

Nebraska Synod Weekend sermon—August 29, 2021

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 (lectionary 8/29/2021)

Ephesians 2:19-22 (anniversary theme verse)

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 (lectionary 8/29/2021)

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ--and Congratulations and Happy Birthday, Nebraska Synod, as we begin the commemoration of our one hundred fiftieth anniversary.

It was September 1, 1871 that a small group--fewer than a dozen--gathered to create the first entity ever known as the Nebraska Synod. Who would have known then that a century and a half later that small inauspicious group would grow to nearly two hundred forty congregations and worshipping communities and nearly ninety thousand members all over the state of Nebraska?

Over the course of the coming year, we will commemorate this anniversary by sharing stories and events and activities, and we encourage you to rediscover the story of your congregation as well, for what we tell is the story not only of our past, but of our present and of our future.

That story stretches all the way back to God's people in scripture. We heard from them in the lessons that were read just a few moments ago. Part of the story is told in the book of Deuteronomy, where Moses is speaking to God's people Israel, telling them just before they enter the promised land that they are to keep God's laws. They are to live according to God's Word, not only so that they'll be blessed in the new promised land, not only so that their lives will be well ordered in the new land, but so that others will see how the people of Israel live and will say of them not only how wise and just their laws are, but how near to them their God must be. This was the story that God's people told of a God near to them, of a God with them always.

That story continued among Jesus and his disciples. In the Gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples are enjoying a meal when they're criticized by Pharisees and scribes, who notice that the disciples haven't washed their hands.

I don't have any trouble imagining that happening. Jesus and his disciples were often on the move. They didn't always know where their next meal was coming from. Who knows how hungry they were when someone set food in front of them on this particular day? They sat down hungry, and began to eat. And they are criticized for not upholding the traditions of the elders.

Jesus pointed out that it wasn't a tradition that needed to be maintained--it was what came from the heart that mattered. The disciples may have been eating with unwashed hands, but that didn't mean they were eating with ungrateful hearts or that they weren't eating in order to strengthen their body so that they might live out their faith.

Jesus said that more important than the traditions of the elders are the core of faith. What comes from within, from the heart, is how one can see faith being lived out. This was the story that God's people told of faith more important than traditions.

Later, when the new church began to be planted and took root all over the known world, Paul would write to a congregation like that at Ephesus, to a congregation that, like many others, was made up of two very different groups of people; of Jewish and gentile believers who had come together to try to form a single congregation as Christians.

They were very different people. They would never be the same, but Paul said they could nonetheless still be one because Christ tore down the dividing wall between them. They could remain different so long as they stood together on their faith, built on the tradition of the apostles and the prophets, built on Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

So long as their foundation was united and they stood on it together, they didn't need to be the same. They could even celebrate their differences because they were united in standing on their cornerstone, Christ. This is how the theme of our commemoration this year was chosen. That theme is, "Built on a rock." We know that our forebears built on the rock of Jesus Christ and their faith in him. This is the story that God's people told.

And that story continued to be told through our forebears, the pioneers on the prairie, when they gathered in 1871 to begin the Nebraska Synod. That small group, fewer than a dozen people, represented gatherings and congregations of people all over the state. Those were people who, when they had first arrived, got busy building communities and almost immediately organized gatherings of faith communities and congregations.

They sought to live according to their faith in order to perceive themselves as blessed, in order to give order to their communities, and especially so that they could witness to one another and to others about this God who was so very near to them, always. When one reads of what those pioneers endured--locusts and droughts, prairie fires and tornadoes, floods and storms and winds, disease and more--one can see how very important it was that they gathered to proclaim a God who was near them, who

was with them even in the most difficult times, because only a faith so strong would let them endure. That faith in a God near to them is the story our forbearers told.

They told of stories like Jesus' story when they gathered in their early faith communities. They didn't have buildings with lovely steeples filled with solid pews. They often didn't even have pastors, let alone vestments and altars and organs. They gathered when and where they could, in dugouts and sod homes, in schoolhouse buildings and open pastures. If they didn't have a pastor available, a lay person would preach. And if no one felt qualified to preach, they would read their Bible together. But come together they did, because what they were practicing came from their heart, their faith in Jesus Christ. They could look far different than they had before they left their homes in the east to settle in this new land.

The human traditions they left behind did not matter. It's what came from their heart and that's what they witnessed to. I can only imagine what it must have looked like for those who came visiting from the settled east or those who immigrated from Europe and elsewhere to see how different and how plain the worship and gathering was among these prairie pioneers. They couldn't hold to the old traditions because they didn't have the wherewithal to have buildings with fine steeples and oak pews and so much more. But they did what they could, gathering with grateful hearts to celebrate the word of God and live according to it. This is the story that our forebears told.

And though they spoke of different languages and practiced worship in different ways, those represented by that small group gathering in September of 1871 was nonetheless united in spite of all of their differences, because they built on the apostles and the prophets; they stood on Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. That shared faith could unite them when so little else could. That was the story our forebears told.

Today, we too tell the story, like the people of Deuteronomy about to enter the promised land, like our pioneer prairie forefathers who gathered on the prairie; we too stand at the threshold of a frontier because of what pandemic has done. A year and a half ago, we were gathering as we always had, when all of a sudden everything had to stop; had to change.

We couldn't gather in person, we couldn't sing hymns. We couldn't share the peace. We couldn't have choirs. We had to go online to worship or gather together outdoors. We had to keep our distance. Everything changed on a dime and much has not gone back to the way it was.

And much won't. We have been forever changed by pandemic. We don't even know what this future frontier is going to look like, only that it will be different. But we will live

into the frontier of that future, living out our faith in the word of God so that we can witness to one another and encourage one another; so that we can witness to the world and encourage the world about a God who is near us, who is with us always. This is the story we tell. This is the story we live.

It's a story of changing traditions, of changing practices, of being different than it was; of being open to new risks and experiments. Just as Jesus and his disciples lived differently from their traditions, just as our pioneer forebears lived differently from their traditions, so we too will practice our faith in ways different from the traditions we've known. Yet we will cling to the core of the faith that lives in our hearts. This is the story we tell. This is the story we live.

As we live into that future frontier, we will continue to be ever different people. If one visited the two hundred forty congregations of the Nebraska Synod, one would see great variety among them. Even within those congregations, many of us are very different from one another. Yet we are united by our confession of our faith in Christ.

We stand on him as our cornerstone so our differences don't separate us. In fact, we can celebrate those differences because we're united in being built on the rock, on Jesus Christ, at a time when our world is so sorely divided. This may be our most important witness to the world--that we can sustain our differences and still be united, standing firm on the rock who is Jesus Christ. This is the story we tell. This is the story we live.

We tell and live this story not only for today, but for the future into which God is calling us, knowing not what it looks like, confident only that God will be there to meet us, as God has been for the last one hundred and fifty years, for the last thousands of years and more. Built on a rock, we live the story of God's faithful people living according to God's word, celebrating new practices in spite of old traditions, standing firm on our faith in Jesus Christ.

This is our story, friends. We live it together. May we do so for another 150 years and more.

Again I say, Congratulations and Happy Birthday, Nebraska Synod. May you be blessed in your story, built on a rock.