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Quiet Moments

Email prayer requests to: pray@clba.org

Forsaken?

H.E. WISLØFF



Forsaken! What a terrible word. It sounds like the tolling of a funeral bell. It contains the deepest sorrow and the greatest pain. Hopelessness is hid in that word.

Forsaken by man! No one cares anymore.

But it is still worse to be forsaken by God. That message contains the pains of hell while still on earth. Jesus tasted this—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Do you feel forsaken by God?

Listen, it is not true that you are. The Lord delights in you. That word transforms your weeping to a song of praise. He delights in you. His delight is to hear you, help you, and

save you. That is why he has sought you. That is why he calls you and pursues you with his love and faithfulness.

But he wants to possess you completely. He does not want to share you with sin and the world. His delight is also in using you. He has a task concealed for you this very day.

Hans Edvard Wisløff (1902—1969) was a Norwegian theologian and writer. He was also the Bishop of the Diocese of Sør-Hålogaland from 1959 until his death in 1969.

Wisløff, H.E., Quiet Moments on the Way Home. Fergus Falls, MN: Faith & Fellowship Press, 1993.

Knowing God

TROY TYSDAL

My first job was working at a grocery store. I carried out groceries, stocked shelves, unloaded trucks. It was the perfect job for a sixteen-year-old boy. But the thing I want you to know about my first job is that I didn't apply for it. I didn't turn in a resumé or fill out an application. I was chosen for it.

One day I was in the supermarket with my mom and the owner was working. When he saw me, he asked, "Would you like a job for the summer?" I said, "Yes." I was chosen, and the truth is, I wasn't a random choice. The owner knew me and I knew him. He believed I would be a leader, one who showed respect for his company. You might be wondering how I know this; I know it because he told me.

My first summer went as planned. I was rewarded with a raise. At the end of the summer I was asked to stay through the winter. The following summer I was asked to help open the store. I had been responsible with a little, so I was given more.

At some point during the second summer, the owner made the decision to take a rare vacation. The decline in productivity was immediate, and by the end of the week it was chaos. I remember walking into the back room and being pelted by a wad of shrink wrap. My fellow employees were engaged in a game of dodge ball—and it looked fun. Just as one of the managers walked in, I picked up the shrink wrap and let it fly.

The following Monday the owner returned, and he gave us a verbal lashing I will not forget. When he finished, he dismissed the group, but asked me to stay. As the others left, he said, "I expected better from you. I expected you to set an example." His words hurt, and he was right. In spite of our relationship, my behavior looked no different from those who didn't know him. But it should have.

Ancient Israel was picked by God—chosen. But for what?!

They were chosen to be the cradle of Christ. God said to Abraham, "... all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). First and foremost



that's what they were chosen for, but they were also chosen to be an example. They were chosen to look different. They had been given the Law of God—if you wanted to know what pleased God you were to look to Israel, for they knew him. If you wanted to know what is right in the eyes of God you were to look to Israel, for he had told them.

Unfortunately, Israel failed to be the light it was created to be. As Israel fell away, God sent prophets to warn them, and finally he sent his Son—Jesus Christ—to die for them.

MATTHEW 21:33-43

Jesus said to the chief priests and Pharisees, "Listen to a parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

"Therefore, (said Jesus) when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the

cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."

In our text, Jesus allows the chief priests and Pharisees to pronounce the fate of the wicked tenants. They say, "He will bring them to an end... and rent the vineyard to other tenants." Jesus agrees with their conclusion, stating, "... the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit." The depth of Jesus' threat is beyond what they can accept. The kingdom of God taken away... because they failed to do the work of God.

So, what is the work of God?

At one point during his ministry, Jesus' disciples asked him that same question. He replied, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:29). Years ago, in that grocery store, I heard the voice of the owner and I was convicted. My heart changed, and there was restoration. A greater forgiveness was offered to the chief priests and Pharisees, and yet they rejected it because they did not believe in the *One* whom God has sent.

You have been chosen by God to live a life of faith—to live a life that points others to Jesus Christ. Not because you are better than them, but because you know God. You know the *One* who died for the sins of the world. You know the *One* who rose again. In *him* you are given the kingdom of God.

Rejoice, and produce its fruit.

Rev. Troy Tysdal is Director of Communications and Prayer for the Church of the Lutheran Brethren and serves as editor in chief of Faith & Fellowship magazine.

