

BISHOP'S SERMON FOR ASSEMBLY WEEKEND
JUNE 6, 2010
TEXTS FOR 2 PENTECOST

I begin this morning giving thanks for the ministry we began together called the Virginia Lutheran Homes. We have three excellent ministries of care for older people, and I give thanks to God that my father is now enjoying the care at Brandon Oaks in Roanoke.

I have been there many, many times and enjoyed many meals, and I have found that sitting around those tables with the residents, listening to their conversations, can change your life.

One evening, I sat at table with dad and four other senior gentlemen. At one point in the meal I turned to the one to my right, and I said to him, "Ralph [that's what I'll call him], what was one of the most life-changing moments of your life?"

And this man, who had been rather silent, became very animated, and he began a story that took almost 20 minutes to tell. The story would leave him breathless at times as he struggled with intensity to answer my question.

He told me of how he suddenly had a chance to go home for a week before being shipped over seas during World War II. He so wanted to get home. He got his pay, and he was in Norfolk trying to get to Boston. His sergeant told him to go out on the road at the gate of the base and hitchhike. Sure enough, a commercial truck driver picked him up. He told Ralph that he could take him as far as New York, so Ralph climbed up into the cab and off they went. All along the way, the truck driver paid for snacks and meals, each time saying to Ralph, "You are serving in the war in my place." When they came to New York, the truck driver stopped at the bus station gave Ralph bus money to get to Boston and money for another meal. Ralph said over and over, "Give me your name so that I can repay you." The truck driver just repeated over and over, "You are serving in the war in my place." Ralph never learned the truck driver's name, but that trip of kindness and generosity was what he instantly spoke of when I asked him from his whole 90 year life to speak to what was life changing.

A few weeks later, I was sad to hear that Ralph died. In his obituary I read that he was known for his philanthropy and that it was suspected that a great amount of his real giving had been done anonymously. Many recipients of his kindness never knew his name.

Within Ralph's life was the life of another whose life seemed to have greatly affected Ralph's life.

I love the 23rd psalm's words, 'He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul/ he refreshes my soul/he renews my soul.'

Our President of Roanoke College, Michael Maxey, said in his inauguration speech, "the Lutheran Church is our breath."

Psalm 63 says, "Because your steadfast love is better than life itself, my lips praise you!"

Whether the woman at Nain who got her son back, or the woman at Shunem who saw the breath returned to her son, or the psalmist who had desperately asked for help who discovered he had been healed, or St. Paul who speaks to having the wind knocked out of him so that he might catch a new breath, they all speak to a new life that has inspired and totally changed the old life. And they will never be the same.

And the best way to tell their stories is in terms of dying and rising to new life. To speak from a time of mourning into a time of dancing, from a sackcloth life into a life clothed with joy.

Your baptism is just such a story. It is a story of dying and rising to new life. It was a time for your parents of dancing and joy. God publicly said, "You belong to me. Receive my very own breath, my Holy Spirit." And baptized Paul will write, "For it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh, I live for the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." Being raised up from the water is much like Ralph climbing down from that truck's cab.

The Christ spent his life for me; I will spend my life for others. And I will tell others about the time that Christ rescued me, picked me up, carried me, and I will tell others of how Jesus took my place in the war against sin, evil, and death.

Martin Luther in his treatise, *The Freedom of the Christian*, spoke to how Jesus Christ gave us his very life and how he took upon himself our very life. And then Luther spoke to how then I should give my life for my neighbor and take my neighbor's life upon myself. How I should stop and notice, pick him up, carry him, feed him, restore him, and perhaps, just perhaps by so sharing the name of my Lord.....restore the soul within him, change his life.

Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life; I am the vine you are the branches. I will keep seeking ways to knock you off your high horse or lowly mule so that I can restore life in you. I will seek to send my servants to breathe life back in you. I have made you my own, and by my grace, I have throughout your life established you as a mighty mountain. And I may indeed need to hide my face from you for the sake of your rediscovering where life comes from. And I will be the very one who stops your funeral procession in its tracks, for I will raise you up to eternal life. And you may entrust to me your whole life, and you may entrust to me all the ones you hold dear, for I will guard them until the very end."

And what of the ones God entrusts to us?

Elijah cries out to God, “O Lord my God, let this child’s breath come into him again.” It could just as easily be translated, “O Lord my God, let this child’s soul come into him again.” The breath of the child has gone; the soul of the child has gone. But the servant of God is fighting for both, praying for both to be restored, refreshed, renewed.

Elijah is praying, “Lord God, return this child’s breath into him, return this child’s soul into him.” “Do not let this child be but one more to die, Lord. Do not let him be the expedient one, Lord. Return his soul, his very breath to him!” This is a cry of intensity because it really matters to Elijah!

What of the millions of children this very day who need their souls restored, who need their souls refreshed and renewed? In the prayers of the church today, are there prayers for the children who are hungry, who need the school breakfast programs in the summer as well as fall, winter, and spring? Globally, is there health care for children short of breath, for children suffering from malaria? Is it all right to have some of them be but one more to die, is it all right for those we don’t know personally to be the expedient ones? Is not the crucifixion but one more story of one whose death was expedient in the eyes of the governor and religious leaders?

Lord God help us to work together to restore the souls of your children. Let your Holy Spirit restore us so that we may be ambassadors for your good story and ambassadors of your generosity for the needs of others.

Ralph was breathless at times as he spoke with such intensity about the one who had changed his life. You might say, the truck driver had restored his soul, gave him a totally different view of life and death.

We are Ambassadors for Christ sharing the Good News. This is the theme of the synod assembly as we meet at Roanoke College this Sunday.

Ambassadors of the one who has given us his very soul, who has given us a different view of death and life. I pray that I might tell the story of Jesus to others as intensely as Ralph spoke about that truck driver! I pray that I might have the same level of intensity of Elijah in pleading to God and others for the restoration of children’s souls. I give thanks for the way I see the life of Christ impacting your lives. If you are asked at dinner sometime, will you have your story of rescue ready? We might all share that story with our very own children and grandchildren.

We are ambassadors for Christ, sharing the good news of the Lord whose steadfast love is better than life itself. And knowing this we live with a joy that has to say, ‘you have turned my mourning into dancing, so that my lips shall praise you and not be silent. O Lord, my God, I will give thanks to you forever!’

