

Pericope

PARTNERS

Second Half of Pentecost 2007

Pericope Partners are short stories that connect the ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with weekly lectionary readings. This resource reflects the partnership we share as a whole church, based on the Revised Common Lectionary Readings Cycle C pericopes for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost to Christ the King Sunday (September 2 – November 25, 2007).

Pericope Partners vignettes are suitable for use in sermons, bulletins, or newsletters. Download them at www.elca.org/pericope and copy them for congregational use. Print copies are available upon request by calling 800/638-3522.

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (September 2, 2007)

by Donna Wiegel
Vocation and Education

Each year since 1999, the New Jersey Synod of the ELCA has taken an intergenerational group to Bosnia. On the surface the mission is simple: to bring a day of fun to children whose childhoods have been taken away by a decade of war in the Balkans. But the theological foundation is much deeper, grounded in God's command for us to love and serve one another.

This crew of 20 spends two weeks traveling by bus from town to town in Bosnia, setting up Friendship Camps in village schools. Each Friendship Camp includes music, arts and crafts, a service project, and physical activities in the gymnasium. Congregations in New Jersey donate funds to provide new gym equipment and lunches for each school, as well as hand-crafted tote bags and toys for the children.

The morning of the Friendship Camp, village children are already lined up in the schoolyard, waiting for the bus to arrive, heralding a day of fun. And why is that? Because relationships have been built between the Americans and the Bosnians; at the end of the day, the Bosnian children know that these Americans from New Jersey will return next year, the year after that, and so on.

The participants are profoundly transformed by their experiences, especially by what they receive in return: lasting relationships with people who are loved by God in a place far from their comfort zones. They have shared in the light of Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

(Inspired by Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16)

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (September 9, 2007)

by Karen Ressel
Global Mission

At an open air church service I was reminded of what it means to be part of the body of Christ. I had been greeted and found a place to sit. I began to reflect on my first field assignment with Lutheran World Federation–Uganda/Sudan.

I had spent the past week interviewing refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in South Sudan. People spoke of ways LWF is improving their lives. Boreholes provide clean, accessible water for better health; schools educate young people; there is assistance to those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. I could hear their gratitude, but I could see the need was still very real.

I couldn't understand the local language, but the service had a familiar rhythm and the readings and sermon were translated into English. From the hilltop you could see the small round houses these people lived in and the paths that they walked. It was very peaceful.

After the service I was greeted enthusiastically by a school teacher. As we were shaking hands she said, "It doesn't matter what we look like, we are the same to God. If you are a leaf, or a root or a branch it doesn't matter, you are still a part of the tree and all of the parts work together for the good of the tree."

I was reminded that day that I am part of God's Mission in the world. God will bear the burden; I only need to answer, "Yes" when I am prompted by the Spirit to act.

(Inspired by Psalm 1:3)

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (September 16, 2007)

*by Joanna Stallings
Campus Ministry*

This past year I received an e-mail from a student at my home. It was an urgent request for conversation. I knew it was important because she chose to contact me there.

Luckily I had her cell phone number, and I dialed quickly. Without preamble she blurted out an emotional account of her life. Earlier that week she was raped. After making a police report, being subjected to interviews, an exam and the arrest of her perpetrator, she called to tell someone what happened. She was devastated, hopeless and angry with God.

She suffered terribly. We met from time to time, but eventually she withdrew from the campus ministry group at Virginia Tech. She stopped coming to worship and began to tank academically. Students were in contact with her. A member of the congregation ran into her at the grocery store and embraced her like a cherished friend. Despite the distancing, the gathered community continued to hold tenuously to the rapidly unraveling fabric of a once strong relationship.

The community remained unwavering; they faithfully expressed concern in much the same way that Jesus relentlessly pursued the lost and those like them. They persisted in reaching out to this wounded student. They followed the example of Christ who looks for those who feel most unlovable. Their persistence showed that they continued to love this young woman as a worthy and treasured child of God.

(Inspired by Luke 15:1-10)

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (September 23, 2007)

*by Pat Zerega
Church in Society*

Today we hear Amos speak to the commercial world of his day, the equivalent of today's mercantile exchange. He is furious at those who trample on the needy and harm the poor.

The ELCA is tackling debt, poverty, and unjust systems as the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program addresses the financial system of our day—the banking sector. Through shareholder advocacy, which includes dialogue with corporations, shareholder resolutions around social issues, and proxy voting on these resolutions, CSR asks the questions of how corporations are helping provide justice for all.

Following the tradition of Amos, CSR is calling for justice in lending.

