most dramatically, it comes at the time of the death of a loved one. One friend described it as a cannon ball blasting through his stomach. Another, losing his own life. Grief is debilitating and perpetual. We can talk about the stages of grief as if, once you have completed the fifth stage the grief will be over. You know that is not true.

Anniversary dates come, Christmas comes, a picture is viewed and we are back in the grief “stages.”

It is a part of life. It is a time of life when we realize how much we need each other. When the grief causes us to question our faith, the community believes on our behalf. The community has been given the faith that claims that death, sorrow and grief are not the final words of life. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is.

We also experience grief whenever we lose something or whenever there is a change. Every change, even joyous occasions of graduations and weddings, bring losses that must be grieved. You already know that as well. The truth about us remains. In the midst of change which brings loss and grief, we are, to our core, resurrection people.

About 15% of our congregations have left us in the past 3 years. Those are losses to be grieved. Those who celebrate the church’s 2009 decision as embracing God’s justice and mercy for all God’s children also recognize the grief that comes with these losses and honor it. It tempers the celebration even as thanks is given to God for the new day that one decision of the church has brought to so many. The losses in this synod are real. The loss and grief cannot be avoided. But we are a resurrection people who celebrate the power of Jesus Christ to heal and redeem.

One of the most powerful movies about loss and grief that affects an entire community is “We Are Marshall.” A recent movie (2006), well...recent to me, explores the power of grief that eventually give way to new life. I will never suggest that our loss of congregations could ever equal the tragic death of 75 people that devastated an entire community. However, the movie does explore the human experience of loss, grief and resurrection.

On November 14, 1970, the Marshall University football team, coaches and key boosters were killed in an airplane crash just outside of their hometown of Huntington, West Virginia. The entire community was overwhelmed with unfathomable grief that extended to the communities of the hometowns of each of the players. Only 4 players were spared—3 didn’t make the trip due to injuries and 1 overslept and missed the trip. He never could forgive himself. The grip of death choked the life out of the University and community as surely as it killed the passengers of that plane.

A major decision needed to be made—would there be football at Marshall the next season or would the program be suspended--a decision that would mean the death of the program at that level. In the midst of the sorrow, the Regents Chair, father of the star running back killed in the crash and steel mill owner, and the President of the University who knew nothing about football, decided to recommend suspension to the Regents. The co-captain who had not made the trip due to injury knew that was not acceptable and rallied the student body to gather outside the board meeting.

Video 26:04-28:20

“It is the right thing to do, sir.”

So the decision was made, to the anger of the chair, to keep the program.

- Coaches and players were recruited
- A herculean effort to convince the NCAA to allow freshmen to play was accomplished
- A new coach brazenly enlisted support of rival Coach Bobby Bowden to open up his playbooks and film library so Marshall coaches could learn
- Even while honoring the grief of the community, a new team became Marshall
- They persistently and relentlessly demonstrated:
 - Commitment
 - Hope
 - Hard work
 - Determination
 - Belief

They were on a mission together

The team prepared themselves for the first game against Moorhead State—it was a crushing defeat and the captain was reinjured. This was proof for those who objected to fielding a team that season that this was a mistake. The president was summoned to the steel mill to hear the news.

Video 1:28:40-1:30:21

The defeat was so complete that the coach wondered if anyone would even attend the next game—the first home game. But they did and they cheered, “We Are Marshall!”

Marshall took the field against Xavier. Once again the captain, Nate Ruffin, is injured and cannot play the second half. Finally he accepts the difficult news during half-time in the locker room.

Video 1:49:?? – 1:50:33

“We are going to be all right.” Low and behold Marshall rallies on a last second play and they score the winning touchdown. As the stadium celebrates, Coach Lengley meets with the newly fired president.

Video 1:58:57-1:59:39

“We are Marshall. We’ll take anybody.”

The young thundering herd would win only one more game that year. When Coach left to become Athletic Director at the Naval Academy, his record was 9 wins-33 losses. Marshall lost more games in the 70’s than any program in the nation yet football remained. 1984, 14 years after the tragic accident, Marshall had their first winning record in 20 years. They went on to win 8 conference championships, had 5 straight bowl wins and 2 national championships.

In the midst of the loss, sorrow and grief, there were those with vision and courage who knew who they were and what their mission was. They embraced their calling to continue that mission for the future.

Just like us. Throughout this weekend you will hear of the incredible mission accomplished during the past 3 years even as we have been preparing for the future.

Nate Ruffin, captain, knew and Coach Lengley knew that being Marshall is not only about today but about Marshall's mission into the future. For us, being the church is not only about today but about the church's mission into the future.

We are the church. We keep witnessing because it is the right thing to do. Will we be all right? We will be all right. Who is welcome to join us? We are the church. We will take anybody. We are the church.

We will never be the synod that we once were but we will always know victory in Jesus Christ. That is why tonight we celebrate that we will never again be the synod that we once were. We are a new synod. We are still the church.

Because of Christ's claim on us in the waters of baptism, we are the church. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are the church. We will witness to that power in our lives because we are the church.

Thanks be to God! Amen.