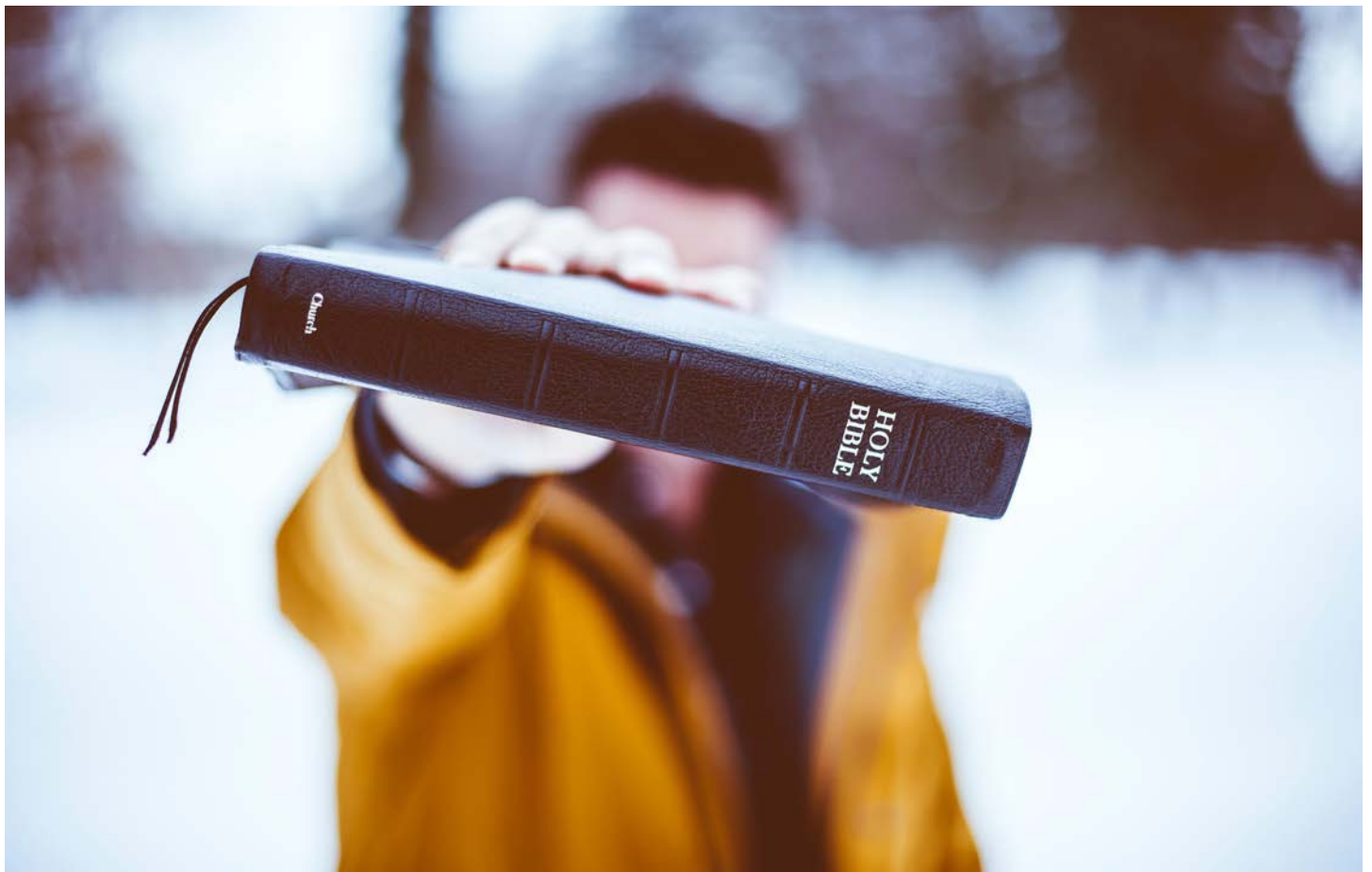


Photo by Ben White on Unsplash

Ancient Israel, the Law, and Us

BRAD PRIBBENOW

TWO DISTINGUISHING MARKS OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

By many accounts, ancient Israel was just like all its near eastern neighbors. Their language had similar origins and their cultural practices looked, in many ways, identical. Yet by two distinguishing marks, ancient Israel was unlike any other people group. Moses explains in Deuteronomy 4:7-8 (ESV).

For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

The first and foremost distinction that Moses identifies about Israel is that the LORD dwelled among them. Other ancient near eastern people groups may

have claimed their god(s) lived among them, but none could say their god(s) dwelled among them in the way that the LORD dwelled among Israel—in the pillar of fire and the cloud (Exodus 13:21-22; 40:34-38; Numbers 10:34); in the holy of holies over the mercy seat in the tabernacle (Exodus 25:21-22); available to them whenever they cried out to him (Isaiah 58:9). Indeed, ancient Israel had a one-of-a-kind relationship with the LORD because of the way he dwelled among them.

The second, but no less important, distinction Moses identifies about Israel is that they had the revelatory Word of the LORD—or as Moses says in verse 8, “statutes and rules so righteous as all this law” that God had delivered to Israel through Moses. These statutes and rules were integral to the unique relationship of the LORD with Israel. The Law of the

LORD was not something created and imposed on Israel by its own leaders, nor was it transferred in from neighboring communities. Rather, it was given uniquely to Israel by the LORD through revelation. The Law was inseparable from God’s nearness; you could not have one without the other.

THE LAW OF GOD THAT BLESSES

The term “law” often gets a bad rap. This is because we tend to hear it in a limiting or behavior-controlling way. Although this is part of its function, the Law first needs to be recognized as a gift of God to us. This, in fact, is how Moses explains it in Deuteronomy 4:8. Notice he says that “this law” (Hebrew, *torah*) given by God to Israel provided for Israel a special status among its near eastern neighbors. *No other nation* was privileged to have access to the LORD or

The Lord said, “Place the cover on top of the ark and put in the ark the tablets of the covenant law that I will give you. There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.”

Exodus 25:21-22

to his righteous laws like Israel. The Law of God given to Israel—built upon the Ten Commandments but also including other commandments and rules given in books such as Exodus and Leviticus—was a sought-after and cherished gift.

The Law was a gift because it laid out a way of life and prospering (shalom) for Israel. As Deuteronomy 6:24 states, the commandments of the LORD were given “for [Israel’s] good always.” God gave his Law to Israel “that [they] may live, and that it may go well with” them (Deuteronomy 5:33; cf. 6:3, 18; 8:1).

These life-giving, life-preserving qualities of the Law of God are what prompted the author of Psalm 119—that longest of psalms and one dedicated to meditation on the law of God—to exclaim over and over again: “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97); “I hate the double-minded, but I love your law” (119:113); “I hate and abhor falsehood, but I love your law” (119:163); “Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble” (119:165).

These verses affirm that the Law given by God through Moses was designed not as a burden to be borne but as the gift of a generous and loving God who wanted them to know his will and, thereby, experience his blessings, both as individuals and as a community.

THE LAW OF GOD THAT CONDEMNS

Yet the experience of Israel’s daily lives (not to mention ours!) with these “statutes and rules so righteous” was rarely free of conflict. God’s Law says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7), yet Israel constantly placed idols of power, security, self-

righteousness, and comfort on the throne of their lives (e.g., Genesis 25:29-34; Joshua 7:10-26; 1 Samuel 15; Jonah 4).

God’s Law says, “You shall not murder” or “commit adultery” or “steal” or “covet,” yet the pages of Scripture put on display Israel’s ongoing refusal to adhere to these laws, thereby bringing consequences of conflict, pain, and death (e.g., Genesis 37:1-11; 2 Samuel 12:16-23; Ezekiel 34:1-10).

This pattern of constant and pernicious disobedience describes the relationship ancient Israel had with God’s good and perfect Law. And, if it describes *their* relationship with the Law, then it describes *our* relationship with the Law, too. This Law that we treasure as a gift and as a reflection of God’s character and his perfect will for us has become a means by which our sins are identified and we earn for ourselves eternal death and judgment.

WHO WILL SAVE US FROM THE CONDEMNATION OF THE LAW?

Looking back at Deuteronomy 4:7-8, we might be led to ask, “So, what benefit was there exactly for the unique ‘gifts’ given to Israel of God’s nearness and his Law?” It appears that both have brought not life but death—not a blessing but a curse!

Well, in a reversal of epic (or should I say *biblical*) proportions, the resolution to Israel’s problem (and ours)—a problem which appears to be introduced by God’s presence and his Law—is actually *solved* by the same.

Israel’s wickedness stood as a condemning witness against them. They were law-breakers. The nearness of God’s holy presence and Law made this clearly evident. Yet without the gift of

God’s nearness and his Law, they would have no hope of salvation.

It was God’s nearness in the holy of holies that provided a place for Israel to turn to seek forgiveness (Exodus 29:45-46; 1 Kings 8:30). It was God’s word of ritual procedure which opened a way for Israel to gain access to atonement (Leviticus 16). It was God’s word of promise of a Suffering Substitute Savior (Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 52:13-53:12) which instilled hope of rescue from eternal judgment not just for Israel but for all the world. And it was Jesus—the incarnate Word of God who dwelled among us in the flesh (John 1:14) and who perfectly fulfilled the Law of God in our place (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22)—who has become for us *the distinguishing marker* of our lives.

