

January 15, 2012  
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**Grace and Peace to you from God our Loving Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!**

*Thank you so much allowing me to be here this morning at Bethesda! It's a privilege to share the gospel with you today and I hope some of you will come and see the presentation today at 11 in the Living Room. It's fitting to have a meeting about "Living-Learning" communities in a Living Room! I'm glad this church has one. For those of you who are wondering, "What exactly is a living-learning community?" again I would say, "Come and see!"*

My brother and sister both grew up in what I would call a "living-learning community" at Holden Village, a Lutheran Retreat Center in the mountains of Washington State. We moved to Wisconsin when I was 6 months old, so I didn't get to share that experience with them. The home I remember was a brick house overlooking the Mississippi River in a small town of a 100 people. Every Sunday I remember getting in the family car, and driving through the hills to Sabylund Lutheran which was in an even smaller town in the country.

I remember always trying to make my family late because then we would have to sneak up to the balcony. I loved the balcony. It was carpeted and had hot water pipes running underneath the floorboards. I would crawl under the pew and be in this comfortable womb-like state as I listened to sermons and songs and scripture. That was church for me. Lying under the pews and listening. I looked forward to this place of peace and rest and reflection in life, even as a child. I would even say I began to sense God's presence in my life there under that pew.

This Sunday we take a break from the Gospel of Mark and have our gospel from John. Mark is one of my favorite gospels particularly because it moves so quickly from event to event. It is action oriented. The word "immediately" is used profusely. You can imagine this narrative forming around campfires in ancient Palestine with someone asking, "Have you heard the story about Jesus?" I love the Gospel of Mark, but sometimes you need a break from all *that campfire story* action.

The Gospel of John gives us that *breathing space*. In the Gospel of John there seems to be no shortage of time. When Jesus calls his first disciples the words hardly convey *a purpose-filled journey*. It just says, "The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee." **Is that any way to start a church?** It sounds as though Jesus could have just as well decided to go somewhere else that day. But this relaxed atmosphere of Jesus' call to the disciples is similar to the rest of the tone of John's gospel. In today's text it's interesting to note that Nathanael, one of the first disciples, seems to be praised for spending time in reflection under the fig tree.

In the gospel of John there is time to reflect. There is time for relationships to form. There is time for Jesus to have a late night conversation with Nicodemus and to chat with the woman at the well. There's time for five chapters straight of Jesus talking in the upper room during the

last supper. There's time for more wine at a wedding. There is time to raise Lazarus from the dead.

But it's not a calm story. There are dramatic interruptions in the lives of most of the people involved. Jesus shows up in peoples' lives and they are forever changed. There are deep relational implications for these fishermen when Jesus says "follow me."

Those types of transformations can be scary. If, like Samuel in our Old Testament lesson, God calls and you recognize the voice, then your life will not be the same. You are caught in the net of community in a new way, that makes a claim on your life, but somehow this net also frees us from a world that demands our time, our space, and our **allegiance**.

In 1934, 10 Baptists from the United States were invited to travel to the Holy Land and Europe before the Baptist World Alliance Congress in Berlin. Since the next Baptist convention would be in Atlanta, a promising young pastor named Michael King from that city was one of the ten pastors invited on the special tour.

The Congress occurred during the time when the Third Reich had established itself as the power over Germany. Nazi Swastika flags were right next to the crosses at the front of the assembly. Nazi Germany's press corps noted with interest, and I'm sure some contempt, the presence of 30 black Baptists from around the world in the midst of the assembly. It must have been a scary place to be for Rev. King.

During his visit to Germany, Michael King found solace in visiting historical sites of the Reformation and found strength in the stories of predecessors in the faith. He became fascinated by the story of Martin Luther translating the New Testament during his exile in Wartburg Castle, and he was so moved by the story of the German Reformer, that when he returned home he began referring to himself as "Martin Luther" King and at the same time began referring to his young son Michael as Martin Luther King Jr.

[\*Note from Josh: the Kings rarely spoke about this name change. King Sr. addressed it in his 1980 autobiography. He claimed that he had always wanted to call his son Martin, and that it was a doctor's mistake or the wishes of his mother to call him Martin on her deathbed that forced the change. However, the historical record and the inclusion of "Luther" points to the trip to Germany. Close friends and family of the Kings called them "Mike" or "Michael" throughout their lives. The source of the influence of the Bible translation is a pastor serving in Wartburg.]

Something happened in Germany to Michael King that was transformational and powerful enough to change his name, a name that has become as famous throughout the world as the first Martin Luther. It's interesting to note that Martin Luther had also changed his name from Luder to Luther, after his discovery of grace, to *reflect* the Greek word *eleutheros* which means "Free." When Martin Luther signed his name it intentionally said, **Martin Free. He wanted that to be his name.** And so when the Kings took that name they also shared the meaning...**Freedom.** *When Lutherans speak authoritatively about how Martin Luther never wanted a church to have his name, they don't seem to realize that it's not his name, but a description of living in grace and having a church named "Free" is pretty cool.*

**What changes a name, a life?** What frees us from all that seeks to threaten and control us? For Christians it's belonging to Christ. When we say we believe in the message of Jesus, his name makes a claim on all our lives, as we are known as Christians. How do we live out that name as Christ's body on earth? When the first disciples followed Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Galilee they may not have known they were getting a new name, but many early Christians would end up not just sharing that name but dying for bearing it.

