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BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH

ELKHORN, NEBRASKA

SEPTEMBER 9, 2007

PASTOR LEE GRIESS

1 PASTOR MARK FRY: Thank you very much. I know how
2 hard it has been. Believe me, I know how hard it is, but I
3 cannot tell you how proud I am of this church and the awesome
4 gift that you have been to me and my wife and my family, and
5 the awesome gift you are to this world.

6 And I will promise you that the future won't either
7 be easy, because we're doing new things.

8 I found myself in Psalm 71 this morning out on my
9 deck with my flashlight and it's a wonderful story of since
10 my youth you've been teaching me, and so even to old gray
11 hair will you lead me.

12 I don't know if that's all going to be here, but I
13 have the gray hairs and God is teaching me new things every
14 day, and it's an honor to be learning alongside you and I
15 want to thank you for that.

16 Our guest today is Lee Griess. Lee is a pastor, had
17 a very faithful ministry for years and years and is
18 continuing to do so now.

19 He's an assistant to the bishop, kind of Pastor
20 Wenda's and my pastor, Bishop deFreese, and he has a team of
21 assistants and Lee is one of those right-hand people for the
22 bishop for all of the Lutheran churches in the state of
23 Nebraska.

24 So would you give a warm welcome to Lee and thank
25 God for his being with us.

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(Applause)

PASTOR GRIESS: Good morning. It's a high and holy privilege to be with you this morning as you recognize your pastors, as you celebrate these twenty years of ministry.

I want to do something I hadn't planned on doing. I want to come down and pray for them, because they are much too humble to pray for themselves, and I would like to pray for them a prayer of thanks and blessing for twenty years of faithful ministry and for your ministry of years to come.

Dear God, we give you thanks for your faithfulness to us and your providing for us and the church, for faithful pastors, for Mark and Wenda, for standing with them in their years of ministry, for strengthening them, for accompanying them in good times and difficult times, for the blessing of your spirit that rests upon them, and for this congregation that surrounds them.

Let your spirit move mightily among them and fill their hearts.

Guide and lead them as they lead these people, that together a great work of God's love might be done here, here and throughout the entire world.

Bless them in these twenty years and in the years to come.

In your name we may pray this. Amen.

There once was a basketball coach. I know that's

1 the wrong illustration for this time of the year, but it
2 doesn't work with football.

3 So there once was a basketball coach, a good coach,
4 a wise coach, a crafty old coach, but one year something very
5 unusual happened to him.

6 One year everyone who tried out for the team was
7 very, very tall and they all wanted to play the same
8 position. They all wanted to be center.

9 So the good old coach called his players together
10 and explained to them that in a basketball team, to be
11 successful, we need all kinds of different kinds of players.

12 Some that will devote themselves to rebounding and
13 blocking out, some that will bring the ball up the court and
14 start the play, others whose primary role is to pass the ball
15 so others will score.

16 He explained that very carefully to them and he was
17 sure he had made his point.

18 So he asked them the question. He said who wants to
19 be the play maker and bring the ball up the court?

20 And no one raised their hand.

21 Who would like to be the rebounder and block people
22 out and rebound the ball?

23 No one raised their hand.

24 Who would like to be defenders and basically work on
25 defending and blocking and all that hard work?

1 And no one raised their hand.

2 Then he asked who would like to be center and score
3 a lot of points and everybody's hands went up and you could
4 see that old coach, he just about exploded.

5 How can it be? How can a basketball team have all
6 centers? It isn't possible.

7 It doesn't work that way. We need guards. We need
8 play makers.

9 We need rebounders and we need defenders and you
10 could hear his voice rising with intensity as he told his
11 players these things.

12 He was sure he had made his point. He was certain
13 that they understood now and so he slowly asked this question
14 again.

15 Who wants to pass the ball so that others will
16 score?

17 He was certain they understood, but he was wrong,
18 because no one raised their hand.

19 And even though later on he would tell his players
20 what role they would play on the team that year, some as
21 guards, some as play makers, some as rebounders, and only one
22 center, and even though that year the team was made up of all
23 very tall and talented players, that team did not win very
24 many games, because all the players wanted to be the main
25 man.

1 Now, there is a lesson in that little story about
2 the basketball team for our lives together in the church.

3 It's a lesson that comes to us from the 12th Chapter
4 of Paul's Letter to the Corinthians and it's on the screen
5 here now. Why don't you read those words with me, if you
6 would.

7 "Now, there are varieties of gifts, but the same
8 spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same
9 Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the
10 same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is
11 given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

12 Now I know you know that St. Paul was not a
13 basketball coach.

14 In fact, the peach basket hadn't even been hung up
15 on the wall when Paul was around.

16 Paul was a church builder, an evangelist, the first
17 missionary of the Christian church.

18 His job was to proclaim the Gospel and in
19 proclaiming the Gospel bring God's church to birth on earth.

20 But there is a lesson in the same words of Paul for
21 that basketball team and for all us in our lives together in
22 the church.

23 For Paul's words are the same as that basketball
24 coach's. Teamwork.

25 Basketball teams need it, and so does the church,

1 for in the church we are all one among many, and yet many who
2 are one in Christ Jesus.