The Law of God is good, both for ancient Israel and for us. The fact that we break the Law does not point to its weakness. The Law does what it was intended to do: it shows us our need for salvation and points us to Jesus, the only one who can save. We could use more gifts like this!



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Honor and Submit?

CLINT KNUTSON

Aren't you thankful for the government? ...Awkward silence... Anyone?... Well then... before we get too uncomfortable, let me place that question in context. The sad thing is, it is a valid question, but one we probably have had trouble answering positively in recent years.

In many ways our time is defined by a distrust of those in authority, especially the government. Some of that distrust is a genuine necessity for a democracy. Some of that distrust is because we live in a time that does not hide injustice, but rather exposes it. So light is shone on all the ugly hidden places of people in the public sphere. Some of that distrust, probably more than we would care to admit, is facilitated by social media platforms that coerce our suspicion as we bicker over whether we distrust the police or our health officials more. This distrust is really a factor of rebellion.

Most of us Christians are familiar with Paul's command in Romans 13 to be subject to the governing authorities.

We may be equally familiar with Peter's encouragement in 1 Peter 2 to submit to those in authority for the Lord's sake. The difficult thing for us—the question that always comes up as quickly as we read those verses—is, “What if the government is evil? Does God want us to submit to an evil government?”

Setting Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 aside for a moment, let's get at something more foundational in this relationship we have to the government. Something even more basic. The Fourth Commandment: “Honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.”

What does that mean?

Martin Luther responded in the Small Catechism, “This means that we should fear and love God so that we do not despise our parents or those in authority, nor provoke them to anger, but honor, serve, obey, love and think highly of them.”

Let's focus on the opening phrase of that explanation, “This means that we should

fear and love God *so that...*” In Luther's explanation of the Small Catechism, “fear and love God” acts as a synonym for trust or faith. Each of the Ten Commandments demands faith, as they all flow out of the First Commandment that we fear, love and trust God above anything else.

Now just stop for a second and consider Luther's argument. He is saying that as we have faith our approach to those in authority will change. Who must we trust *so that* we can honor, serve, obey, love and even think highly of those in authority? We must trust God first.

Our honoring and submitting to those in authority is *not* based on whether they are worthy or unworthy of that honor. We honor and submit to them because we trust the Lord. The primary relationship at issue is not our relationship to the government, rather it is between us and Jesus. Because of our faith in Christ, our relationship to the government is changed. We trust the Lord who gives us and our neighbors the gift of government.

Now we can return to Romans 13:4-5,

“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.”

Exodus 20:12

“For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.”

Authorities are established by God to punish the wrongdoer; they are established by God for our good. We live in a world so corrupted by sin, that if left to its own devices, sinful humanity would so harm and abuse itself that it would be devoured. But the Lord has placed the government over sinners to punish their wickedness and to force them to behave well toward their neighbors. When we actually stop to think about it, we see that the government is an amazing gift of grace to a sinful world.

As Christians, we are given this awesome gift of faith and salvation through which we trust our gracious God. We therefore love what he loves and want to do what he desires and wills. One of the things God wills is that we honor, serve, and love those whom he has placed in authority over us. God wants us to do this for the good of our neighbor. God’s desire and purpose for the government is to help us love and serve our neighbors. This should actually have us Christians seeking out authorities whom we can joyfully honor, serve, and obey.

There is still that troubling question: “What if the government is evil?” In a sinful world, governments and authorities

on every level are also corrupted and twisted by sin. Governments may set themselves in opposition to those they are supposed to serve. At times they may even set themselves against God. Some devastatingly horrible events in history remind us that we need to be careful.

Our first response to this question should be prayer. Our ultimate help does not come from government, nor does it come from the will of the people. God is the authority over every government, so our first call is to him. We can also pray for our leaders in their roles, pray for godly leaders, and pray for leaders who will submit to the will of God.

As we discern what it means to submit, consider the lives of the Apostles. The Apostle Paul used the legal channels at his disposal when those in authority were sinning against him. He used the privileges of being a Roman citizen to challenge sinful actions in those above him. The key is that Paul was still submitting to the authorities. Paul was working within the structure and system of the Roman government. We should remember that there are legitimate ways to challenge sin within government that do not involve rebellion. We can challenge while still submitting.

We can also firmly stand upon the Word of God and proclaim it. We see Peter and the other Apostles doing this early in the Book of Acts. They preached, though those in authority had commanded them not to, and their retort was, “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29). The Apostles proclaimed the

truth and then they suffered for the sake of the Cross. They were punished unjustly by the government, yet they waited for God to deliver them. Even in that extreme case, they were under authority.

The expectation in Scripture is that Christians will see government in a new light after we are converted. We will understand government as a gift from God for the good of our neighbors. In this sinful world it is often a corrupted gift. However, God wills that we submit to the government, in every way we are able, so that our neighbors may live in peace, be loved and be served. Our attitude to government is part of our Christian witness. We do this for the sake of Christ, that his name will be glorified; we do it out of love for our neighbors.

Aren’t you thankful for the government?



Rev. Clint Knutson is Pastor at Birch Hills Community Church in Birch Hills, Saskatchewan and Saron Lutheran Church in Hagen, Saskatchewan.



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Your Truest Identity

ERICK SORENSEN

Who are you? In our time (in the North America) there seems to be no shortage of answers one can give in response to this question. For example: “I am a cisgender African-American male married father of two who does financial analysis for Goldman Sachs; I root for the Jets, the Clippers and the Orioles; I prefer craft beer to domestic beer, vote Libertarian, do CrossFit, listen to country music passionately, and in my spare time I like to play badminton.” These facts stated by this hypothetical man show some of the ways people describe themselves (though usually not all at once!).

What do you say? Who are you? I mean really, who are you?

For the Christian, there are answers to that question that supersede all other identity markers.

WHO YOU ARE NATURALLY

Well, I hate to be the one to deliver the

bad news, but the answer to the question of who you are naturally ain't too cheery.

Ephesians 2:1-3 tells us in no uncertain terms that naturally our identity can be described as “dead in trespasses and sins.” Naturally, we have no spiritual life or vitality about us. Naturally, we have no desire for God or the things of God. Naturally, we simply “follow the course of this world, follow the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience,” that is, we naturally follow the devil's path. To make matters worse, we can't do anything to fix it on our own. Naturally, we are enslaved, “having lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind.”

Ray Davies (lead singer of the Kinks) once remarked, “If I had to do my life over, I would change every single thing I have done.” Obviously, Davies was using hyperbole, but you get the point: He recognizes he's a deeply flawed man.

