

## **Sermon for NE Iowa Synod Assembly: John 16:12-15**

**The synod's focus on faith in the home at this synod assembly has brought back many memories for me. I grew up in New York City in an inner city community called Harlem with my parents, my older brother, and two cousins, who came to live with my family when I was 5 and they were 13 and 15. Their mother died and they needed a home. My older brother and I went to church with our maternal grandmother. It was not a Lutheran Church. I think if truth was told, my brother and I did not necessarily enjoy church, except the singing, because the services were long. Sometimes 2 ½ hours. We did enjoy being with our loving and generous grandmother. After church she would always take us to the local candy store. She loved Jesus and talked about Jesus a lot and she wanted us to love Jesus like she did. Without her influence, I know I would not be standing before you as a pastor in the ELCA.**

**My grandmother always taught us that whatever we ask for we would receive so when I was in the third grade I took a test and I know I failed. Grandma had taught me that Jesus would give us what we pray for, so I prayed hard that Jesus would see a way for me to pass. I figured if Jesus could change water into wine, he most certainly could change an F to a C. Well, you know how this story ends. I failed. And because Jesus did not**

change that outcome for me, I was angry at Jesus. I felt I deserved a miracle because I came to church when sometimes I really did not want to. My faith suffered.

My grandmother did not mean any harm by telling me that Jesus will give you what you ask for. She had read in Matthew 21:22 the following, "Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive," and she trusted God's word. Obviously, I would not be standing before you today if my perspective on faith had not turned around, but it took some time, trust me. We have to be careful about what we teach our children.

For example, perhaps we should share more about the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Something that is discussed in our Gospel for today. The spirit of God has guided me in ways I did not think possible. And there have been people in my life that have guided me to grow in my faith. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit placed these people in my life for a reason. I am thankful that my life crossed with theirs. I will give a couple of examples.

A painful divorce and the sudden death of my father made me begin to focus on God again. I was teaching nursing at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio and started sitting in on some of the religion classes. One of my colleagues encouraged me to come to his church and it was a Lutheran Church. I did not know much about Lutherans, but as I studied

the theology and learned about the power of God's grace, I was hooked. I joined the church my colleague belonged to and it was about 60% African - American and 40% White. I remember when I walked in for the first time I thought, "This is what the kingdom of God should look like." Persons of all colors and sizes and hair textures and personalities and hangups and joys and sorrows coming together to praise God!

My colleague who invited me to church was white and there was a small, elderly lady in the congregation who was white, who treated me like I was her daughter. I felt that the people in that congregation knew the power of God's love and wanted to share that love out in the world. I truly believe the Holy Spirit guided me to Hope Lutheran Church. The Holy Spirit is powerful and discerns our needs. Today's Gospel lesson speaks about the guidance of the Spirit. I learned at Hope Lutheran Church that people who are very different from each other, can come to love and understand each other if they are open to being changed by the Holy Spirit.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is speaking to his disciples. Prior to these words that were just read, earlier in this chapter, Jesus is explaining to his disciples that he is going away, that he is going to the Father and they will not see him again. And right after he explains all of this in detail about his leaving, we have what is in today's Gospel. In these words, Jesus basically says to his disciples that yes, he is leaving, and he has lots to say

to them, but he cannot tell them right now, because they probably would not be able to bear it.

Wow, imagine how the disciples felt. They have been doing important ministry with Jesus, such as; seeing people being healed by Jesus, seeing Jesus reach out to those society had shunned; seeing Jesus give hope to the hopeless and now he is saying to them that he has things to tell them, but they cannot bear to hear what he has to say. It was probably hard enough for the disciples to know that Jesus was leaving, so they may have wondered what did he have to say that was going to be so very devastating?

