



Cultivating LOVE

SYNOD ASSEMBLY 2024

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What an honor to be among you as God's gathered people across Nebraska Synod join together in worship. This is my first trip to Nebraska, so thanks to Bishop Scott, Deacon Timothy, and the Synod Assembly team for helping me visit my 45th state.

Since this is my first visit to Nebraska, it felt important to educate myself. I've done some reading, particularly on the history of your people, you Lutherans, and I've found the stories of resilience and hardship, perseverance and faithfulness, devotion to ministry and good humor in trying circumstances, so incredibly moving.

I loved one story from the late 1850s and early 1860s, about Henry Kuhns, the first Lutheran missionary in Nebraska. Maybe you all know this one: Kuhns had a preaching gig one Sunday in Dakota City. But there was a tremendous blizzard that day. Just two people showed up for worship: John Ziegler and Charles Eckhart, who together ran the town's general store. Back in Omaha, when folks asked Pastor Kuhns how things went, he replied, "I had a very large and intelligent audience." The report I read said, "Mr. Ziegler, being a very large man, and Mr. Eckhart, being very intelligent, corroborated the pastor in his assertion."

Then, do you know the story of the Olinger family of Burt County? Michael Olinger, a blacksmith, arrived in 1855 from Virginia. A good Lutheran who traced his ancestry to Pennsylvania and then to the Palatinate, in what's now western Germany, Olinger and his family made up most of the early Lutheran congregation in town. By 1861, they'd saved up enough to begin erecting a church building, only for a storm to destroy the frame; then a prairie fire devoured the debris. In 1867, they tried again; a tornado tore that frame to splinters. In 1868 and 1869, a new foundation was laid, a building almost completed; another tornado, another pile of wreckage. In 1880, Emmanuel Lutheran Church was finished and consecrated at last—and how appropriate that its name was and is "Emmanuel," God with us; God with us, in mercy and grace, is at the heart of our Gospel and epistle passages today.

“Come forward,” Jesus says to the man with a withered hand. “Come forward, and stretch out your hand.”

Why does the man with a withered hand show up for Sabbath services? He’s of little interest to the religious leaders, except, in Mark’s telling, as an object, as a test for Jesus, even perhaps a potential trap. But he should be of interest to us. Why does he show up?

I wonder whether the man with a withered hand shows up because he’s not so different from many of us. Perhaps he shows up because he’s there to listen and to learn. Perhaps he shows up in the hopes of catching sight of the divine. Perhaps he shows up in search of a glimmer of possibility, a glimpse of goodness beyond himself.

“Come forward,” Jesus says to the man with a withered hand. “Come forward, and stretch out your hand.”

Notice that the man with the withered hand never asks Jesus for anything. In the texts we have, there’s no record of him saying a word. He doesn’t ask for healing. He doesn’t ask for salvation. He’s just there, amidst the crowd of Sabbath-day faithful. It is Jesus who makes the first move. Jesus sees him, and he knows him, and he summons him, and he gives the man what he doesn’t even have words to request.

“Come forward,” Jesus says to the man with a withered hand. “Come forward, and stretch out your hand.”

Stretch out your hand to touch mercy. Stretch out your hand to feel grace. Stretch out your hand to find wholeness. Stretch out your hand to experience Emmanuel, God with us.

“Come forward,” I imagine Jesus saying to you. “Come forward, and stretch out your hand.”

What is it that you want today? What do you need? What shape would restoration take in your life if you were completely candid and could make that ask of Jesus?

But also: What is it that you can give? What does your neighbor need? What shape would restoration take in the lives of those around you if you were totally bold and felt empowered by Jesus?

Stretch out your hand to bless. Stretch out your hand to help one another. Stretch out your hand to feed the hungry and offer water to the thirsty. Stretch out your hand to embody the good news of liberating love. Stretch out your hand so that others might also experience Emmanuel, God with us.

I know that you might think that this is foolish talk. Who am I anyway, not even Lutheran and a first-timer in Nebraska? Perhaps you feel as if I am refusing to acknowledge that the church, that you, might feel as if you are trying to work with a withered hand. Fewer resources. Shrinking congregations. Huge questions. Enormous change. Seemingly insurmountable challenges. But here's what I learned from reading about you and your forebears and your current labors: You know how to do this, because you have done it before and you are still doing it, bearing witness, faithfully if imperfectly, over centuries across this land.

You might need to stretch out your hand to remember. Pluck some grain from the fields as the disciples did, and reflect on God's provision. Dip your hand into the waters of one of Nebraska's great rivers, and recall your baptism. Touch the soil that has nourished the inhabitants of these plains for generation upon generation, and think of all who have been sustained by this good earth, the Native peoples who stewarded it before you as well as those who settled after them.

"Come forward," I imagine Jesus saying to you. "Come forward, and stretch out your hand."

Jesus's healing and empowering love is the same as it always was, even if it can be hard to hold onto that reality. These do not feel like the best of times—not for the church, not for this country, not for this world. The words that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church can feel a bit too on the nose, perhaps: "afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down." But he didn't leave us sitting in the pain: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed," he wrote. "Perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies."

Jesus's healing and liberating love is the same as it always was, even if it can be hard to hold onto that reality. These do not feel like the best of times, but this church, this country, this world, need you to embody the mercy and the grace that you have already received. And I know that you can do this, because you have done it before, even in the midst of blizzard and in the aftermath of windstorm, preaching the Word and building your holy sanctuaries. You do it together, God's gathered people, the body of Christ, always, always, always testifying to good news.

As I was reading, I found one reference to the very first sermon that your spiritual ancestor Henry Kuhns preached when he arrived in Nebraska. I wish I'd been able to find the full text, but I couldn't. What I did find, though, was a snippet of information. It's said that his parents picked the text for that first sermon, the words of John the Baptist: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Some translations state it slightly differently: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Jesus's kingdom is not like those of this world. You know that. His power is known through its tenderness, his otherworldly might most visible in his stunning sacrifice, his strength most resonant in his embodied love. Do not forget how he stretched out his own hands, for the sake of the world, on the Cross, and then, rebuking death itself, he established his kingdom and restored all things through his resurrection.

"Come forward," he says to the man with a withered hand as well as to you. "Come forward, and stretch out your hand."

Because he would stretch out his own hands, to accomplish what we could not, he can ask us to stretch out ours, in faithful gratitude. In a gesture like that one, the kingdom is indeed here. It sings of mercy, and it shines of grace. It empowers us to emulate Christ's sacred solidarity, and it inspires us to work for the cause of justice. This is your heritage. This is your treasure. So go now. Stretch out your hands. And bravely share this gift of love with a world that so desperately needs it.

In the name of the One who was and is and is to come, the wildly creative God who made you, the faithful God who called us to come forward and stretch out our hands, and the devoted God who promises never to leave us or forsake us. Amen.