Chuck Colson in his book *Who Speaks for God?* tells of an interview he saw by Mike Wallace with a concentration camp survivor from World War II named Yehiel Dinur. Dinur testified against Adolf Eichmann at the Nuremberg Trials. Eighteen years earlier Eichmann had sent Dinur away to Auschwitz to be gassed. This is what happened when Dinur came face to face in the courtroom with Eichmann: Colson writes, “Dinur began to sob uncontrollably, then fainted, collapsing in a heap on the floor as the presiding judicial officer pounded his gavel for order in the crowded courtroom. Was Dinur overcome by hatred? Fear? Horrid memories? No, it was none of these. Rather, Dinur explained to Wallace, all at once he realized Eichmann was not the godlike army officer who had sent so many to their deaths. This Eichmann was an ordinary man. “I was afraid about myself,” said Dinur. “...I saw that I am capable to do this. I am exactly like him.”

“God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”

Ephesians 2:4-5

Dinur’s insight was true: Put any human being in a certain set of circumstances and the sin that lurks within can rear its ugly head in unimaginable ways. Therefore, the Apostle Paul says we are “by nature children of wrath,” that is, inheritors of hell. That is who we are naturally. So, in response to the question “Who are you?” one could legitimately say, “I am a sinner.”

But of course, the biblical answer to the question of who you are doesn’t only express who you are naturally, but also declares who you are supernaturally.

WHO YOU ARE SUPERNATURALLY

Following Paul’s dreadful proclamation in Ephesians 2:1-3, hear his words in verses 4-6, ESV:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...

Though naturally you are “dead in trespasses and sins,” *supernaturally*, through faith in Christ you are declared to be a spiritually alive citizen of heaven. Tim Keller once said, “Grace is being invited to a place we don’t belong.” That’s precisely what the Apostle Paul depicts for us.

One time a friend of mine was looking to do something big in Jesus’ name, but wasn’t quite sure how or what to do. So rather than organizing something big, my friend just went out and did something...

well... strange. My friend went to a part of the city where homeless people hang out and struck up a conversation with a guy. After a little while getting to know one another, my friend just came right out and said, “Here’s the deal. I’m a Christian and I want to serve you. When Jesus served his disciples, one of the things he did was wash their feet. So... this may sound incredibly weird, but can I wash your feet?” Understandably, the man was hesitant. Nevertheless, after a bit of discussion, he agreed to let my friend do it. He took off what was left of his shoes to display feet that had seen far too much hardship—blistered, overgrown, and filthy. Soon my friend began to wipe his feet with a towel and soap and water. The homeless man began to cry, and strangely he said, “If you only knew the things I’ve done, you’d never want to wash my feet.”

Yes, it is true. He didn’t deserve such an act of love, but he was invited to a place he didn’t belong. In a similar way that’s what it means to be a citizen of heaven. You have been given access to a place you don’t have any business being!

Paul’s big idea here: Though your natural identity is dead, enslaved, and sinful, your supernatural identity is alive, free, and accepted—all given to you freely on account of the work of Christ. To use theological language, who you are is “Simul Justus et Peccator,” simultaneously a Saint and Sinner. But that still doesn’t capture everything about you. Paul goes on to describe who you are supernaturally becoming...

WHO YOU ARE SUPERNATURALLY BECOMING

As much as God’s grace has already

made all who believe into living citizens of his kingdom in heaven, he is not done with your life down here. Ephesians 2:10 tells us, “You are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works.” The word for “workmanship” in Greek is the word “Poiema” from which we take our word “poem.” The sentence could be translated, “You are God’s work of art. His masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

So, let’s go back to our original question: Who are you? You are naturally a sinner, who supernaturally has been declared to be a saint and now through your various vocations in life are sent out to the world to serve your neighbor with good works. That is who you ultimately are, Christian. That is your truest identity.



Rev. Erick Sorensen is the CLB Church-Planting Pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Manhattan, New York, and serves as associate pastor of Hillside Lutheran Brethren Church in Succasunna, New Jersey. Erick is a regular conference speaker, the co-author of Scandalous Stories, a commentary on parables, and the co-host of the podcast 30 Minutes in the New Testament.

CLB Shared Ministry: Contribution Report

→ **\$587,801**
Received Through 8/31/20

\$2,650,000
2020-21 Contribution Goal

--- \$550,033 Anticipated Through 8/31/2020

The CLB Fiscal Year Ends April 30, 2021.

Living from the Other Side

ROY HEGGLAND

A popular song over the last few years is titled, *Hello*. One repeated line of the song is, “Hello from the other side.” The singer is lamenting that she now sees things differently from “the other side” after walking away from someone who meant a lot to her at one point in time. In a sense, all humanity has been living life from the wrong side. Even as Christians, we are so used to seeing life from the wrong side that we forget we are called to “live from the other side.”

We can illustrate this by thinking of a beautiful woven tapestry that presents a magnificent landscape or intricate scene of beauty. The back of the tapestry is an incoherent mess of the woven ends hanging loose. There is no sense of what is clearly visible on the other side. Imagine if that tapestry were hung in a museum so that both sides could be viewed by walking completely around it. Now imagine that almost all the visitors to the museum are congregated around the back side of the tapestry and are trying desperately to figure out what the tapestry means. When someone mentions that the

“other side” of the tapestry is what they are meant to look at, most refuse to even believe that there is another side. Some acknowledge the “other side,” but after looking at the tapestry from that side for a while, the calls from the crowd at the back side are too strong for them to resist going back to looking from there.

In Romans 12:2, Paul says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Paul is calling us to see life through minds that have been transformed and renewed by the power of the gospel. He is telling us as Christians to no longer view life (the tapestry) from the back side as the world does, but look from the “other side” and live life from the perspective of seeing God’s plan “woven” through history to form a beautiful picture of eternal love and redemption.

Since this is a stewardship article, I almost titled it “*Giving* from the other side,” but I used the word *living*, hoping you would read this far and perhaps to

the end. Actually, I have come to the conclusion that, for a Christian, *living* means *giving*. I say that because the goal of Christian living is to live like Christ. If there is one word to express Christ’s life among us, it is the word “giving.” He gave himself for us so that we would be “gifts” to the world.

Looking from the back of the tapestry, most will conclude that life is meaningless so why not take as much as you can and enjoy yourself as much as possible. But for us who have been transformed by the gospel, the picture is clear: Jesus has completely rewritten the roadmap of our lives. He has called us to live as he did—giving rather than taking, praying rather than cursing, loving rather than hating, hoping rather than despairing, and trusting rather than being afraid. He has changed us so that we can see the beauty of the “other side,” his perfect, beautiful plan. Thank God for his transforming grace!

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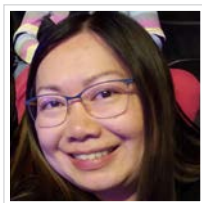
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God is at Work Despite Circumstances

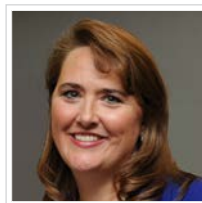
CHERYL OLSEN

God is encouraging us even during COVID-19 conditions. These are excerpts of testimonies Brooklyn, New York women gave during the 59th Street Lutheran Brethren Church online worship service on Pentecost Sunday.



