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BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH  
ELKHORN, NEBRASKA  
DECEMBER 9, 2007  
PASTOR LOWELL NELSON

1 PASTOR LOWELL NELSON: Good morning. Thanks for  
2 having enough guts to come to Consecration Sunday.

3 I come to you with the good news of Jesus Christ;  
4 that Jesus was born, lived, died, and was resurrected.

5 And the good news that we have is that we are now  
6 new creatures, new people, in this faith.

7 And anything that happens today, I want you to know  
8 that good news.

9 And what I want to talk about today is stewardship  
10 from a different point of view.

11 For you who are guests today, or are here for the  
12 first or second time, I hope you enjoy this message.

13 For you who are members here, this is the time of  
14 reflection about for 2008 to determine what we are going to  
15 pledge to the Lord's work through Bethany.

16 For anybody here I hope these are good words for  
17 you.

18 The Christ-centered identity is meant to say, I'm  
19 not going to talk a lot about stewardship techniques or  
20 tactics.

21 I'm just going to talk about who we are as people of  
22 God.

23 Next slide, please.

24 As you get to know me, I like shapes. I like  
25 triangles and circles.

1           I think they help me understand the simplicity and  
2 power of God.

3           But the first thing I wanted to share with you, as  
4 you get to know me, I have been here now for two months, and  
5 we have teased what you call somebody like myself, and I  
6 guess we call myself a pastor in training.

7           Yesterday I had a great experience. I want to share  
8 it with you, because you are going to be able to see me grow  
9 over the next few years.

10           What happened yesterday is that Bethany is a part,  
11 with eight other Christian churches here in the Elkhorn  
12 community, of something called COPE, Christian Outreach  
13 Program of Elkhorn. Hopefully you've heard of it.

14           Our church is generous. We are part of that and we  
15 give gifts to this program so that we can help people in this  
16 community, people that are in need of food, financial  
17 support, basic necessities.

18           And yesterday was fun because down at the former  
19 Bethany Lutheran Church site, now called Community of Grace,  
20 can I see a show of hands of how many people used to attend  
21 there.

22           Many of you. That was my first time there. I have  
23 been out in this area for about four years.

24           And what was happening was a Christmas party and it  
25 was great because there was food and fellowship and every

1 family that came, about thirty families, received a gift of  
2 clothes and gift cards and we helped make that happen.

3 But most importantly all these congregations working  
4 together made it happen.

5 And here is what I wanted to share with you about  
6 how God touched me yesterday.

7 Being part of the Bethany family I serve on that  
8 board now, and I was trying to understand why I was there.

9 To be quite honest, I wasn't feeling a hundred  
10 percent, but I took my son Joe and we went there.

11 And I guess I thought I was going to be a bouncer, I  
12 used to do that years ago, I thought I can move some tables,  
13 so I could do that, I could certainly do that.

14 But as we were there and getting set up, a man came  
15 up and came to one of the people and said, "I need to talk to  
16 somebody."

17 And the people said, "We are glad you're here. We  
18 hope you have good fellowship."

19 He said, "No. I need to talk to a pastor."

20 And it was like the parting of the sea. All of  
21 sudden all of these people went out of the way and looked at  
22 me.

23 I was actually saying, "Where is the pastor, too. I  
24 would like to see the pastor."

25 (Laughter)

1           It's not our church, and what happened was an  
2 opportunity to share the good news of Christ for a man who is  
3 in crisis, a man that is a Christian, but had forgotten the  
4 closeness of God, and for his family that were there a chance  
5 for reconciliation.

6           And I just thought about how God works, is that  
7 whether the faith of the people that created this new  
8 ministry site, or the faith of the people that created the  
9 previous ministry site, I was thankful to be part of  
10 Bethany's ministry.

11           I was thankful. I felt more connected as I come on  
12 board here, more connected to what Bethany has been about and  
13 is into the future.

14           As I show this chart here, obviously Christ is at  
15 the center, and in this day and age that's becoming more  
16 countercultural, to be a Christ-centered person.

