

Installation of Wayne Miller as Bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod
September 9, 2007
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson

Isaiah 55:1-11

Psalm 67

I Corinthians 1:18-25

Mark 10: 35-45

Grace to you and peace in the name of our crucified and risen Christ. Amen.

Wayne, Pam, members and friends of the Miller family, sisters and brothers in Christ in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, churchwide colleagues, and global and ecumenical guests, it is an honor to participate in this joyful day.

On behalf of the entire Evangelical Lutheran Church in America I give thanks to God for the people, ministries, and mission of this synod. I want to say a special word of gratitude for your stewardship of mission support that undergirds the work of the synod, the churchwide expression, ELCA institutions and agencies, and our ecumenical and global work.

Today I invite you to join me in thanking the people of St. Mark's in Aurora, who are no doubt experiencing mixed emotions today as they have given their pastor of 12 years to serve as this synod's bishop.

I was not able to attend your synod assembly and publicly express my gratitude and that of this church for the leadership of Bishop Paul Landahl and your synod staff. I have witnessed your passion for an inclusive, diverse church, your centeredness in Word and Sacrament, your willingness to challenge us to confront racism and to organize people and money for the sake of justice. God's blessings on each of you in this time of transition.

Wayne, I imagine the last few weeks have been consumed with questions—those asked of you by synod assembly voting members inquiring about your vision for the mission of this synod and those asked by reporters, although they seem to be interested in writing about your answer to only one question. You also have been asking questions about how you will configure the synod staff, where you and Pam will live, and how to spend your time the first few weeks in office to not only provide for a smooth transition, but also begin to shape your leadership.

In a few moments I, too, will ask you questions. I will ask you about your willingness to assume the office of bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod and your faithfulness, diligence, and witness in carrying out this call. I will ask this assembly about its commitment to receive and support you.

Here is my strong word of advice: do not let your engagement with the questions end today. In fact, when I asked a member of this synod what contributed to your being called to synod bishop, the response was, "Wayne's ability to engage people with insightful

questions that deepen conversation and invite participation and imagination.” May that be a mark of your ministry as bishop.

Wayne, you have a capacity to invite this synod into holy imagination, prayerful discernment, and bold prophetic speech and action as you together wrestle with central questions and challenge one another not to become consumed with what I would call distracting questions or easy answers. After all, isn’t that what God’s grace in Christ frees us to do? Joseph Sittler reminded us that grace is the wonder of life, the giftedness of life that causes us to ask questions that transcend the moment

The readings you have chosen for today provide the basis for some of the most provocative questions with which we must continue to wrestle. How can we hear the familiar words from Isaiah 55 and not be driven to ask once again: Who is welcome here? Who is invited to the waters, on what terms, and at what price?

We can reference all kinds of welcoming statements that we have made as the ELCA churchwide organization, as synods, and as congregations. Don’t get me wrong. It is important that we make those statements, but we must then go deeper and ask the searching, hard questions such as: If we are such a welcoming church, why are we still ninety-seven percent white in our increasingly and wonderfully diverse society? If we are such an inviting church, why are we now almost fifteen years older in average age than the population of the United States? If we are such a reconciling church, why are discussions of human sexuality and the full inclusion in ministry of people who are lesbian or gay still threatening to divide us?

If we believe the radically inclusive invitation of Isaiah, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters,”¹ then why the continued economic disparity between those who live with prosperity and those who live in poverty? If we are who we claim to be—evangelical Lutherans, an evangelizing people—then why in God’s name are there empty pews in our sanctuaries? Why are we getting distracted by questions about closing churches and decreasing mission support? God has placed us in a mission field of people who thirst for forgiveness and faith, healing and hope, justice and mercy, living wage jobs, affordable housing, available healthcare, and for acceptance and purpose. “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.”²

Wayne, I recall a brief conversation we had about the significance of Lake Michigan in your life. With clarity and vivid imagery you described your driving need to get to the water. Sometimes it is for solitude at a time of struggle, sometimes for refreshment in midst of discouragement, sometimes for cleansing, and sometimes to be in the company of strangers. I pray that will be a mark of your leadership, too—to challenge and to model for all the baptized of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod a life of returning daily to baptismal waters as we are refreshed by God’s grace, joined to Christ’s death and resurrection, and renewed for our life in community and our work in the world. What if the daily witness of every member of this synod was marked by an evangelical persistence inviting others to come to the waters: the cleansing waters of God’s forgiving mercy, the refreshing, renewing waters of Christ’s love, the life-changing waters of God’s justice? That is precisely what Isaiah describes, “Let the wicked forsake their way,

¹ Isaiah 55:1, NRSV

² Ibid.

and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”³

Wayne, I encourage you to ask over and over again, “Have we lost trust in God’s faithfulness to God’s promises? Have we lost the courage to confront the barriers we erect that stand in the way of people hearing and heeding the radically inclusive invitation for *all* who thirst to come to the waters? Do we believe that the Holy Spirit is going to show up in our lives and ministries? Do we gather every Sunday to ask where God has been at work this week in our personal lives, in our communities, through our ministries, and in the world? Have we become—as I asked in my churchwide assembly sermon—a church body for which ELCA now stands for Expectations Low, Climbing Anxiety? Do we believe the promise that God’s word that goes out from our mouths will not return to us empty, but will accomplish that which God purposes and succeed in the thing for which God sent it?