Mary, an elderly woman, saw ads on TV and decided to refinance her home. It was such a “good deal”: a nice man sat at her kitchen table and told her he could not only refinance her home but roll in a little extra money for that trip to see her grandchildren. When she couldn't make the payments she lost her home and all her savings.

Many other situations like this exist where homeowners don't understand the terms they are getting on their loan. Prepayment penalties, up-front insurance payments, and unnecessary fees are signs of predatory loans.

The CSR program has asked the major banks to be responsible lenders that abolish predatory lending from their practice. At the same time the CSR program encourages them to expand access to capital for underserved borrowers and participate in community reinvestment programs.

(Inspired by Amos 8:4-7, 1 Timothy 2:1-7, Luke 16:1-13)

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
(September 30, 2007)

by Ben Baldus
Church in Society

Remember the “A Team”—the 1980s TV show about a secret commando unit sent to prison by a military court for a crime they didn’t commit? They promptly escaped into the Los Angeles underground. Still fugitives, they survived by their own wits. Their exploits often involved helping the vulnerable and righting social injustices.

New kinds of “A Teams” are emerging in Michigan. These are congregational advocacy teams. Their purposes are to identify local problems and devise solutions. While they clearly don’t have Mr. T, they are resourceful in confronting local problems.

Today’s readings haunt us to this day. Nothing has really changed much. From Amos to Timothy and Luke, poverty and wealth stand in stark contrast to God’s generous gifts.

University Lutheran Church, East Lansing, Mich., is a college town congregation that has embraced advocacy as a key aspect of its ministry. Working with Lutheran Social Services of Michigan’s Public Policy and Advocacy Office, the church has created its “A Team” to fashion an advocacy plan for its community.

This has involved learning about how government impacts people, becoming effective Christian citizens, knowing about the ELCA’s positions on current issues and, finally, identifying local needs that ULC can feasibly address.

Like the TV show nearly 25 years ago, ULC’s “A Team” is seeking to make a difference on its own turf. We hope that other teams will be planted and prosper throughout Michigan.

(Inspired Amos 6:1a, 4-7, Psalm 146, 1 Timothy 6:6-19, Luke 16:19-31)

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
(October 7, 2007)

by Janice Rizzo
Communication Services

We have all seen headlines that grab our attention: “Bin Laden looms over Padilla terrorism trial.” “Benoit strangled wife, smothered son.” And at the checkout counter, we can’t help noticing headlines that scream: “Multiple Personality Man Charged Triple Room Rate!” and “Woman Delivers Own Baby While Skydiving!”

Good editors always use headline-friendly synonyms. Instead of saying “agreement,” use “pact”; don’t print “prohibit,” when you can say “bar”; and a “promise” sounds so much better if it is a “vow.” Likewise an “increase” is fine but “jump” pumps life into the headline.

Why do writers and editors do this? They are attention-getting methods for the skimming audience. An editor wants to turn headline skimmers into readers. It’s as simple as that.

It is what I keep in mind when laying out an issue of *Seeds for the Parish*. I ask myself “What can I say that will let people on the go decide to take the time to read this article?” I think that is what God was doing with Habakkuk in today’s reading: “Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the Vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.”

In other words, “Write this in big letters on a tablet and post it near the main road so that everyone from all the world, even those running by, can read the message.”

What is the headline God’s proclaiming to the world, the headline appropriate for Lutheran World Federation Sunday? What is so important that everyone needs to know it? It is the headline that changed Martin Luther’s life and the lives of so many others throughout history. It is the headline that is just as powerful today as it was when Habakkuk first put it on that tablet. Today it might be written this way: “Unbelievable! God Gives Hundreds of Millions Free Gift” with a subhead of perhaps: “Poor and broken people given hope as they are saved by grace.”

(Inspired by Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4)

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
(October 14, 2007)

*by Darrell Morton
Federal Chaplaincy Ministries
Synodical Relations*

The young girl who served Naaman was a slave taken far from home. She had lost control over her own life. But rather than focusing on her own pain, she noted her master's needs and became for him a messenger of hope.

Similarly, chaplains may find themselves in places where they would rather not serve. Even so, we have dedicated ELCA chaplains throughout the war zone. Like those they serve, they would rather be home with those they love, but they endure the separation and danger because they are messengers of hope.

When Chaplain Corey Bjertness was informed that he and his unit had been extended from one year to sixteen months in Iraq he wrote: "The 34th ID is one day closer to going home. So are we all. The Bible says, we are one day closer to streets of gold. We are one day closer to no more sorrow, no more pain, no more hardship of any kind. Although this life becomes our primary reality, there is another. Although this life's hardships absorb me and capture me, there are other truths. I'm not sure what heaven looks like, but I am sure it will be great. So, hang on tight. Don't let the pain win. You can do it. You will not always feel the way you do today. Remember, 'You are one day closer to someday.'"