17           Christ-centered as a part of life, maybe, but Christ  
18 at the center? This is what it's supposed to reinforce for  
19 us.

20           Next slide, please.

21           I wanted to remind you what it means to have an  
22 identify in Christ.

23           The first piece of this is our Baptismal identity.  
24 I hope everyone here is baptized.

25           And if not, we would love to talk to you, Pastor

1 Mark, Wenda, or myself. We would love for you to be  
2 connected.

3 Baptized is a word that talks about being immersed  
4 or dipped into the water.

5 The baptism is as simple as this. For Christ's life  
6 and death and resurrection, and our own acknowledgment of our  
7 upcoming death, we are baptized into Christ's identity. We  
8 have a relationship with God now through Christ.

9 In the Baptismal service last week was so touching  
10 where we had five people, a family of four young people and  
11 their father baptized.

12 We are different because we are baptized. Our life  
13 is different. It's part of who we are.

14 And again I invite people that have not experienced  
15 the life giving force of baptism to come and talk to me  
16 afterwards, because we want you to know about that.

17 That's the first step, is to understand we are not  
18 alone.

19 The next slide, please.

20 Communion. This is stewardship Sunday, Consecration  
21 Sunday.

22 Consecration is a word that means dedicate to a  
23 higher purpose.

24 We are asking you to dedicate your financial  
25 resources to God's work through Bethany.

1 I kind of get a kick out of communion, and as a  
2 pastor in training I want to explain what that means.

3 Have you thought about how unbelievable it is that  
4 through communion, through the words of institution, and the  
5 practical signs that are here of the bread and of the wine,  
6 of God's real presence here, we are reconnected with God and  
7 our sins are forgiven.

8 We start fresh. We are God's people. When we come  
9 to church, we are not just coming for a transaction. Our  
10 lives, our very lives are transformed.

11 And so I don't know how it's going to come out, I  
12 teased at the first service, which has a somewhat formal  
13 style, I love it, I'm very comfortable with the liturgy  
14 there, I'm going to tease you, too.

15 You know what? After we get done with it sometimes,  
16 I'm used to this Swedish pietism, I grew up in a pietistic  
17 environment, you know what that word means, kind of holy, it  
18 took us an hour to get a cup of coffee, how polite we were to  
19 each other.

20 If somebody would offer a cup of coffee, then our  
21 silence, "Oh, we couldn't possibly," and that would take a  
22 while.

23 Then somebody would say, "Would you like cream?"

24 It takes an hour. I'm used to that kind of formal  
25 style.

1           But isn't that good news, that our sins are  
2 forgiven? Isn't that unbelievable news?

3           So if you hear me hooting and hollering, that's  
4 going to be me trying to break out of my mode and realizing  
5 my Christ-centered identity is the baptism that allows me new  
6 life and an ongoing relationship with God. There is nothing  
7 like it.

8           The next one is discipleship, and I think you  
9 understand theology.

10           I'm going to classes now to be able to articulate  
11 more clearly what God has said through the Holy Scriptures  
12 and then how I can reframe it.

13           It was important to have that understanding  
14 yesterday to a person in trouble.

15           And what I want to describe on discipleship is, as  
16 Christ-centered folks, we have the best of all worlds.

17           Through the love of Jesus Christ we are justified to  
18 God right now.

19           We don't have to do anything else to get God in our  
20 life.

21           We are made right through this faith in Jesus  
22 Christ.

23           But the rest of the journey, of becoming more holy,  
24 a word called sanctification, is the rest of our lives are  
25 this journey of learning how to be more like Christ.

1           No pressure, no guilt, just the invitation.

2           We were talking about this. Sometimes stewardship  
3 comes like I need to give some money to get closer to God.

4           And decisions are important to make in one's life,  
5 but our theology is one where we know that Christ comes to  
6 us. Christ comes to us and together we walk in stewardship.

7           Hopefully you've understood that message and  
8 hopefully I've been able to articulate it more clearly, is  
9 that our stewardship is a way of expressing our life with  
10 God.

11           And our God is a generous God. Our God is a loving  
12 God.

13           So as we learn more about that we are able to free  
14 up our financial resources, our very life, our very love, and  
15 to live forward.