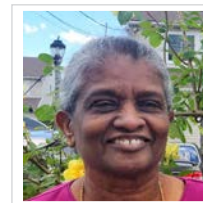
Hoi Wing and her husband Dennis both worked at New York hospitals during the COVID crisis, alternating working from home, so one could always be with their kids. Hoi Wing described sharing hope with co-workers.

“I really thank God for his strength and protection... My family and I have remained safe and healthy thus far. I have some co-workers who are especially anxious about COVID-19. One of them was afraid that if he had to go in to work, he would be bringing home the virus to his elderly mother... I reminded him that it’s all in God’s hands; we just have to take the precautions that we can, and leave the rest to God. Another co-worker had multiple anxiety attacks and has been constantly worried. I tell him that worrying won’t help, and that God is watching over us—we just need to keep praying. Every day we pray as a family for safety, especially for those who are high-risk in our congregation, and among our loved ones and friends. It has been very difficult, but with God’s protection and provision, we are able to continue serving him in our jobs and in our relationships!”



Heidi works with diplomats from around the world, and told about a boy left on his own at age twelve. His Christian friend, whose gracious mother often blessed him with food, encouraged him to trust Jesus, but he wasn’t ready. Years later, he recognized God’s grace had enabled him to survive and be educated. He was the first in his family to follow Christ and is the only Christian diplomat serving in his country’s mission at the United Nations. He recognizes that everything he has received has come as a gift of God’s grace, and is grateful for the friend who shared Christ with him!

Heidi concluded, “Whether the Holy Spirit prompts you to pray for someone, to come alongside someone, to encourage someone to trust in the Lord, or to provide for someone’s physical, emotional, or spiritual needs, God is using you... While you might not see the seeds taking root right away... God is at work! He hears our prayers, and is pleased when we obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit. May that encourage you!”



Margaret and her husband Daniel, an older couple, were confined during COVID. She described the first Pentecost, when the disciples were in a locked room.

“They were locked down; they were filled with fear and anxiety. But at that time, as the Lord Jesus Christ promised them, when they waited, God the Holy Spirit—on the Pentecostal Day—poured out his wonderful blessings on them! And they received the blessings, and they received the encouragement, and courage, and they went forth to spread the good news! During this time, yes, we are locked down, but God the Holy Spirit is giving us the encouragement to reach out through technology to many people so that they will be encouraged. People who are filled with fear and anxiety... We call to many people and they call to us, just to have a little chat in their loneliness, and to find mutual encouragement. And that’s what God has given us through this.

“Our heavenly Father, and our Savior Jesus Christ, and our Comforter the consoling Holy Spirit is *with* us during this time. That’s what I have experienced and what I want to encourage you with. God bless you all!”



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The Same Blood

DAVID VEUM

I have tested positive for the virus—not the one being monitored by the CDC, but a genetic virus. It is spread from person-to-person, but tracing is not necessary. I know where I got it. I received it from my parents; I gave it to my children. I have a sin nature. Dr. Paul wrote my diagnosis: “Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

This diagnosis includes us all. We all have the same blood. We have all tested positive for this virus named sin.

The burden of this disease is extensive. It’s terminal—always. In the interval between the contraction of the disease and death, it has devastating results. We

do not see the world clearly. We don’t love as we ought to love. In the simplest of terms, I am proud and self-serving.

A couple of weeks ago, I became aware of these results in a new way when talking with a Black friend. He is a very bright young man, having earned a degree in psychology and an “A” in New Testament Greek. Our friendship has included his staying in our home. I have advocated for him by writing to the court to challenge Lady Justice to keep her blindfold on and not treat him unjustly because he is Black. But those actions did not make me see my disease; they just prepared me for the realization of its results.

This happened as we were talking about his deep emotions unearthed by the current protests. He said something that

rocked me to the core. “Dr. Veum, a lot of white people have been kind to me, and some have even done nice things for me. But I get tired of being treated like a project.”

That’s when I saw it. I have repudiated prejudice. I have even taken sacrificial actions. But if I have treated him like a project, I haven’t loved as I ought to love. I haven’t loved my Black friend as a brother.

Shortly after that conversation, another friend shared a perspective he had heard, but didn’t recall where: “Born of the same blood. Redeemed by the same Blood.” The first phrase of that line reflects back to me St. Paul’s diagnosis of my disease. My sinful self thinks of myself and my kind as being more important. I choose

“For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Galatians 5:14

to not feel my friend’s deep pain, the pain of being mistrusted just because he is Black. I choose not to treat him as family, recognizing him as my brother.

Except the Apostle Paul asserts that we are all born of the same blood. As a Jew speaking to Greeks on Mars Hill, he put it this way: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth... From one man he made all the nations” (Acts 17:24, 26). The prophet Malachi challenges his congregation with the same message: “Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us?” (Malachi 2:10). We are born from the same blood. Every race, every culture, every person belongs to the same human family.

That makes every person we encounter our neighbor. God calls us to love each person of every race with no exceptions and never to treat them as projects. “For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:14). God’s Word leaves no room for prejudice or superiority.

Then the Scriptures go even further. As I was writing this and looking up passages on this subject in my old Thompson Chain Reference Bible, I was pointed to a section beginning in Matthew 25:41 that I didn’t want to remember:

“Then (the King) will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”

He will tell us why we are on the left: We failed to act. When he was hungry, we gave him no food. When he was a stranger, we did not welcome him. When

he was without proper clothing, when he was in prison, when he was sick, we did not visit him. *When he was treated unjustly, we did not advocate for him.* Our ignorance—*when did we see you?*—will be no excuse, for Jesus comes to us in “the least of these.”

Then the parable ends, “And these will go away into eternal punishment...” We are called to action. We are born of the same blood. Every person in our society is my neighbor, but I have not loved my neighbor as myself. The diagnosis is precise and concise. I have a sin nature. I have sinned. I am guilty.

But then Jesus came. He made me his neighbor. He even visited me in prison. Condemned as I was to the prison of God’s judgment, he took my sin nature and my sin to the cross. In the ultimate injustice, he was condemned and crucified in my place. He released me from the prison of eternal death and hell. He redeemed me by his Blood.

And, Jesus redeemed you. He redeemed every person of every race by the Same Blood. On that point, Scripture is absolutely clear. On that point Romans 3:23-24 is absolutely clear:

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

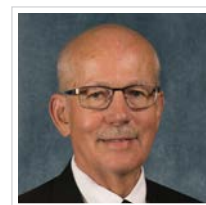
Revelation 5:9 reminds us that someday people from all cultures and all races will sing the song of the Redeemed in praise of the Lamb who was slain:

“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain,

and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.”

Until that day it is our privilege and calling to love and serve our neighbors, not as projects but as persons created by our heavenly Father. My friend has a vision for doing this. He plans to create a nonprofit organization based on equality, that will teach youth through community programs how to fight adversity. I promised that I would serve on his board.