This December I travelled around the country to other sites where we are hoping to set up young adult communities like the one here in New Haven. I met with some really interesting people living out that Christian calling in different ways [A group of community organizers in Spokane, Kathryn Lohre the new President of the National Council of Churches, and the President of Luther Seminary. I especially enjoyed meeting with the leader of a nonprofit who has partnered with Habitat for Humanity to purchase five lots of land in Bellingham, WA in order to start a small footprint home project. He wants a living-learning community to be a part of it].

But probably my favorite conversation was with a young adult I was inviting into the vision team for this new ministry. His ancestors are from India, but he is a 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Tanzanian. He was raised as a Muslim, but while going to Concordia College in Moorhead, MN he experienced a conversion to Christianity. It snuck up on him while he was asleep in a car. He woke up thinking he needed to find a church, but didn't know why. He went to the basement of the house where he was staying and sat on a couch, and the church and God found him there in a conversation with the home's owner. This conversion had huge implications on his life and his relationship with his family...Just as these first disciples would have experienced. And the courage with which he has met those changes is truly inspiring. He went to seminary and is finishing his internship at a church in Minneapolis this year.

I've been staying at the Overseas Ministry Study Center, just up the hill, and so I've gotten a chance to be a part of a community of missionaries that witness these types of dramatic conversions in their work overseas. It's inspiring to remember that God is still calling people into his church in radical ways. >>And that's what many young adults want in their faith experience, not less faith but more than what they see in us, the traditional church.

>>But congregations are so valuable. Where else in society do people gather across generations anymore? And yet the one generation that is missing in almost all congregations is young adults. Being a part of a congregation for them often seems like being a member of an organization: you pay your dues, you do your duty once or twice a week, you check in and check out, but without really living out faith in daily lives in any noticeable way. They think we have begun to see faith as an empty ritual to be performed, as Eli's church did in our Old Testament lesson, unable to see visions or hear God's word. I think young adults often see us as holding people back instead of freeing them.

**But what we do here is a part of that radical reign of God even though it seems ordinary.** Gathering like this is the freeing work of the kingdom of God. Coming together in community to listen to God's Word for us is part of our transformational call.

**Here at Bethesda God is at work in wonderful ways, as you gather around the Word and receive Christ's body to be his body in the world.** I want young adults to gather here in New Haven and experience the life of faith at this church, and to learn from it, but Bethesda is also being offered the opportunity to learn from these young adults, to hear their voices, that may be a Word from God for you.

We all have voices given from God, and we all are called to continually help each other listen for God's voice for us in each new day. And that is a path we are intended to walk together, across generations and across differences, with the gospel of Jesus Christ as a guide. That is the experience God is inviting young adults into and the experience that God is inviting partner churches into as we continue to walk forward in this new ministry.

This world moves so quickly, youth and young adults are as overwhelmed as their parents by the busy-ness. **The Markiness of life's *immediatels*, but is it the gospel at the center of this hurry, or have the decisions we've made come to control us, become our idols?... to keep us from transforming because we are always moving too fast!** We ask, just as Paul does in today's Epistle, "Have we become "dominated" by our busy lifestyles, **and our escapes from them?** "

Young adults have learned from their elders how to juggle many things, and how to push through difficulties to attain goals. How to live in debt instead of freedom. Overburdening ourselves often becomes a point of pride for us. We learn to run all the time, and we teach each other to constantly keep moving. Some people, especially pastors approach church the same way. *But most people in our culture have begun to see church as nothing more than an "app" to add on to their busy lives and plug into their operating system.*

But sometimes we need to slow down, sometimes we need to unplug. Church can offer a place where we slow down together, and let God's transformation take place in our lives. Where we can take time for reflection, **time under the fig tree** to listen to the voice of God together, to hear God's Word for us, and be ready for his call, as Nathaneal was in Galilee. Church is where we can see the divine bridge God gives us in Jesus Christ, the heavens opened and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man as God comes to us as his body on earth, as bearers of his name, in need of his grace everyday.

Being a Christian makes a claim on your life, a claim that we need to ponder and discuss...to share and proclaim about. That claim is the mark of freedom not bondage. But being a Christian means being called into community. As Paul reminds the Corinthians and all of us...We are bought with a price. We are one body. And God raised the Lord and will raise us by his power. Pauls tells us "Anyone united with the Lord becomes one Spirit with him." And when we are in that Spirit we say together "speak Lord for your servants are listening" and from our knees we seek to follow God's Word for us, God's calling for us into the world, as we call others to "come and see."

May the Peace that passes all understanding keep your heart and mind in Christ Jesus our Lord!  
Amen.