16           So to me stewardship is not something out here we  
17 talk about a couple weeks a year.

18           Stewardship is just understanding that in Christ,  
19 our baptism, ongoing communion, and discipleship, it's just  
20 who we are.

21           Next slide, please.

22           I hope over the last couple of weeks you have had a  
23 chance to reflect upon what your giving will be for next  
24 year.

25           And I hope it has been a good challenge for you

1 individually.

2           It's a good time to take a look, and we've combined  
3 this interesting part of the year, Thanksgiving, to really  
4 reinforce what God has done for us, and also Advent.

5           I love this time. It's a really neat transition.  
6 We are getting ready.

7           We are preparing for Christ's return on December  
8 25th, celebrated here on the 24th.

9           It's a great time. Thanksgiving and preparation. I  
10 couldn't ask for more and I hope it has been a time for  
11 individual interest for you.

12           Next slide, please.

13           But I'm really interested in the family. For  
14 couples, have you had a chance to talk about what God has  
15 given you and what you look forward to giving next year?

16           And for many couples that's not a conversation that  
17 you have.

18           Money, of course, in some of the premarital  
19 counseling is one of the most difficult issues.

20           You think it might be about sexuality or some other  
21 issues for marriage, but often money is the number one issue.

22           My prayers have been during the week that you have  
23 been able to talk to your spouse about understanding what God  
24 has given and what you will be able to share back.

25           And certainly that you are able to talk, if you have

1 children, or grandparents with your grandchildren, how  
2 counterintuitive, how countercultural it is that we actually  
3 take resources and give them to God.

4           Years ago we were on the Simply Giving Program,  
5 which is an automatic withdrawal program out of the checking  
6 account, and we felt pretty good about that. It was  
7 sacrificial giving.

8           The way we did it, it was taken out, we didn't put  
9 anything in the offering plate, and our kids, very observant,  
10 we were talking about giving one time and they said we don't  
11 give.

12           I had never taught them what we do. We talked  
13 generally about giving, but we had never made it practical.

14           I'm hoping that this is a kickoff that you talk to  
15 your kids about giving, about being able to give financially.

16           Next slide, please.

17           And then the church, and I wanted to give this  
18 information to you, is that as we talk about preparing for  
19 the upcoming year, that in early January in a series of  
20 meetings, culminating during our worship service on January  
21 27th, we are going to talk about how Bethany is going to be  
22 wise stewards of your gifts.

23           It's both. We've talked spiritually about your need  
24 to give.

25           You have noticed we have not talked about carpet,

1 lighting, increased cost of payroll, insurance, or any of  
2 those things. That's off to the side.

3 We have been talking about the spiritual need to  
4 give, the spiritual understanding of what God has given us.

5 But in January we are going to turn this around, and  
6 for myself representing the church, and others on church  
7 council, our assignment is to be wise stewards of what God  
8 has given through you.

9 And so we will talk about where we are donating our  
10 money out to the community, we'll talk about staffing  
11 patterns here, we'll talk that, so that both sides of the  
12 church have the same level of integrity that we're asking you  
13 to have.

14 Next slide, please.

15 The Roman's text, I'm so thankful to Gene and our  
16 musicians have been singing through this.

17 I took one line from it. It is rich. If you want  
18 to take more time, Roman's is a fantastic theological  
19 understanding, especially from a Lutheran viewpoint.

20 "For from him and through him and to him are all  
21 things."

22 We are talking about God. From and through and to.

23 "To him be the Glory forever."

24 I started a couple of weeks ago saying stewardship  
25 isn't something out there, it just life, it's our very life

1 of who we are, and nothing more than that and everything for  
2 that. From God, through God, and back to.

3 Yes, with our money, but with our very life, in  
4 everything we do.

5 Thankful for the gifts God has given us in our  
6 relationships.

7 Thankful for the gift God has given us in our very  
8 life.

9 Thankful and reflecting back into this world that so  
10 mightily needs we as God's people stepping forward to reclaim  
11 for God what people try to take away.