God's word of hope is spoken in unlikely places by unlikely people, even by people like us.

(Inspired by 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c)

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
(October 21, 2007)

*by Kristine Perry
Diaconal Ministry Community of the ELCA*

Today's text has Jacob wrestling with the man at the Jabbok. I was reminded of this Bible story on a recent companion partnership trip to Nigeria.

Yusof Amos of the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria shared the story of a group of evangelists from his congregation who were called to travel by foot to a remote village in the hills to plant a new church. They packed a few items for this four-day journey. Two days into the journey, they came upon a river they had to cross. A young man in the group could not swim, but because the water was just waist high, he insisted on crossing the river with the others.

The current was stronger than any of them expected, and, despite rescue efforts, the young man drowned. The group had to decide whether to return the young man to his family for burial or to continue on the journey. They entered into deep prayer, asking God for guidance. The Holy Spirit instructed half of the group to carry the body back to the man's family, while the others proceeded to the village.

I wondered, "What would Americans do in the same situation?" In our grief, perhaps we would return home. But these people answered the call to Word and Service – to bring the Gospel to God's people while serving the needs of the family by returning their beloved son.

Thanks be to God when we wrestle with God and answer God's call to serve one another.

(Inspired by Genesis 32:22-31)

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
(October 28, 2007)

*by Erica Spilde
Global Mission*

A favorite Latin American prayer states, “Lord, to those who hunger, give bread. To those who have bread, give hunger for justice.”

Often we may act like the Pharisee, proud that we are “not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers.” We may look at our choices in life and say, “Hey, I’m not so bad.” Yet when we consider ourselves in the context of this prayer, we may start questioning the ways that we sin “by what we have left undone.”

As in the ELCA, one of the ministries of the Costa Rican Lutheran Church (ILCO) is to advocate for legislative policies that will benefit marginalized populations with whom the church works. When I discuss this aspect of the church’s work, people often get uncomfortable with its “political” nature. Why do we feel good about giving bread to the hungry but feel as though work for justice to end hunger is too political?

It is not hard to identify U.S. policies that have had negative impact on the most vulnerable in Central America and around the world. We may separate ourselves from government actions, saying that we are not responsible for the decisions of our political leaders, yet we know in our hearts we have the power to effect change if we would just be bold enough to use it.

Let us be like the tax collector and humbly acknowledge our sins of complacency so that we may discover our very biblical hunger for justice and act upon it.

(Inspired by Luke 18:9-14)

Reformation Day
(October 31, 2007)

*by Dave Daubert
Evangelical Outreach & Congregational Mission*

I was on vacation and visited a mission congregation meeting in a school auditorium. In theory they saw themselves to be a welcoming place—it even said so in their Yellow Pages ad. My wife and I went in and sat down.

Early in the service the pastor invited everyone to greet other people with a warm welcome. As a visitor, I always play the role of the introvert and see if the people will come and actually be friendly. The woman in front of my wife and me turned and said hello. A woman behind us did the same.

Then they moved on. People were actively greeting and hugging and shaking hands, but no one else talked to us. For what seemed like a long time we stood watching as people were being friendly, but only with friends. As a visitor, I had the same experience I have in many congregations: everyone was too busy being “friendly” to notice me.

It reminded me again of Romans 3:23. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” is true for us when we gather. Most of our congregations have a self-image that says that “we are a friendly bunch.” Yet we continue to be friendly to friends without welcoming the stranger. Sin is not just something for other people to be concerned with. It is also about us—even when we gather to be the church.

(Inspired by Romans 3:19-28)

All Saints Sunday
(November 4, 2007)

by Joel Thoreson
Office of the Secretary

On All Saints Sunday we give thanks for those who have gone before us, the great cloud of witnesses doing God's work in the world.

In 1853, Arne E. Boyum, a poor young man from Norway's Sogne Fjord, arrived in America with the hopes and dreams typical of new immigrants. He found the Norwegian community facing a lack of pastors to serve it, and was selected by that community as one to minister to it. He was ordained by Elling Eielsen, and kept to his calling, initially walking to various congregations in Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota.

Pioneer pastors struggled to unite the faithful against worldly temptations. Enjoying the religious freedom in America and freed from the restrictions of the old country's state church, many immigrants left the Lutheran church. Yet the faithful found strength through pastors and congregations joining together around language and theology, sharing resources, educating pastors and supplying areas with clerical leaders.