3 God in the mystery of faith and in the creation has
4 created us all different, given each of us special gifts and
5 abilities and special roles to play in the body of Christ.

6 We are all important to the work of Christ and to
7 God's church.

8 Each of us has an important role to pay. Each of us
9 is indispensable in the work of Christ.

10 Let me explain that to you. Let me tell you a
11 little story to explain that.

12 Picture, if you would, a quiet residential street
13 and one of those big orange highway trucks comes creeping
14 along the street and pulls to a stop.

15 A worker climbs out of the cab, walks around the
16 back and gets a shovel and he begins to dig a big hole
17 between the curb and the sidewalk.

18 When he's done digging the hole he puts the shovel
19 back in the back of the truck and walks around and gets in
20 the cab again.

21 The second worker gets out and comes around back,
22 takes the shovel and fills the hole in, puts the shovel in
23 the back of the truck and the truck moves down the street
24 another 20, 30 yards and the whole process is repeated again.

25 Across the street in a house is an elderly lady

1 watching this.

2 She can only stand it so long until curiosity gets
3 the best of her and she jumps out of her house, rushes across
4 the street when they are digging the third hole and filling
5 in it.

6 She says, "What in the world are you doing?"

7 The one worker says, "We are part of the urban
8 beautification project."

9 She says, "What is so beautiful about digging a hole
10 and filling it back in?"

11 "No, no, no, you don't understand," the second
12 worker said, "the guy who plants the trees is out sick
13 today."

14 (Laughter)

15 Now, the story is not true. It's just too
16 ridiculous to be true, but there is truth in the story, isn't
17 there?

18 There is a truth in the story for us as our lives
19 together in the church, for when we fail to do our part, when
20 we fail to offer our own gifts of time, talent and treasure,
21 when we fail to be an active member of the body of Christ in
22 our congregation, we are like those highway workers. All we
23 do is leave a hole behind.

24 God has given each of us an important role to play
25 in the body of Christ and each of us has an indispensable

1 part to play as we together serve Christ with our lives
2 together.

3 Because, again, we are one among many, and yet many
4 who are one.

5 Each of us is important to the work of Christ.
6 There are no first class, there are no second class citizens
7 in the kingdom of God. God blesses each of us to be part.

8 I'm a St. Louis Cardinals fan, so it's hard to give
9 an illustration from the New York Yankees.

10 I apologize to you Yankee fans, but that's just the
11 way it is, I can't help myself.

12 But I have to give you an illustration from the New
13 York Yankees, because it's too good not to.

14 A few years ago Yankee pitcher David Cone
15 accomplished something only fourteen other players in the
16 history of major league baseball has accomplished.

17 David Cone threw a perfect game. Only 14 times in
18 the history of major league baseball, thousands and thousands
19 of games have been pitched, and only fourteen times has this
20 been accomplished.

21 I don't know if you know, but a perfect game is when
22 the pitcher pitches perfectly.

23 I know you are not supposed to explain things with
24 the same word, but there is no other way to do it.

25 When the pitcher is perfect in his pitching, that is

1 to say there are no walks, no errors, no one reaches base,
2 only the exact number of players necessary come to the plate
3 and they all end up out.

4 Nine innings, three outs, 27 players, they all come
5 up and they all make an out.

6 It is perhaps the most difficult accomplishment in
7 all of major league sports and it almost didn't happen.

8 It almost didn't happen. It took a diving catch in
9 the top of the 9th inning by left fielder Rick LeDee to
10 preserve the record.

11 Even though David Cone pitched magnificently, he
12 only through 88 pitches, some pitchers can throw 30 in one
13 inning, but only 88 pitches for the whole game and 68 of them
14 were strikes and it still took a diving catch by Rick LeDee.

15 In the top of 9th a pinch hitter came to the plate
16 and the first pitch that David Cone threw him he hit a line
17 drive to deep left center field.

18 Later on Rick LeDee would say this. "I was
19 determined to give it my best effort, whether I caught the
20 ball or not. No matter what happened, I was going to dive
21 for the ball and I guess I just got lucky and the ball fell
22 in my mitt."

23 So here is the question for you. Did David Cone
24 pitch a perfect game?

25 Or was his team responsible for putting his name in

1 the record book?

2 Well, the answer is, of course, both. They couldn't
3 have done it had he not been pitching so perfectly, and he
4 could not have done it had they not played perfect behind
5 him.

6 There is a message in that for our lives together as
7 part of the church.

8 Each of us has an indispensable role to play, and if
9 we fail to play it the whole team suffers.

10 That's not to say that God will not accomplish what
11 God needs to accomplish without us.

12 Martin Luther in his explanation to the Lord's
13 Prayer says just that; that God's kingdom comes no matter
14 what we do, and sometimes in spite of it, but God's kingdom
15 also comes through us.

16 Each of us has an important role to pay, and when we
17 fail to be that part of the body of Christ, when we fail to
18 be an active, supporting, contributing, working member of the
19 congregation, the whole body of Christ is weakened and our
20 witness to God's love is not what it could be, because we all
21 have incredible treasure to share with this world.

