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Sermon on John 12:20-33

Rev. Paul Sartison

Rev. Paul Sartison preached this sermon first at the closing worship of the Saskatoon Conference Convention at Trinity, Rosthern, SK, on Saturday, March 24th, 2012, as outgoing Conference Dean. He preached it again at the chapel of the Lutheran Theological Seminary Saskatoon on Thursday, March 29th.

Text: John 12:20-33

Lent 5, Year B. March 24, 2012.

When Telmor Sartison was elected bishop of the ELCIC way back in 1993, an old friend and colleague of his pulled him aside and said, “Well, what’s it like to have been elected to preside over a dying church?” I’m not sure what answer he gave to that question. But if he’d had John 12 right here in his hands when the question was asked, he might just have said, “Oh, it’s great. Really, it is! It’s what we’re called to be!”

Here is what has happened to us in the last year: Last summer The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada died. Now I’m not saying that because I think that we did something horrible to ourselves at convention last year. I don’t. It’s not a prediction of doom, it’s not a prophecy growing out of some kind of sense of despair, and it’s not a projection based on trends in attendance or churches leaving or pocketbooks and wallets closing. It’s just what happened.

It’s what happens. It’s...what should happen.

For so many years we tried to save our life. While we engaged in a twenty-five year tug of war about a matter that is scarcely mentioned in Scripture, we drained our soul in endless roundabouts of discussion with nothing new ever really being said. We argued past each other about the authority of Scripture, completely losing sight of so many other important things: Did you know there are homeless people out there? That something like ten percent of Canadian children live in poverty? Or that so many people all around us have never heard that there’s this God who loves us with a crazy love that would give up everything for us? For this whole world? We missed all these things because we couldn’t stop pouring our life, willingly or reluctantly, into this debate....into this debate about real live people.

So in July, we decided – *we* decided, because we are the church, not a 60% verses 40% church but one whole church – *we* decided that it was time to die: To let go of trying to hang onto something or protect ourselves and simply to say, “This is where we’re going, this is what we’re deciding to do. If it means that we thrive and have a complete turnaround, great! If it means that we fall into the earth and die, then so be it.”

So we died. It’s true: We died. What was will not be again. We will never again be the same church, the same people, the same expression of the Body of Christ that we were before. Something new is being born, but we’re not quite sure what. It may be that we won’t really know what’s coming next for a long time.

So for now, something has died.

Now I haven't really come right out and said it, but I'm sure you have all figured out by now that what I'm talking about is Structural Renewal. It's true! Ever since the ELCIC took its first baby steps in the fall of '85 and early '86 we've been wringing our hands wondering how we can make ends meet and how we can make this work well and how we can organize our lives better so that we are being as faithful as we possibly can be.

When I was a student at LTS, I did in fact hear people argue about how the church should be structured, and they quoted the Bible to prove their points. It seems that with each new national bishop there's been a major or minor restructuring, reshuffling, or rearranging, and it's taken a lot of energy, and a lot of good things and maybe not-so-great things have come and gone with all those changes. Since last summer's acceptance in principle of the recommendations of the Structural Renewal Task Force I have listened to people go on at great length about how this will take care of whatever ails us as a church. And I have listened to so many more people go on about how this might just be the dumbest decision we could have made at this time. It'll sink us for sure!

And whether you or I like Structural Renewal or don't like it, we are the Body of Christ, called to give our life for the life of the world. Of course, everything I have said up to this point could have been said about those other decisions we made last summer. We've argued about sexuality since the day we were born as the ELCIC, we've poured our souls into it while we all – on both sides, or all three sides, or however many sides there are – missed so many other things in the life of the church and the world that were very important.

And last summer we died. We left something behind and moved into something new and uncertain. In July, we decided – *we* decided, because we are the church, not a 60% verses 40% church but one whole church – *we* decided that it was time to die: To let go of trying to hang onto something or protect ourselves and simply to say, "This is where we're going, this is what we're deciding to do. If it means that we thrive and have a complete turnaround, great! If it means that we fall into the earth and die, then so be it."

A lot of people were very broken up about these decisions. A lot still are. A lot of people were really happy about them. And a lot still are.