12 Please come tonight, if you can, to participate in  
13 the healing service, so as God's people we can go back out  
14 into the Omaha community people and reclaim God's world for  
15 goodness.

16 Next slide, please.

17 So I just come to this one again, which is at Christ  
18 at the center of our life, I just have a simple story to  
19 share with you about how my life in Christ has been shaped.

20 And it has to do with my uproar about my father. My  
21 dad is a retired pastor, he and mom are up in Fremont, and  
22 it's tough being a pastor's kid, I think that's why it took  
23 me so long to feel the call to the pastoral role.

24 Growing up in a parsonage, any other preacher's kids  
25 out there?

1           Sometimes when we work together we call ourselves  
2 TO's, sounds better than preacher's kid, that means  
3 theological offspring, it's kind of our little union.

4           But it was tough and I remember being age 14 and I  
5 remember on a Saturday evening I saw a check on our counter.

6           It was made out to Grace Lutheran Church in West  
7 Point, Nebraska.

8           And I saw that check and I was stunned. The check  
9 was made out for an amount I couldn't even conceive of how  
10 much money was going in this check.

11           I felt like a detective and I took that check and I  
12 walked up to my parents and I said, "I demand an answer.  
13 What is this?"

14           And I think I was even more forceful than that.  
15 "What is this? How dare you. Do you understand how we  
16 live?"

17           I made fun of the Wimmers. The Wimmers are from  
18 West Point. The Wimmers are very generous people, but the  
19 Wimmers were living better than we were.

20           And I made some observations and then I demanded an  
21 answer.

22           And my dad gave me an answer that was so wise. He  
23 looked at me, he didn't argue, he just looked at me and took  
24 the check and he said, "It's who we are."

25           Now, as a 14 year old, you kind of know you just

1 lost an argument, because how do you respond back to  
2 something like that?

3 But the rest of my life I've just done it, which is  
4 it's not a matter of separation; it's about our very life.

5 It's who we are. It's who we are, and hopefully  
6 that's encouragement to you, that stewardship is about being  
7 Christ-centered.

8 Thank God for the opportunities of baptism to new  
9 life.

10 Thank God for the opportunity for communion that we  
11 are going to celebrate today, because together this family of  
12 God feasts together with the love of God and we actually have  
13 renewal and forgiveness of sins, and then our life as  
14 disciples.

15 So stewardship is just about being Christ-centered.

16 I'm going to ask for the ushers to go ahead and hand  
17 out cards.

18 We have dedication cards for what you intend to give  
19 for next year.

20 We had talked about maybe doing them; maybe not.

21 It's a good idea to do it.

22 For you who are guests, please feel free not to take  
23 one.

24 But for you who are members, please take one, and I  
25 have a special encouragement for people who are younger,

1 maybe 14 or so, you're confirmed, it's a great time to give  
2 when you're young.

3           It's a great time to develop good habits and somehow  
4 when you are young and you make twenty bucks, maybe even more  
5 baby-sitting or mowing the grass, that a two dollar give back  
6 to God makes more sense.

7           Perhaps some of us that get older struggle with  
8 larger amounts.

9           But I encourage for anybody in a family to be able  
10 to take that, for couples, that you would now spend the next  
11 few minutes in prayer and song contemplating what you are  
12 going to give.

13           Sign it, please, and then if you have any notes of  
14 pastoral encouragement, feel free to put that on the back,  
15 and then I want you to hold on to them.

16           Because Wenda is going to lead us then. We are  
17 going to bring these up during our communion worship.

18           We are going to ask you to go to one of the crosses  
19 that we have here and to put it in as an act of worship.

20           I'm going to offer a brief prayer now.

21           God, thank you so much for our identity in you.  
22 Thank you for the gift of stewardship, understood in  
23 generosity.

24           Once we understand how generous you are, God, for  
25 the gift of your son Jesus Christ, his life and death and

1 resurrection, the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through  
2 this place, all we want to do is to be able to give.

3 Help us in our faith. Help us in our discipleship  
4 walk. Let this be a moment of transformation for us.

5 Amen.

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