22 I read not long ago about a church in Oklahoma that
23 discovered oil on the church property.

24 I don't know whether you are doing any more digging
25 around here, Mark, or not, but that may be something to look

1 for. Who knows.

2 After they had discovered oil they had a special
3 congregational meeting and they had to decide what to do with
4 the windfall.

5 They decided that they would pay off the debt for
6 their church building, make some needed repairs and then set
7 aside a certain amount of money for a nest egg for the
8 congregation and whatever was left over they voted to give
9 equally to all the members of church.

10 As soon as that motion was made a man in the back
11 jumped up and waved his hands and said, "I move that we take
12 in no new members."

13 (Laughter)

14 That church in Oklahoma had a tremendous gift, a
15 great treasure, but they chose not to share it with others.

16 The treasure was not the oil; the treasure was not
17 the proceeds that came from selling the oil.

18 The treasure was the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The
19 message of God's love and forgiveness, of God's salvation to
20 us through faith in Christ Jesus and the new life that is
21 ours when that salvation is part of our lives.

22 And you know what? This congregation, even if it
23 doesn't discover oil, has the same treasure.

24 We all have that treasure to share. As part of the
25 Nebraska Synod we share that treasure, don't we?

1 Our ministry together as part of the Nebraska Synod
2 stretches from the banks of the Missouri River to the high
3 plains foothills of the panhandle.

4 Together as members of the church our ministry
5 extends to people of Asian descent in northeast Nebraska, our
6 outreach to the people of the Lakota Sioux Nation in
7 Scottsbluff, our witness outposts throughout the state to
8 Hispanic and Latino ministries, our outreach to the Sudanese
9 among us in this state, and to the people of Pastor Helen's
10 congregation in the inner city of Omaha.

11 Together through our offerings we support Christian
12 counseling for those in need, extend a hand of help and
13 concern to those with physical and developmental challenges
14 through Mosaic.

15 We reach out to the poor in food pantries. Our work
16 goes on day and night.

17 That's to say nothing of the work that we do
18 together also as part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in
19 America and its worldwide witness.

20 We have 260 missionaries scattered around the globe
21 in thirty countries who day and night, while we are even
22 sleeping, proclaim the Gospel of Christ.

23 We support orphanages, medical mission clinics where
24 there are no doctors, care for those with diseases that we
25 will never encounter.

1 We reach out to people in a variety of ways. This
2 past year, 2006, our offerings to the Lutheran World Hunger
3 program of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
4 exceeded the astounding total of twenty million dollars that
5 supports a myriad of programs that literally save lives, save
6 lives of people we will never meet, places we will never go,
7 both day and night around the globe, and I could go on and
8 on.

9 We have a great treasure to share, a treasure that
10 God has given us. Each of us has a part to do in doing that.

11 This last month I was in Chicago at the 10th
12 Biennial Assembly of the ELCA and our presiding bishop, Mark
13 Hanson, challenged us to be a church that is sent. A church
14 that is sent; not a church that is settled.

15 He said to us there, "We dare not be a settled
16 church, one that is content to be part of the culture around
17 us.

18 "We must be a sent church. A church that will not
19 rest until all have heard of the Gospel of God's love.

20 "A settled church looks inward. A settled church is
21 content to strive to meet its own needs. A settled church
22 exists only for itself.

23 "But a sent church looks outward to the world around
24 it. A sent church is a mission to its neighbors, untiringly
25 serving the needs of the poor, working for justice for the

1 oppressed, proclaiming the good news of God's love.

2 "We must be a sent church. A church in which each
3 of us sees ourselves as an indispensable part of the mission
4 and ministry of that congregation."

5 James Hewitt tells a story about a family that came
6 into a movie theater and on the way in the nine year old son
7 stopped at the refreshment stand to buy a box of popcorn.

8 And when he had gotten the popcorn he came back into
9 the theater and the lights had already dimmed because the
10 previews were on and his eyes were not adjusting yet.

11 So he stood there in the aisle looking for his
12 family, unable to see them.

13 To his dismay, not long after he got in there, the
14 lights darkened even further as the main feature began and he
15 began to panic. He didn't know where his family was at.

16 He finally in a loud voice shouted, "Where is my
17 family?"

18 I can't help but believe that if Jesus were here
19 this morning, he would say, "Where is my family?"

20 And we would be able to say here we are. We're here
21 in worship. Here we are in prayer.

22 Here we are in study as we deepen our faith
23 together.

24 Here we are as part of the Nebraska Synod, and the
25 Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, all over the world at

1 the same time, spreading the good news of God's love.

2 Because we would see ourselves as one among many,
3 and yet many who are one, the family of God in service to the
4 world around us.

5 God bless you on your ministry together, your
6 ministry as part of our Nebraska Synod and Evangelical
7 Lutheran Church of America, and your ministry after twenty
8 years and years to come.

9 Remember that when the worship ends this morning,
10 the real service, the real service then begins.

11 In Jesus' name. Amen.

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