It's really complicated, you know, because the dividing line runs down the middle of families, it divides old friends and seminary classmates, it divides congregations. One of the congregations that left is the church in Edmonton where I was baptized, and where my parents hauled my siblings and me every Sunday when we were all so small. The pastor who left the ELCIC with that congregation was a good friend of mine at Seminary. It's complicated, and all of this comes close to home for us all in one way or another.

Maybe that's why nobody clapped when we made hard decisions, because we all knew that some of us would be glad and some of us would be heartbroken or angry. So instead of clapping we sang: "Great is thy faithfulness, O God my father...." We sang pious old hymns that just kind of course through everyone's blood, we sang four-part harmonies that for so many of us are as natural as breathing, we sang these old words of faith that all

of us friends and opponents share. Songs like this: “When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, “It is well, it is well with my soul.””

We sang, we decided, and we died. We left something behind. Something new is coming along. And whether you or I like same-sex anything or don't like it, we are the Body of Christ, called to give our life for the life of the world.

It's a strange time in the life of the church. It's been interesting and occasionally odd being your Dean during this time, and it's a strange time for all of us, because once we make decisions about things – restructuring or sexuality, communion of young children, ordaining women – we need to figure out how we're going to be these people and this church in this new way in the world. And whenever we go somewhere new, whether we like where we're going or not, something is going to die; something's going to be left behind....

But then there's always something new coming along as well. We died last summer, sure, just like we've died so many times....but we are being raised up. And of course that's the way it should be. Of course we died, because we're the Body of Christ, and the living breathing body of Christ dies – on a cross on a hill outside the city. Of course we'll die. But the Body of Christ dies and rises, so that the world might live.

So for now, it's OK if we're a seed in the ground: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains alone. But if it dies it bears much fruit.” For now we're a seed in the ground....but something new will poke up out of the earth one day, and then what a plant we will be: We'll be colour and life and brilliance and fragrance and beauty that gives pleasure to everyone who passes by and joins in the growing; we will be grain and food and goodness and fullness and shelter and warmth for everyone who is hungry, or who needs a refuge, or needs a safe place. What a plant we will be!

So maybe right now we're a seed in the ground. But Christ calls life out of death; Christ raises up what is fallen. It's a promise. It's true. For as surely as Christ surprised us all outside an empty tomb one crisp spring morning, so we too will be called to life and raised to leave behind an empty tomb.

In this reading from John there's something else that we so often overlook: Jesus says, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain.” Or like it says in the Greek: “It remains alone.” While we tried to preserve our life, while our fear led us again and again to take the safe course, we were alone, and fighting to keep what is ours. But that's a lonely life, and it's not what we are called to do. We are called to give our life for the world around us – it's called loving God and loving our neighbor. We're called to give our life, so of course that might mean that we die along the way. So we've fallen into the ground now, and died. And when a seed falls into the ground it becomes something more, it's bigger than alone, it bears fruit, it becomes many, it is not alone. We have fallen into the ground, and we find that we are in the company of all those who have died or who are suffering. We've fallen into the ground, and maybe now we'll begin to see that we're in the same cold earth as all those others who have lost, who have died, who

have been counted as the losers and the outsiders in our world. We're in the company of sisters and brothers in the Body of Christ who struggle with decisions and who disagree and are never quite sure what's happening next. We have fallen into the ground, like a grain of wheat, like a seed, and maybe we'll find that we're not alone because we're in the company of a whole bunch of people we never thought would be in here with us – you figure out who that might mean for you.

And this – this is the other thing that will happen: Because Christ has died and Christ is risen, we will all find ourselves – we really will! – in the good company of those with whom we have disagreed, in the gracious presence of those whom we don't understand or who have left our company because they cannot live with the decisions we have made. We will not be alone, and we will be brought together, raised up even now from the cold earth to be a plant, a tree, a gift of life to the world.

Perhaps we could ask one another, then, what it's like to spend a day in the dying church, what it's like to be called to go out and serve as members of this dying church. We could ask our newly elected Dean, "So what's it like to be called upon to be a Dean in a dying church?" And we could all answer, "It's like being called into a world of promise, called into a life filled with hope." For when we are called to die, we are called to be in the presence of one who has already died and given his life for us.

And that is just the thing: Because Christ has died and risen, everything is a promise: The dead will live, the broken will be healed. The divided will be brought together. The church will die. The church will rise. The Body of Christ is given for the life of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.