

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Duane Hanson

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



## The Sermon Text — John 14: 15-21 SERMON

The speaker was Bishop Younan, the Lutheran Bishop of Palestine and the President of the Lutheran World Federation. He was the commencement preacher two weeks ago at the graduation of my daughter in law, Dara, at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. Thirty-three future pastors, many of whom had known him from their trip to Palestine, were anxious to hear his words before being called to a congregation. In essence he said, “You have been called to follow in Christ’s footsteps...and you are not alone. As you go out to the parishes you will serve throughout the country you need to know that you are not alone, the Holy Spirit has gone before you. Wherever you go, there is awaiting for you a community of faithful people who will receive you. You do not arrive first. God’s presence goes before you. You are not alone.” Not bad words for anxious graduates awaiting a first call to a congregation. Not bad words for us as we await the calling of a senior pastor. The new pastor also needs to be assured that he/she is not alone. We, the body of Christ, are here to welcome our new senior pastor.

The fear of being alone is a fear we all share. It begins early in life. For many it was that first day of school...leaving the warm hand of a mother or father behind...stepping into unknown territory...feeling empty, scared...and then discovering the warm hand of a teacher or a classmate. A new community had been entered.

For others it might be that moment when your son or daughter goes away to college or to work...leaving the familiar, leaving the security of friends and family and being thrust into another unknown. I recall the day I drove my daughter to Grinnell College. She knew no one, she was recovering from Lyme’s disease...but even so, she was anticipating a new step in her life. I was fighting back tears. I was the one who felt abandoned. I felt a loss...I felt alone.

And I’m guessing that many of you have been with loved ones when they receive the devastating news of a diagnosis of an illness or disease. I recall having a friend in my office when he received the news that he had prostate cancer. There was a feeling of devastation, of being alone.

Many of us have also had the experience of being surrounded by family and friends at a funeral and yet feeling alone. We see and interact with our families and friends. But yet we are unsettled. We want a word. We want assurance that we won’t be alone. We hang on to words of hope. We appreciate the support of friends. But we really want to sense the presence of our God.

Our text today speaks to those fears. Jesus says that he will not leave us orphaned. He will not leave us alone. Jesus says that he will give us an “advocate,” a “helper” who will be with us forever. As we hear the words of our text this morning, we realize that Easter clings to us. Easter won’t let us go. We may want to let go. But the amazing grace of God won’t let us go. Instead, God goes before us...to prepare, to heal, to give us new possibilities in the midst of loss.

The gospel text this morning reveals a great mystery. The mystery is that even though Jesus is physically absent, he is present. Now that’s a great mystery. It is a secret, a mystery so powerful that it has undergirded the church for over 2000 years. And it’s a

mystery that we need to share with others as we near the end of the Easter season.

This was a mystery that the disciples needed to learn as they moved on in this world without the physical presence of Jesus. They needed to be assured that His Spirit would be with them. Biblical translator Eugene Peterson in “The Message” says it this way: “I will talk to the Father, and he’ll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth. The godless world can’t take him in, because it doesn’t have eyes to see him, doesn’t know what to look for. But you know him already because he has been staying with you, and will even be in you.”

Now that’s a great mystery to expose! Even though it might appear that Christ is absent, he is in fact present! The church, God’s people are not abandoned. The good news for us this morning is that we are not alone and we will not be left alone! God continues to be with us, to walk with us...His Spirit continues to bubble to the surface in a world which continues to spread fear...fear of the future, fear of the unknown, fear of the neighbor.

It is into this culture of fear that Jesus meets us and invites us to consider being a part of a new kingdom, the kingdom of God. And it’s a kingdom which has full disclosure. There is no question but that Jesus has entered into this world in a new way. There is no way one can misunderstand his words to us to care for one another. Easter has made God’s kingdom and God’s intent transparent. But living in the light of Easter is not always easy. And it certainly wasn’t easy for the early church. For the first Easter and its aftermath also happened in the context of a fearful, repressive society.

As I look back on the Easter story, I am amazed at how it was possible for the life and death of Jesus to have made an impact on Roman society and on the countries they dominated. As we look back it appears that the Roman Empire was a roaring success. Even to visit the Roman ruins today is to be impressed...in Rome, the Forum, the Coliseum. Throughout the empire, they had built a superb system of roads and ports to facilitate business. Their engineers excelled building aqueducts and amphitheaters. Their economic system provided a common currency. For many citizens the Roman Empire promised peace, security and equity through domination.

But as Brian McLaren reminds us in his book entitled, “Everything Must Change,” the pax Romana recipe was elegantly simple, as it is for all empires. Concentrate the power of violence in one source---the emperor (literally, the king of kings.) Then decisively crush any and all opposition to the emperor. Then, unified under the emperor’s supreme will, the empire will defeat its enemies and punish its criminals so that all will experience prosperity, equity, and peace.”

All that is except for slaves and servants, small farmers, tenant farmers, women, soldiers, and those who lived at the borders of the empire. And to protect the precious freedom of the empire’s wealthy and powerful men, there would have to be taxes---taxes that fell on the non elite, the poorest of the empire. And as we know from the Good Friday story, the cross was Rome’s brilliant way of eliminating uncooperative people. Brian McLaren describes it this way, “Imperial security forces would erect crosses

conspicuously on hillsides near well-traveled roads near major cities of the empire. By impaling rebels like insects on pins for public view, security forces would demonstrate both the absolute and fearsome power of the empire and the complete and pathetic powerlessness of writhing, gasping, crying would be insurrectionists.”

