



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Sermon by Rev. Dee Pederson, Bishop

July 2025

1 Peter 4:7-11

⁷The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. ⁸Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹Be hospitable to one another without complaining. ¹⁰Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. ¹¹Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ, grace to you and peace, in the name of the one God, the Holy Trinity who gathers and sends the church – yesterday, today, and forever. Amen.

“SYNOD” means “walking together” “walking on the way.” That means that YOU are walking together with:

- the other 224 congregations who are part of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod together with you in the SW quadrant of the state;
- the other 9,000 congregations who are part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America;
- those who are part of the Lutheran tradition in 99 countries around the world; and
- all the partners we are privileged to work with.

YOU – as the congregations and leaders of this synod, are the hands & feet & love of Jesus each day where God planted you. Together we are called to invite new people into the way of Jesus and experience community, justice, and love. Thank you for the ways YOU live this out!

The text for this sermon talks about how our life as the church is about being “a steward of God’s grace.” So, what does that mean? And - what does it mean to be a steward?

You know how the English language builds words on parts of words? We build and create different words on a simple base word. For example:

- spectacles (are the extra glasses I need for close-up reading), or
- a spectator (is someone who watches something), and
- inspect means to look at something more closely, and
- re-spect can mean to look up to or look at again more closely

In the same way, the language of the New Testament – Greek – creates many different words, all built on the base word for “house. ” It can refer to:

- a building – as in “a house of prayer,” and “a building from God, a house, not made with hands.”
- The household or family of faith: “you are members of the household of God.”
- To build, as where Jesus said, “on this rock I will build my church” and “love builds up.”
- Being a steward or a manager of what belongs to someone else. This is where we come to understand stewardship as caring for what ultimately belongs to God.
- Bishops are to be stewards who care for God’s household of faith.
- Our word “ecumenical” comes from the same base word as the whole human race.
- And stewarding is God’s plan of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The reading from 1 Peter says that life together as the family of faith – the church – involves building on and managing – stewarding - both the words that we speak and our actions toward others. We are called to live as servants of God and stewards of grace. And it boils down to love and hospitality, gracious speech and serving others – all of which give glory to God.

So think about how important words are in the daily lives of EACH of us!

- We you use WORDS on a device like this PHONE all the time.
- We depend on WORDS to get the news & communicate with each other for emails, FB, TikTok, Twitter, personal messages, and texts.

In the early church, people had trouble with their words, and the earliest pastors who wrote the NT letters used THEIR WORDS to give people guidance & correction& blessing! Because people were:

- polarized and divided, especially Jew and Gentile,
- drawing a line between insiders and outsiders,
- judging each other, pointing a finger at others (forgetting, like my mama reminded us: if you point a finger others, 3 fingers pointing back at you!)
- using their words put others down, and to justify themselves and their cause.

The same is true for us. When I was growing up, we had this little chant – maybe you, too – *“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.”* And we didn’t realize: IT WAS A LIE!! Names & words have the power to give life & freedom; Lutherans of all people know that! But words also have power to kill.

THINK about the words that fly across our phones and news and social media feeds, and you see it everywhere. People use words:

- to divide families and bust-up long-held friendships,
- to bully, perpetuate injustice, and all of the -isms that label God’s precious children,
- to divide the church so that it is no longer a community that is safe and a place of belonging for ALL people – meaning ALL - no one excluded.

Words matter!

Today in our synod, we can see ways in which the Holy Spirit is moving churches to set aside some of our divisions and realize we can not only TALK with other Christians; we can partner and work together in our local communities and areas. And I can only imagine that God smiles to see the LOVE that all of us precious children can actually have for each other!

When I was kid, it WAS the divisiveness of churches that stood out for me. I grew up in a Norwegian Lutheran Church, and we were never to set FOOT in the Catholic or methodist Church of my friends. If I stood across the street and tried to sneak a peek in the door, I

could even catch a whiff of the incense that Roman Catholics burned, but I did not KNOW what sort of mysterious activities went on inside, and we never connected with each other. We mainly looked to ourselves and never thought about what we might have in common or might be doing together to make a difference in our community.

I pray we never go back to those old days of ill will among people of faith, and I am so grateful for the ways the ELCA churches in our synod are partnering with others for the neighbors in the community where God has planted them!

Some of our old divisiveness among Christians is disappearing. But we live in a time when new lines of polarization are emerging as:

- partisanship and suspicion divide us;
- a spirit of scarcity leads us to worry only about ourselves; and
- when we say or do nothing about the suffering of our neighbors, the struggles of our older or senior neighbors, and the anxieties of our children and youth.

Friends, this is a time when we are called to live as God's servants and stewards of God's grace – just as the earliest Christians were as they attempted to follow Jesus so long ago.

BECAUSE JESUS DIED AND ROSE AGAIN:

- we maintain constant love for one another;
- we don't complain about being hospitable to others;
- we serve one another with whatever gift God has given us;
- we recognize the words we speak are to be understood as the very words of God;

You see, we are ONE broken, sinful humanity - forgiven and set free because Jesus bore all of our sin, all of our grief, all of our fears, all of our brokenness and took it to the cross, put it to death, rose again, and ushered in a world where GOD'S vision of compassion, mercy, justice, and love might be known by ALL people.

And so, as the church, YOU & I have the awesome joy and responsibility of being part of a church that is SENT to be a force for love, hospitality, service, compassion – all done with the strength that only God can provide.

We live in a world that so desperately needs the Spirit to stir up the church to be a presence of Jesus Christ. The only way that hearts are changed, the only way that you and I are stirred up with FAITH is through the WORD, that, as Scripture says, *is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword.*

- It is that living Word that spoke - and heaven and earth, great sea monsters and the palm of a child's hand - came into being.
- It is the living Word that is our *refuge and our strength*, a very present help in trouble.
- It is that living Word which, God said, *"will not return empty, but will accomplish that which God intends and prosper in the thing for which God sends it."*
- It is the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus Christ.

How does that Word seek you and find you and get a hold of your heart? There are so many ways!

- through the scriptures we read & proclaim & pray & music we sing, &
- in the caring conversations you have with others.
- When Luther spoke about the Word, he didn't restrict it to what takes place within these 4 walls or in this hour of time online. He said the Word is everywhere present - and preached in the work of your daily calling:

"If you are a laborer, you will find that the Bible has been put into your workshop, into your hand, into your heart. It teaches and preaches how you should treat your neighbor; just look at your tools and you will find this statement inscribed on them. Everywhere you look, it stares at you. Nothing that you handle every day is so tiny that it does not continually tell you this, if you will only listen."

Today the tools of our daily work may be computer screens or tractors, paint brushes or laundry baskets, mops and scrub brushes, calculators and coloring books. Whatever the tools we find surrounding us – the Word of God – preached, believed, professed, and lived so that the Spirit might stir us up to speak freely of the lovingkindness of God for each of us – and for the neighbors around us.

As “good stewards of God’s grace” – receive this blessing that is may be familiar to many:

Go out into the world in peace.

Have courage.

Hold on to what is good.

Return no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, and help the suffering. Honor all people.

Love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.