

# Sent to Serve

The sermon preached by DE-MD Synod Bishop H. Gerard Knoche  
Synod Assembly Opening Worship, Thursday, June 14, 2007

Texts: Isaiah 43:1-7. I Peter 4:10-11. Luke 3:21-22, 4: 16-21.

Last Sunday, as probably many more of you know than I could ever imagine, a surprise worship service was held to celebrate my 40 years of ordained ministry. I was surprised and a bit overwhelmed, especially when I learned that over \$28,000 had been given by churches and individuals to help start the Lutheran Adolescent Recovery School that has been my dream. People perjured themselves in speaking more graciously than I ever deserved. It is an occasion I will never forget.

At the very same time just a couple of hours away in Camden, New Jersey, my brother was, after more than 20 years, celebrating the end of his work in that city. He was holding an open house at Leaven House. Tom bought that rowhouse and from it has fed more than 350,000 people through the time he has been there.

Now Tim was very active in Luther League growing up, at St. Paul's, Rockdale, and then synod-wide. But after earning a graduate degree in urban planning, he began to work in cities, first Philadelphia and then Camden, to help improve the lives of those who live there. He severed his ties to the church because he says that the church doesn't take the poor seriously. Tom really does.

He not only feeds them, but he has worked to rehab houses and then set up a trust to carry mortgages so the poor can buy them. He has created housing for people just out of alcohol or drug rehab or jail trying to get back on their feet. He has taught them carpentry and other building trades. He has marched to get a percentage of jobs at a prison being built in their community for the local poor. For most of the period, he has voluntarily lived below the poverty level with the rest of the community. He presented the state with the only plan for community redevelopment that was created from the grassroots up and not imposed upon a municipality.

So when I looked at the lesson for tonight, I wondered whether Tom had not listened better to Jesus than I have. For the Gospel lesson tonight is clearly Jesus' mission statement - and ultimately ours. Jesus had just been baptized, and received the assurance that he was God's beloved son. Then after surviving the temptations in the wilderness, Luke records his first public sermon. Jesus enters the synagogue and stands up to read. When the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah was handed to him, he selects the passage from chapter 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he sat down (the Jewish posture for teaching) and said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." What the suffering servant did for the Israelites in exile in Babylon, Jesus was now announcing that he would do in the first century. And it is

generally agreed that the one who claimed to be able to do these things was the Messiah for whom the peoples were waiting.

Now if the sign of the servant of the Lord and the tell-tale marks of the Messiah were these deeds of social justice, then I would propose that they are the distinguishing marks of Christians in our time. We can know the Christians because they bring good news to the oppressed, they bind up the broken-hearted, they proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. Does that describe us individually or as a synod? Let's look to see.

In some ways it does. I think of St. Dymas, our congregation in the prisons. We know that it helps folks because the recidivism rates are lower for folks who have been members of it. And there are many who volunteer to lead worship or Bible studies in these places, who will testify that they have received more than they ever expected.

Christ Church, Baltimore, operates a shelter for women and children that takes folks off the street with just the clothes on their back and trains them to do jobs, so that when they leave the shelter there is a real prospect that they will be able to support themselves.

Seven churches in the synod operate summer camps for children, to keep them off the street where they may get caught in the crossfire and killed. We support the program in our synodical budget so that the poor can attend. From these camps, some future leaders of the synod may emerge.

Some of the oppressed are those with diagnoses of cancer. One of our pastors meets in a support group of those who will have surgery for prostate cancer to help them deal with the fear that often induces.

BRIDGE, an organization of church people from many denominations, has held actions that have been significant in making inclusionary housing a reality in Baltimore City and Howard County. Ten percent of all new housing must be affordable, so that people with lower-paying jobs will have a place to live in the city.

That's just the beginning of the kinds of things we are doing as a synod that would be responsive to the mission statement Jesus set forth. I am less confident that we could make such a list if we were to be evaluated individually. I do know that many churches make quilts for Lutheran World Relief that are the only bed clothes in Alberta Victoria Hospital where Christians and Muslims are treated in Jerusalem. Many have gone to Louisiana and Mississippi to help rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. The Washington County and Anne Arundel Conferences have been involved in building Habitat for Humanity houses, and I have been at the dedications to see the joy of the families that will live in them.

All of us who are gathered here tonight have been baptized. In that baptism we were given the identity as one of Jesus' children. After his baptism, Jesus let us know where that baptism would lead. Anyone who works with the poor in New Jersey knows my brother Tom's name. The challenge of the lessons tonight is that by our faithfulness in proclaiming release to the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind, and helping the oppressed go free we will assure that no one can escape knowing who Christ is either. We are sent to share and serve.