But we know that in the midst of this regime of fear Jesus exposed the weakness of repressive regimes. And that great mystery is the cross. For the cross is the turning point in understanding the newness of the kingdom of God. Jesus uses the cross to expose Roman violence. His cross on Golgotha didn't become a “shock and awe” display of power for the Roman. Rather, his cross on that Good Friday represented a “reverence and awe” display of God's willingness to accept rejection and mistreatment, and then respond with forgiveness, reconciliation, and resurrection. In this new kingdom, peace is not made and kept through the shedding of the blood of enemies but rather the king himself sacrifices his blood to make a new kind of peace.

The theologian Dominic Crossan reflects that “if the Roman motto is peace through victory, or peace through the destruction of enemies, or peace through domination...then for Jesus the motto is peace through nonviolent justice, peace through the forgiveness of enemies, peace through reconciliation, peace through embrace and grace.

That's how the mystery of God's love is made known to us. There is another way to live in this world. There is a kingdom that is in the world but not of the world. There is a kingdom that is both visible and invisible. There is a community, called the church, which has a different set of lenses in which to see the world. It's a mystery and yet no longer a mystery. Easter has made the mystery transparent.

Eugene Peterson, the author of *The Message*, has written a new book entitled, “*The Pastor*.” It is both a biography of his life and his coming to terms with the call of being a pastor. Peterson grew up in Montana, steeped in Pentecostalism, only to find himself becoming a Presbyterian after a series of experiences in New York City. Early in life he found himself loving the power of language and storytelling. Both served him well throughout his life as a writer, translator, and pastor. Much to his surprise, upon completion of seminary, he was asked by his denomination to begin a new church in Bel Air, Maryland. He soon discovered that the creation of a church, that is, God's people gathered together in worship, didn't happen according to the manual he was given by his denomination's mission department.

Pastor Peterson sees a parallel between the way Jesus came into our world and the way the church was formed. He asks the question, “How did God bring our Savior into our history?” His response: “We have the story of what he could have done but didn't. God could have sent his son into the world to turn all the stones into bread and solve the hunger problem worldwide. He didn't do it. He could have sent Jesus on tour throughout Palestine, filling in turn the seven grand amphitheaters and hippodromes built by Herod and amazing everyone with supernatural circus performances, impressing the crowds with Super-God in action. He didn't do it. He could have set Jesus up to take over governing the world—no more war, no more injustice, no more crime. He didn't do it. However, we do have the story of what he, in fact, did do. He gave us the miracle of Jesus, but a miracle in the form of a helpless infant born in poverty in a dangerous place with neither understanding nor support from the political, religious, or cultural surroundings. Jesus never left that world he had been born into, that world of vulnerability, marginality, and poverty.

So then Peterson addresses how the church came into being. In much the same way...by a miracle. Celebrities were conspicuously absent. Governments were oblivious.

Just as the Holy Spirit goes before us today as we begin to form communities called the church so also the early church started with nobodies. There was Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon. The strategy has never changed. Eugene Peterson learned that it would have been a lot easier to imagine a church formed from an elite group of talented men and women who hungered for the “beauty of holiness.” Instead, he discovered that the “TV guide” was the most prominent reading material found in many of the homes he visited.

Listen as he describes some of his early parishioners. “Chuck at fifty who has failed a dozen times and knows that he will never amount to anything. Mary who had been ignored and scorned and abused in a marriage in which she remained faithful. Phyllis living with children and a spouse deep in addictions. Lepers and blind and dead-and-dumb sinners. Also fresh converts, excited to be in on this new life. Spirited young people, energetic and eager to be guided into a life of love and compassion, mission and evangelism. A few seasoned saints who know how to pray and listen and endure. And a considerable number of people who pretty much just show up. I sometimes wonder why they bothered. There they are the hot, the cold, and the lukewarm; Christians, half-Christians, almost Christians. New Agers, angry ex-Catholics, sweet new converts. I didn't choose them. I didn't get to choose them.”

What Pastor Peterson learned was that he didn't get a church formed to his expectations. Rather, it was the Holy Spirit that brings a church into formation. And the mystery continued...the church was being formed by ordinary people...much like those first followers of Jesus.

When the Apostle Paul described the first generation of Christians in Corinth he wrote: “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth, but...the low and despised in the world.” And how true for us today. God's Spirit continues to shape us. We discover new neighbors. We discover that there is power in being faithful to the one who came to renew a new spirit within us.

At the close of the worship service for the graduates of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, Bishop Younan told this story which he says is a classic in the Arab world. It's a story of a King and Queen giving three different gifts to their children as they set out into the world to seek meaning for their lives. They seemed like odd gifts. One was a telescope. Another flying carpet. And the third was a healing apple. They didn't seem like significant gifts. And then one day one of the princes was looking through his telescope and saw his sister ill on a hillside. How to get to her...the flying carpet of his brother. And then how to heal...the healing apple of the other prince. Separately the gifts seemed like trinkets. But used together...they were able to bring healing to their sister. And so it is with the gifts of those of us in the church. Alone our gifts may not seem like much. But when coupled with the gifts of others, great things can be accomplished together. And to bring our gifts together we have the gift of the Holy Spirit. God has not abandoned us. We need not be fearful. We have the gift of one another and the wisdom of the community as to how to use our gifts. Thanks be to God. © 2011