We are born of the Same Blood. Today, we join all who embrace Christ at his table, united as one Body, Redeemed by the Same Blood. Someday we will join together in eternity. The virus—the sin nature with all its prejudice—gone forever. Worthy is the Lamb.



Dr. David Veum is President of Lutheran Brethren Seminary in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.

CLB FORGE



A NORTH AMERICAN MISSION PODCAST

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PODCAST #7

WITH GRETCHEN RONNEVIK

The CLB Forge Podcast, hosted by Rev. Ryan Nilsen and Rev. Mike Natale, is designed to equip churches for mission, ministry, and multiplying disciples. In August 2020, they interviewed Gretchen Ronnevik, author of the book Ragged: Spiritual Discipline for the Spiritually Exhausted, and creator of an online course on gospel mentoring.

Ryan: Gretchen, would you tell us about your spiritual journey as a disciple and any mentoring experiences you've had?

Gretchen: I grew up in the Church of the Lutheran Brethren. My parents divorced when I was four or five, and my grandparents, recently retired missionaries and church planters, moved in. I would say that they were the biggest spiritual influences in my life. When I was going through confirmation, I spent every weekend of junior high with my grandpa, studying the catechism. And he was old-

school, where you memorize everything! Doughnuts and sweets and theology, that was my junior high experience! No question off the table and just a really loving situation.

My mom had mentors at our church. Two women in particular really did not let her fall. They met every week for years, holding her up in prayer, giving advice and just helping her. She really believed in it, so she would always find me mentors too. It just became very normal that there was someone in the church to go and talk to.

Mike: That's great. There are people in my life too, who were mentors to me, and I think of the impact they can have on an individual's life without even knowing it.

What is gospel mentoring and how did you develop a passion for it?

Gretchen: My grandpa loved talking about the Law and the Gospel. It was

something that he drilled into me. I was telling my friends this, my Lutheran friends, and a lot of them said, "Well, what are the Law and the Gospel?" I had thought the theological education that was given to me was normal. That was a wakeup call to me, and I became very passionate that we get some really solid theology into our women, because it's so freeing to have it.

I had been working on a book on gospel mentoring, which my husband suggested I release as an online course first. I did a ton of research, and talked with a lot of churches, women's ministry directors, and women I knew, about their experiences. By now over a thousand women have gone through this course, many outside the CLB. God took this to places I never expected.

A lot of mentoring programs teach the law to women. "Here's how you be a better wife, a better mother. Here's all the things you should and shouldn't do."

“Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.”

Proverbs 13:20

But the more I read Titus chapter 2, the more I saw the purpose of all this is to teach sound doctrine. So I asked, how does Christ play into all of this? It seemed like he was missing from a lot of the mentoring programs out there.

Many women grew up hearing conflicting messages about what gives them value as a woman. No one ever told them, “Your value comes from Christ.” I’m continually encountering older women saying, “I have never heard this before.” When they heard the word mentoring, they thought, “I remember those mentoring programs where the law was heaped on me and I almost died. I just can’t do that to younger women.” But when I say to them, “Mentoring means giving younger women the gospel, showing them Jesus,” then they’re like, “Oh, I can do THAT.”

So it started out with me wanting to help younger women, but it ended up revealing the gospel to a lot of older women in a way I didn’t even know was needed. That’s been really, really exciting to see.

Mike: Can I ask what the course looks like, when someone signs up?

Gretchen: It’s pretty easy. There are about 20 videos, six to twenty minutes long. It walks you through defining Law and Gospel, helps improve basic biblical literacy, defining what a mentor is.

Mentoring looks different in different situations. It can be informal. Some of the most influential women in my life were just willing to listen, engage in conversation, and share with me from the Word of God. For them, it may have been simply a half hour after church, but to me those were life-changing conversations.

Ryan: I love hearing how this has developed. Can you tell us one way this has impacted how you and your family do life in ministry?

Gretchen: A couple of years ago, one of the women I was mentoring had a marriage crisis. I prayed with her daily over the phone until she got into counseling. Some of my kids were having to help out or watch the younger kids, but I was able to look them in the eye, and I didn’t have to share all the details, but I just said, “Someone who I know and love is really struggling right now, and I was able to pray with her and share Jesus with her. And I want you to know that your doing the dishes tonight made that happen. This is something that we’re doing as a family. You’re helping me out, allowing me to help her. And this is how the body of Christ works!”

Mike: So Gretchen, what is your vision for this gospel-mentoring ministry?

Gretchen: I would love to see more women equipped with understanding Law and Gospel theology. It can be difficult to get really good women’s Bible studies that provide that, so I would love to help make that really easy for women’s ministry leaders.

Ryan: What’s a lesson or two that God has been teaching you this year?

Gretchen: Dependence on him. It can be really easy to get focused on “goal setting,” but God has his own plans, and I’m exactly where he wants me to be. There are seasons when I’m not able to do all I would like, but to be with my family is just as important, ministry-wise. Really just keeping the Lord at the center, letting the Holy Spirit drive things.

Mike: How can we pray for you and your ministry, as it continues to grow and as God takes it and furthers it?

Gretchen: Pray for a lot of wisdom. Between all this and my vocation of being a wife and a homeschooling mother, it

can be a juggling act. So pray for wisdom in what projects I take on, and be praying that we would be protected and that my kids would know God better because of this ministry.

Ryan: Thanks for letting us be a part of that ministry in prayer. Now, I’ve had spiritual mentors in my life, but how would I go about starting to mentor someone else?

Gretchen: The first step is always to pray. When I started mentoring, I made a list of people who came to mind as I prayed. And God provided opportunities to talk with them. God doesn’t put a lot of barriers in ministry where he wants you. The word mentorship has a lot of baggage. But it can just be, “I would love to meet with you every couple of weeks, hear what’s going on in your life and pray with you and help you any way that I can.”

I don’t know many younger people who will say, “No, that sounds horrible.” You are someone who wants to pray with them and hear their story. And then once you hear what their needs are, you’ll have a better idea how to help. But just listening, that’s a great place to start.

To hear the full interview, search “CLB Forge” on iTunes or any podcast platform.

Gretchen Ronnevik is a farmwife, mother, and teacher to six children. Her course on Gospel Mentoring can be found at www.gospelmentoring.com.

Rev. Ryan Nilsen serves the Church of the Lutheran Brethren as Associate Director of North American Mission.

Rev. Mike Natale is Pastor of Faith Chapel Lutheran Church in Cranston, Rhode Island.

Contact Ryan or Mike at: podcast@clbforge.org

Caring During COVID-19

MICHAEL KITTELSON

Covid-19 caused Victory Lutheran Brethren Church of Hsinchu, Taiwan to temporarily close the building. Victory Hakka Fellowship decided to find a way to continue to meet. It was simple, and it was certainly not traditional, but we offered people the opportunity to be encouraged. After scouting out locations, we decided on a park near the church. It had built-in seating with natural spacing. This arrangement satisfied people’s concerns for safety in group settings. We told people we would be there between 10 and 11:00 a.m. on Saturday mornings (unless it rained) to talk, pray, worship, and encourage one another.