I believe the Metropolitan Chicago Synod is leading the ELCA in challenging us to become a more diverse, inclusive church with full inclusion of people of color, those whose primary language is not English, and people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered. You also are leading us by challenging us to confront the white power and privilege woven not only into the structures and systems, but also the attitudes and actions of this church and this society. This systemic exclusion means that all in fact are not welcome to the waters of justice and mercy.

Wayne, model in your leadership the courage of the prophet Isaiah, who asked hard questions, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”⁴ It is a provocative question that drives us to confront the lure of our consumptive and competitive culture, but it also invites us into a community of those who thirst for God’s mercy and are committed to pursuing the common good. Perhaps we have yet to determine whether and to what degree we are willing to be changed by those who hear and heed the invitation to come to the waters.

For Isaiah it is clear: people we do not know or only regard as strangers will run to us. The searching question we must ask is: do we expect the stranger to become like us or will we be changed by virtue of their presence among us? That question permeated the life, growth, and conflicts in the early church and it continues today.

Wayne, there is another question that I hope you will pose continually: What Gospel are we proclaiming in word and deed? Can we proclaim that good news without always using the word “Gospel,” which is an insider word whose meaning is known to some, but not to all who thirst. As I listen to pastors throughout this church, I hear about the great pressure many of them experience to get and hold their share of members in a very consumer-oriented and competitive religious marketplace. It is no secret that people look for congregations that meet their needs, whether for programs for their children or small group study or a certain style of worship or a charismatic leader. I remember hearing a quote by a very successful pastor of a large congregation in Arizona who said he occasionally preaches about forgiveness, but rarely, if ever, about struggle or sacrifice. He usually preaches about being happier when we invite Jesus into our bedroom, board room, and backyard. The temptation is then to preach a self-help gospel—a “things go better with Jesus in your heart” gospel, a “Jesus loves me, just don’t mess up my life with

³ Isaiah 55:7, NRSV

⁴ Isaiah 55:2, NRSV

that cross” gospel. A self-help gospel then becomes the prosperity gospel now drawing countless followers all over the world. Paul is absolutely clear in writing to the Corinthians, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”⁵

Wayne, just listen to Paul’s provocative questions: “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”⁶

Then comes the powerful promise that should be said in every message, and homily in every pulpit, and written in every bulletin and on every screen: “God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.”⁷ The wisdom of the cross is that through Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection, God takes us out of our preoccupation with a wisdom that will satisfy our desires, reduce our cravings, and make us other-wise. It is wisdom as a feast for whoever needs nourishment. The wisdom of the cross is that God does not need our good works to save us, but our neighbor does. And the creation does. So following the way of the cross in the power of the Spirit and the promise of Christ’s resurrection means we are set free in Christ to be a gospel-proclaiming, truth-telling, bridge-building, justice-seeking, neighbor-serving, peace-making, earth-caring, invitation-extending, enemy-forgiving, intercessory praying people.

Wayne, it is clear from your ministry at St. Mark’s that you have marvelous gifts of creativity and communication that enable you to proclaim that crucified Gospel of Christ with faithfulness to the tradition and with imagination for our contemporary context. That is the kind of leadership Jesus describes in our Gospel reading from Mark. Jesus again asks the question he was asking from age twelve to his constant challenging of his disciples to his questioning God in his dying breath to the risen Christ.

In the Gospel from Mark, Jesus asks a question not unlike you will ask when you meet with call committees, conflicted congregations, clergy and rostered leaders who are discerning a call, or churchwide colleagues. That question is, “What is it you want me to do for you?”⁸ When Jesus heard the disciples’ answer—give us positions of power—Jesus was willing to say, “You do not know what you are asking.”⁹ Then Jesus turns the question from what they need from him into a question revealing what God demands of us. He says, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”¹⁰ In other words, Jesus is saying, “You want me to grant you glory. I want to know: Are you going to go with me through the valley of suffering, to the cross, and then to the resurrected life?”

Wayne, I predict that the greatest challenge and the most important mark of your leadership will be your ability to invite the people of this synod who believe they are quite clear about what they need from you first into a conversation about what God’s mission in this Metropolitan Chicago Synod, throughout the ELCA, and the world needs from us and then to ask what gifts, power, and relationships we have been given for the sake of that mission. Our honest struggle with those questions will lead us into costly

⁵ I Corinthians 1:18, NRSV

⁶ I Corinthians 1:20, NRSV

⁷ I Corinthians 1:21, NRSV

⁸ Mark 10:36, NRSV

⁹ Mark 10:37, NRSV

¹⁰ Mark 10:38, NRSV

servanthood, a joy-filled, thoughtful discipleship that follows the way of the cross in the promise of Christ's resurrection.

Wayne, trusting in God's faithfulness, God's promises, and in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, may your leadership be marked by unquenchable curiosity, relentless questioning, imaginative proclamation, and extravagant inviting. Amen.