Beginning with Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and the formation of the Ministerium of Pennsylvania in 1740, this model was replicated throughout the many ancestor bodies of the ELCA. Other early leaders, such as William Passavant, led the way in creating hospitals, orphanages and other social ministry organizations. These individuals were not wealthy or highly educated, but, to paraphrase the psalmist, they were humbly adorned with victory in their efforts through the gifts of the Lord.

These and other examples of the work of the saints who went before us are preserved for research and study in the archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

(Inspired by Psalm 149)

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
(November 11, 2007)

by Diane Monroe
Evangelical Outreach & Congregational Mission

Three generations enjoyed a casual dinner out. As the meal ended, the family ritual of "fortune cookie time" led to good-natured banter as we read our pithy life lessons and amusing predictions to one another.

Drew, not quite three years old and definitely not able to read yet, declared he wanted to read his message. Everyone responded with broad smiles and endearing chuckles, assuring Drew, the first grandchild and the center of our attention, that we all would love to hear his fortune. Although not exactly sure what he'd say, we did anticipate a delightful glimpse of the world through the experience and imagination of a child.

With the tiny strip of paper pinched between his little fingers, Drew stared intently at it before "reading" GOD-LOVES-DREW.

Whoa! Where did that come from? Who expected a response with spiritual depth? How could this little guy speak of God's love with such assurance?

Today's reading reminds us of the awesome privilege parents, grandparents, and the faith community have for passing on the faith. God's grace cradles the capacity for faith growth. Bit by bit, through daily encounters with others that faith is nurtured and shaped. As adults our role is to "show and tell" God's love and to provide opportunities for even the youngest among us to articulate God's presence in our lives.

(Inspired by 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17)

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
(November 18, 2007)

by Timothy Spring
Campus Ministry

She arrived in September to be the cantor for *Holden Evening Prayer* at Montana State University's Campus Christian Center. She did a grand job. I learned later that it was the first time she sang that service.

Kerry, a first year student, became a regular among our music leaders. Her energy and enthusiasm were contagious. Her own interest and experience with Celtic music helped us introduce a Celtic liturgy. Kerry asked about the preparations before worship on Easter Sunday. I explained that we would be doing an Affirmation of Baptism. She said "I've never been baptized, but I'd like to be."

During the summer, when her family members could be present, Kerry was baptized. She continued to be a worship leader into the fall, until she moved to Texas to be closer to her dad. Soon after her move she began worshipping at a small Lutheran congregation. She filled out a time and talent sheet and indicated an interest in music. The next Sunday the pastor asked if she'd be able to help lead *Holden Evening Prayer* in a couple of weeks. Kerry answered, "I think I can help with that."

Students may be involved in campus ministry for only a season, or a year or more when they are on campus, but in that short time the church is privileged to walk with them on that part of their journey of faith, inviting them to sing a new song and then bidding them farewell and Godspeed as they go to new places to continue the song of all creation.

(Inspired by Psalm 98)

Christ the King Sunday
(November 25, 2007)

by Wyvetta Bullock
Office of the Presiding Bishop

Leaders come in all shapes and sizes. They are not always the folks with official titles or positions. In an urban congregation on Chicago's West Side there are many leaders without titles. Mrs. Annie Mae Liddell is one of them. Mrs. Liddell is eighty-something and still going strong. She raised eight children of her own and as many foster children. I have known Mrs. Liddell for 20 years. The first time I saw her she had a baby in her arms, and today she still cares for little ones in our community. She is amazing in her patience and compassion for children. Mrs. Liddell shepherds them with tender/tough love. She provides a safe presence in the midst of a neighborhood that is often shaken by violence. The young people on her block know her as the "praying lady."

In addition to her role as mother, grandmother and foster mother, Mrs. Liddell is a faithful member of the congregation's choir. When she lifts her voice with the chorus of "He Reigns Forever," you truly believe that he does! Mrs. Liddell's leadership does not end with children and the choir; she serves as a member of the church council and on our local community organization's board. She marches in the streets for peace and serves meals to the hungry. Her witness to the reign of God in Christ is steady and persistent.

May God continue to raise up leaders like Mrs. Annie Mae Liddell so that the world may know the reign of Christ.

(Inspired by Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 46, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43)

Pericope Partners, available for download at elca.org/pericope, are examples of ELCA churchwide ministries suggested by the weekly lectionary readings for the Second Half of Pentecost (Cycle C). This is the last issue of *Pericope Partners* produced by ELCA Communication Services. Send suggestions and comments to Ben McDonald Coltvet at ben.mcdonaldcoltvvet@elca.org

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