We met there from March until the end of June. More than once there were clouds overhead and a few drops of rain fell, but we were blessed to be together. People sat in the shelter of a large tree. When the sunlight reached a certain spot, you knew it was time to close the service.

The location helped us to put aside fears so we could concentrate on loving God and loving each other. Upon our arrival with the books and papers for worship, we found someone had already swept to make the area neat. Most individuals used the Bible on their cell phones. After the service, people took time to encourage and care for one another. Later a loudspeaker was used to help with music, teaching, and prayer.

We had all the parts of worship normally found in a church setting—a call to worship, songs of praise, and prayer. Scripture was read and we heard the words of God that encouraged our souls. We successfully gathered to praise God and encourage each other. Was it convenient? No. But it was enough.

People became accustomed to the location and we “had church” in the park. We didn’t seem to disturb those around us. In fact, some people were even eavesdropping on our activity. Because people felt safe, we had our



Victory Hakka Fellowship of Taiwan.

normal members and began to add new friends to our group. How did people get there? They were dropped off by family, walked, took scooters, an electric cart, and some came by wheelchair. We had more people attending outside than we recently had inside the church building, because some came who are shy about entering the church building.

People encouraged one another while keeping a safe distance. Greater than that, people were introduced to Jesus. Members were disciplined in the basic truths of the Christian faith. Some were being prepared so they could make a choice concerning baptism. The Triune God was glorified during times of trouble and fear.

During this time, we wanted to learn how to communicate love and concern. We wanted to help believers, but even more so those yet to believe in Jesus. We offered people this option so we could see one another face-to-face, while the location helped them feel safe from the possibility of transferring an infection.

The goal was to have people encourage others personally. Call a person on the phone or through other messaging systems. Send a card or note of encouragement, but not through social media. This shows others that you specifically thought of them. Tell them

you are praying for them, and then pray with them—either in person or on the phone. For example, I even recorded prayers for a friend I could not visit in the hospital. He was comforted by the prayer to the heavenly Father who was watching over him.

People learned to care for others. We became people with boldness yet caution who found ways to love each other. We did not want to miss the opportunity God had placed before us to touch people when they needed the love of God. The Holy Spirit cared for both our needs and the needs of those around us.

By the end of June it was too hot to be outside, but with the virus situation in Taiwan being very stable, we were able to return to the church. Pray for us as we are working to find ways to encourage those who are still shy about attending worship in the building. We are also planning for other outside activities when the weather is cooler.

In all we do, may God be glorified and may precious souls be blessed for all eternity!

Michael and Delores Kittelson serve Lutheran Brethren International Mission as missionaries to the unreached Hakka people of Taiwan.

Go for the Nations

DANIEL WEN

We first met new LBIM Director Dan Venberg in person in 2017—at the emergency room. Nancy was being treated for pre-term labor. Dan encouraged us. He shared about his life as a missionary kid, and how God led his family to the mission field. We knew then in our spirits that God was giving us a clearer vision of the mission field. This vision had already led us to prepare for mission in college.

Growing up in Hsinchu Victory Church in Taiwan, I spent most of my life in the Chinese Lutheran Brethren Church (CLBC). This is where I rooted my Christian belief and formed my mind for mission to the world. Nancy came from the Alliance Church in eastern Taiwan, with a multi-cultural background, and she also gave her life to respond to mission since childhood. Nancy and I met each other in college, as we were both engaging our lives in campus outreach, overseas mission trips, etc. Nancy spent her senior year in Paris, France as an exchange student in 2008. One year later, I started working as a product designer in a Taiwanese company in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

After spending our first year of marriage in Vietnam in 2011, we decided to go to the CLBC seminary for three years' theological study. We joined the CLBC church in Chupei, Taiwan so I could serve as a youth minister. During four years of serving in this growing church, planted by Hsinchu Victory Church, we had the privilege to serve not only the youth, but also the whole congregation.

During this time, we experienced how CLBC exemplifies a church's engagement in the great mission. One day my pastor asked me to enter his office, and he told me that it was time to make a decision. He knew that we had the burden to be missionaries since we were college students. He told us that Taiwan would have a brand-new mission training organization, Radius Asia, and asked if



Daniel and Nancy visiting the CLB mission field in Chad, Africa.

we were sure that God called us to be missionaries—if so, now was the time to take the next step.

A week later, after a period of prayer with Nancy, we were convinced that this was a call from God in our hearts, so we shared it with the elders and deacons of the church, and it was also unanimously approved by everyone. At the same time, the leadership committee of the synod were also thinking about how to participate more in missions. Knowing our church was ready to send us to the mission field, the synod decided to support us as a missionary family to Chad. During the one-year training in Radius Asia, I also had opportunities to visit different congregations and preach the message about mission throughout the CLBC. Many brothers and sisters were deeply moved and inspired by the mission in Chad.

The senior pastor of Chupei Victory Church invited all the congregations in the synod to join together in sending us, regardless of how much financial support they could provide. As long as the elders and deacons of a church were willing to pray for us for the long term, they were welcome to become one of the sending churches.

God is working in his Church. He caused 13 of the 18 congregations in the

synod to join Chupei Victory Church as sending churches. We will become the first missionary family supported by the synod and sent by the churches during CLBC's seventy-year history. God is calling the CLBC to respond to the mission with their mother church, the CLB of North America, and to walk along with the sister churches in Chad to finish the task.

God is leading our family and the churches, opening the way for them to go to the nations. It is not about how brave the missionaries are or how faithful the churches are. It is all about the Lord.

“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us, so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations” (Psalm 67:2).

Because of his grace on us, we can be a testimony for the nations. Because of his command and love for the Church, we have the privilege to be sent and to preach. It's him who starts, it's him who guides, and it's him who will complete the mission for his glory. Amen.

Daniel Wen and his wife Nancy Wu have been called and commissioned by the Chinese Lutheran Brethren Church of Taiwan as missionaries to the unreached peoples of Chad, Africa.

A Different Kind of Nightmare

PHIL HEISER

It was another nightmare. Sunday morning, and I wasn't ready to preach. In fact, I didn't even know I was preaching until just minutes before worship. Once I was able to actually find the sanctuary, my sermon was nowhere to be found. "Guess I'll have to 'wing it,'" I told myself.

Then I woke up. What a nightmare!

Perhaps some of my fellow ministers can relate. For the congregants reading this article, this is an all-too-common nightmare for preachers. It's really a derivation of the old-school "final-exam-day-but-I-didn't-know-it-was-the-day-or-was-I-in-the-class-or-where-am-I-supposed-to-take-the-exam" nightmare. Now can all of you relate?

Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, describes a different type of nightmare:

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

Here I am again, just before worship, and I realize, by Jesus' own words: "I am not ready!" Only this time, it's not a bad dream. It's unreconciled sin.

The unexpected twist in this nightmare scenario is that it's not my anger, resentment, or other sin that I recognize in myself. Instead, it's my brother, who has something against me.

How important is it to Jesus that we be reconciled to one another? Important enough that Jesus says, in effect, "Stop your worship! Leave whatever gift you would bring me, and bring the gift of reconciliation to your brother first. Then resume your worship of me, hopefully with both you and your brother coming



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together before me with grateful hearts." That is Jesus' word to all of us who are broken and conflicted with someone in our life.

By God's grace, what could be a nightmare turns into something beautiful. Miraculous. A foretaste of heaven.

What Jesus pleads for us to do is the very thing he did for us. He knew that our hearts, minds, really our entire being, were bent against him because of our sin. Rather than waiting for us to reconcile, God came to us, sending his one and only Son to reconcile us with himself.

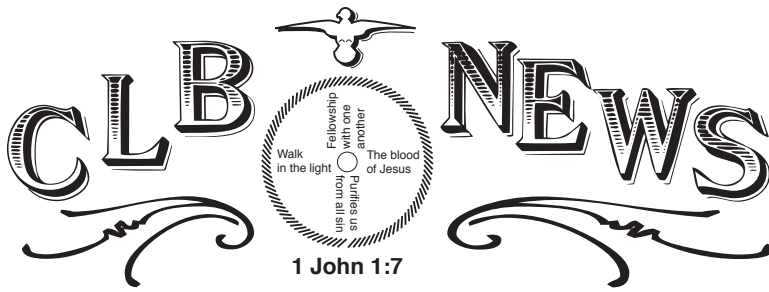
The Apostle Paul made it clear who should be the first one to seek reconciliation: "As far as it depends upon you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). Reconciliation should be a glorious, beautiful competition of who can get to the other person first.

Just as God reconciling us to himself was a miraculous act of God's grace, so two brothers (or sisters) being reconciled at the foot of the cross is a miracle of the Lord. We know that miracles like these are only a work of God's holy Word and Holy Spirit in ransomed and restored hearts.

The Church of the Lutheran Brethren, in partnership with Ambassadors of Reconciliation (www.aorhope.org), is offering training in God's Word to anyone who struggles with unreconciled conflict. Our world is watching to see how Christians are responding to conflict in a remarkably different way. May they see Jesus. What a beautiful dream would come true!



Rev. Phil Heiser serves the Church of the Lutheran Brethren as our Associate for Ministry Support.



For God's Glory



Dean Bengtson doing physical therapy.

On April 26, Linda Bengtson, Lutheran Brethren International Mission missionary in Japan, changed her profile picture on her Facebook page to feature the following statement: "Life is fragile. Handle with prayer." Two days later, her husband Dean suffered a major stroke that paralyzed the right side of his body and impaired his speech. Life is fragile indeed.

While in the ICU at a hospital in Sendai, wondering what would come of this drastic turn of events, Dean came to rest in the firm belief that all this was for the glory of God. Now, four months since the stroke, Dean is back home and well on his way to complete recovery. Both Dean and Linda report how they have indeed witnessed the glory of God as they have walked through this valley. Because of this "sickness," many around Dean and Linda have been exposed to God's glory and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Through his care and rehabilitation, Dean and Linda developed lasting friendships with doctors and health care providers who witnessed and heard about their faith. Dean's primary physical therapist has personally visited three times since Dean's discharge and wants to get together more often. Neighbors close to Dean and Linda have seen clear evidence of the power of prayer in Jesus' name. As these relationships lead to conversations and questions about the hope that they have, Dean and Linda are ready with an answer... and God is glorified.

Prayerfully Optimistic



Matt Smith after his accident.

On July 31, Matt Smith and a friend, wanting to take a break from French language study, decided to rent motorcycles for a ride into the mountains around Albertville, France. Both were experienced riding cycles, so they embarked on a day enjoying the beautiful scenery of the French Alps.

And then it happened. The throttle on Matt's bike malfunctioned, causing Matt to lose control of the bike and crash. His spinal cord was fractured in one place and dislocated in another, resulting in paralysis on his right side. He was airlifted to a hospital in nearby Grenoble where he had two separate surgeries. After recovery from surgery, Matt was transferred to a rehabilitation unit in the same city, for ongoing physical and vocational therapy. There he will remain until he is able to function independently and continue with therapy at home. He is making good progress, and he is also finding opportunity to minister the gospel among staff and patients! We are prayerfully optimistic that Matt will make a full recovery and that the Smith family will be able and ready to transition to life and ministry in Chad in the coming year.

Thank you for your prayers for our missionary families! Like all of us, they face trials. They get sick; they have accidents; life happens in ways they do not expect. But they press on, trusting in God, for the sake of the gospel.

In the words of Christina Smith from a Facebook post on August 19: "Many of you have said, 'I wish there were more tangible things we could do for you from here (North America).' Please see this as proof that you are doing a hugely tangible thing when you PRAY!"

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Known By God

I've been thinking a lot about the challenge of masks. They've become a part of our culture for the time being. They are very challenging, as it has become harder to carry on conversations with strangers, and harder to read expressions of people we know. So much of communication is non-verbal, but now many of the non-verbal clues we use in communication are missing, due to the masks. This means that the masks themselves are socially distancing, and maybe for that reason alone they are serving their purpose in the age of COVID-19.

I am finding it a challenge to preach to a masked audience. I cannot tell as easily as in the past whether my words are connecting with people. I used to see expressions that told me if the listeners were tracking with me. If I attempted some subtle humor, I could see on people's faces if it registered. Now I can't really tell.

I performed a marriage ceremony recently—an outdoor wedding with only immediate family in attendance. It got me imagining a world where masks become standard—where maybe the first time a couple sees each other's faces is when they finally take their masks off, standing face to face at the altar on their wedding day. I hope we never see that day!

It is a basic human need to know others and to be known by others. One of the hardest parts of this pandemic, beyond the physical illness, is for those who are shut-in for their own protection—say in a nursing home, or in one's own home. They don't have very much direct human interaction. They suffer from a lack of knowing and being known.

Let me take a Bible verse out of context, but it conveys a truth about God that is both precious and valuable these days. It's from Galatians 4:8-9. The Apostle Paul writes to the Christians in Galatia: "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God..."

And he goes on to make his point. But having expressed that, apart from Christ, they did not know God, Paul now affirms that, in Christ, they do know God. Not only that, but he seems to catch himself and clarifies it: "now that you know God—or rather *are known by God...*"

To know Jesus is to know God. And to know God is to be known by God—which is what really counts. God knows your name; God cares about you as his very own child. God is not wearing a mask. You can hear him clearly and see the expressions of love on his face every time you look into the Word. He is not socially distanced from you.

You need to know and be known. In this age of isolation, rest assured that you are.

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