But even in the midst of the news that he tells his disciples that he has something to share that they probably cannot bear; Jesus offers them hope by telling them that the Holy Spirit will be with them. I have come to believe that the Holy Spirit does what it says in this scripture it will do, it will guide us into all the truth. I believe that the Holy Spirit is opening our eyes in these times, how all over the world, there is more anger, more distrust, more hate. When I go out and speak about us living our faith in daily life, I suggest that there should be something different about us as Christians, not perfect, but different. I believe that the Holy Spirit shows us so many times in our lives where we can make a difference in those areas that separate us, but for whatever reason, we do not reflect what the Holy Spirit is calling us to be about. I think the Holy Spirit wants us to be about sowing peace

where there is anger, building trust where there is mistrust, and sowing love where there is hate. I am not suggesting we do this because God requires it of us. We are loved unconditionally. We respond as Christians to live out our faith in our words and deeds in thankfulness to God's unconditional love. As a sinner, I know there have been situations where I did not step up or speak up when I should have and someone was hurt by my inaction. As I see anger, and mistrust and hate increase, I have tried to be more understanding and loving with the help of the Holy Spirit guiding me and giving me strength.

I have a story to offer all of us about how the Holy Spirit can guide us and bless us to love in ways we never imagined. At the age of 29, Anthony Ray Hinton, a poor, African-American man was mowing his mother's lawn. 2 officers came up to him and told him he was under arrest. He kept asking the officers why he was being arrested and finally he was told several charges that were being brought against him including the murder and kidnapping of two fast food employees. He knew he did not do it and constantly protested, but to no avail. It took about a year and a half for him to go to trial. During that time he had a polygraph test that showed that he had definitely not committed the crime. Officers came to his home, found a pistol that had not been shot in 25 years, cleaned it up and said it was the murder weapon.

Mr. Hinton says that his trial was a joke, as the man who was appointed as his attorney did not believe in his innocence and was incompetent. Mr. Hinton had no money for a more professional lawyer. At trial he was convicted of these 2 murders and was sent to death row. His first 3 years on death row, he was so angry he did not speak. He was angry he says because all his mother and his faith had taught him about love and justice and hope left him. His mother had given him and his 9 siblings a deep foundation in faith, but when faced with obvious racism and mistreatment in the justice system, he gave up.

But he did speak again. What made him speak again, after three years was that one of the other inmates was crying hysterically; and Mr. Hinton felt so much compassion, for the gentleman, that he yelled out and asked what was wrong. The inmate said that he had just found out that his mother had died. Mr. Hinton was extremely close to his mother, so he shared his empathy with this inmate.

After this encounter, Mr. Hinton and this inmate would speak across the wall barrier that separated them. Other inmates also began to join in their conversation and eventually Mr. Hinton started a book club for these inmates. The inmate whose mother had died and he was crying so hard, was a White man who was in death row for killing a 19 year old African American male. The story goes that this White inmate grew up in a

family where his Dad was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. He was taught by his father to hate at an early age. One day his father read that an African American man had been acquitted of murder. The father was so upset by this that he told this son to go out and kill an African-American man. So this inmate and some friends befriended this 19 year old African American man and killed him. These actions sent this White inmate to death row, where Mr. Hinton befriended him.

I saw Mr. Hinton being interviewed and so many parts of his story are sad. Imagine being in death row and you did not even commit the crime! During parts of the story, I could not hold back tears. But this part of the story touched my soul to its core. Mr. Hinton said that when the white inmate was sent to die, it is reported that he said that all his life he was taught how to hate. He had to come to death row to learn how to love because he knows that Mr. Hinton showed him love. After Mr. Hinton shares that part of the story, he asks, "If we teach how to hate, why can't we teach how to love?"

We Christians know about a love that loves us despite all of our sinfulness. We have a God that sent his son to reveal what God was all about and has given us the Holy Spirit to guide our lives and give us strength. Hopefully we have those people who early in our lives pass on to us the power of that love and then teach us and show us how to share that

love with our neighbor. If there was ever a time when we need to reflect our love of God out in the world, it seems to be now.

In case you were curious, after 16 years in prison, there was an effort begun by a gentleman named Bryan Stevenson who has an organization that seeks to explore the innocence of those on death row who perhaps the criminal justice system failed in their incarceration of these inmates. After 14 years Mr. Hinton was acquitted. So he was incarcerated for 30 years for a crime he did not commit. Mr. Hinton has written a book about his experiences in prison and the title of the book is, "The Sun Does Shine." The book was given that title because after walking out of prison after 30 years, and being able to see the sun in full for the first time in 30 years, Mr. Hinton said these words, "The Sun Does Shine." Yes, the sun does shine and as we live and love God and our neighbor, let us always remember to let the light of Christ shine through us out in the world. Let us make a difference in this world through our love. Amen!