



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Sermon by Bishop Dee Pederson

Synod Assembly Sermon, June 2026



GROUNDING IN HOPE

Texts—Romans 4:13-25, Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Six months ago exactly, some of you gathered in this space for Christmas in Christ Chapel and, like me, you were probably – amazed, inspired, brought to tears, filled with joy, filled with—HOPE! Because this year, that was the focus—“Seeking Hope: Dreams of a New Way.” Artistic Director—and our organist today—Chad Winterfeldt, wrote this for the program:

“Journey, Adoration, Dreams. In our celebration of Christmas in Christ Chapel, you are invited to ponder a story in which individual seeking transforms into collective hope.... What are the unexpected dreams that lead us into a future filled with new hope and promise?”

In the evening darkness of this space, Rev. Ben Hilding stepped up to the lectern to provide the welcome and introduction to the evening’s program. He and Rev. Alicia Hilding had just left their congregational calls to accept the call to serve as Chaplains and Deans of Christ Chapel together, and move to St. Peter. And this is how Rev. Ben began:

Matthew’s Gospel tells the story of the magi’s journey. To Jerusalem. Then to Bethlehem. Then back home, by another road. While the magi are sometimes referred to as kings, this Biblical story actually contrasts two different kings. King Herod. And King Jesus.

Here at Christ Chapel, this very space, with its series of concrete spires, was designed to resemble a king’s crown. And yet, the most emanating spire defines the kingship of Jesus not through wealth and power like King Herod, but through a cross.

A theology of the cross teaches that one can perhaps see and understand God best in places of suffering, poverty, struggle, and pain. And through a crown of thorns. After the manger, Jesus and his family had to flee persecution. The magi had to decide whether to obey Herod, or risk their lives to protect Jesus. God gave them hope, showing them dreams of a new way.

THAT was the opening of Christmas in Christ Chapel last December. Today, 6 months later, we gather, *Grounded in HOPE!*

In today's collection of stories from Matthew, Jesus steps into the lives of very different people—each and every one of them grasped by some kind of hope—people and scenarios you would never expect Jesus to be drawn to. And as he does, you begin to think maybe Jesus should know better, and start to sense, “this might not end well.”

Because, you remember the kids a parent told you never to hang around with?

- The mean kids who pick on you, cheat, and set sheds on fire?
- The people who were of a different religion, culture, ethnic identity, income level?
- People known for whatever thing you or other people held against them?

So the people in today's Gospel, THESE are the very people whose lives Jesus walks into, and they know hope. Jesus busts through unquestioned religious customs and comes into their lives so they might be grasped by faith and know healing and hope.

Matthew was a tax collector crook, who contracted for the Roman occupiers of Palestine. Taxes, tolls, customs, money under the table... Matthew was there to collect it. Tax collectors were known for graft and theft. That was the only way Matthew knew how to be. As one commentator says, tax collectors “*were carp feeding off the river bottom of Roman rule.*” [Interpret that however you need to for your own frame of reference.] And yet, with a word, “Follow me,” Jesus calls Matthew and he follows a NEW WAY, free no longer to live for the rule of empire, but for the reign of God.

Well, the good, respectable church folks in town wonder what the heck Jesus is doing having dinner with a houseful of Matthews, and Jesus is clear: “I am not here

to prop up religious or oppressive government systems. I am here to bring mercy and healing. These are the very folks I came for.'

Next Matthew tells the grief-filled story about the little girl who died: A desperate father and community leader, bursts into the house and begs the Rabbi to bring his daughter back to life. In the pain of a parent's deepest grief, of course, any of us would go begging! But the funeral professionals and church musicians think Jesus is quite hilarious: Didn't he know better than to touch dead bodies because it makes YOU unclean? Didn't he know that dead people stay dead?!

And then there is that woman who is untouchable. Bleeding. Be honest: imagine that kind of suffering! She is ostracized from her community, her family, their support, allowed no human touch for all those years, but has faith and hope that even touching the hem of the garment of this Jesus she's heard about might bring her healing. And so in desperation and hope, she goes; and in the presence of Jesus, she is healed.

Three people who knew hatred, pain, poverty, and struggle. Three people whom the world avoided, shunned, refused to touch, gave up on. But again and again, Jesus mixes everything up.

- God joins a feast among tax collectors and sinners who become disciples.
- A woman is healed and restored to the shalom of her community.
- A little girl gets up—alive!

And by a WORD, hope is given, life transformed, and people understand God's heart in a whole new way. For in the words of JESUS, even Scripture is understood and interpreted in a new way. *"You have heard it said.... But I say to you...."* And in this story, *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

We human beings—Pharisees, church professionals, maybe even religious people who give two days for a church assembly, but in fact—all of us creatures—have a hard time with that! We think that disciples ought to be the ones who are able to measure up, get it right, be perfect. We don't intend to think that way, we try to live by grace, but it happens:

Who are you? You are a child of God. You did nothing to earn it. And you can do nothing to lose it. Promise? Yep, God says, *Promise*.

Just as Paul declares, so Matthew tells it in stories:

- A call to freedom is given in grace.
- God brings new life where everyone else sees death.
- God brings healing for those who have lost all their community.

Because God's promise is for all the world—not by earning righteousness by keeping the law—but by God's grace, *received in faith as the assurance of things HOPED FOR, the conviction of things not seen*.

And oh, dear friends, is this a word we need to hear today as we are walking by faith, hoping against hope in so many ways? We come together from 223 congregations in a corner of the state that is changing quickly. It's been changing for decades, but most of us had been doing just well enough that we tried not to see the changes in our culture. And then there was this global pandemic, and now: communities more divided than ever before, and trouble on a global scale:

- a struggling economy, looming agricultural crisis,
- not enough workers, too many retirements, families deciding “church” is not on their list of priorities or even on their radar,
- churches stretched for leadership and volunteers,
- communities trying to tend the fear and needs of their people.

We start to see our local context as hopeless. And it would be easy to say, “*Woe is me, we're dying on the vine*”—instead of a context as rich with life and promise as the greening fields, planted again by our farmers who are some of the people of the greatest faith I know! For the witness of Abraham & Sarah, the transformed heart of a tax collector, a father driven by grief, and woman who will not take no, and a little girl standing again.... In all of these, we see lives of faith and hope.

During this past Lenten season, I subscribed to a daily devotion from Ignatian spirituality for reflections titled, ‘Stubborn Hope.’ Written especially for this time, they grew out of

scriptures that reflect stubborn hope, not as wishful thinking, but as active faith faced with impossible circumstances that does not necessarily see the outcome of its efforts realized yet. I think it is “stubborn hope” that we hear in today’s stories:

- One author remembered the words of a Jesuit Superior, Fr. Arturo Sosa, who had said, “The one who has hope, not only has faith that another world is possible but behaves as if already living in it.”

Isn’t this the faith of Abraham and Sarah even though there seemed to be no life in their bones?

- Another author said, “*Stubborn hope....isn’t a feeling we wait for, it’s a choice we make when the world is at its coldest.*”

And isn’t this what we see in Matthew and the grieving father and the desperate woman?

THIS STUBBORN HOPE is not something that we wrangle up inside of ourselves. It is grounded in something deeper, that comes from outside of our selves in a word from God whose promise is sure. It comes from Jesus, who lets a cheating tax collector, a grieving parent, a desperate woman, and a little child know that the very Son of God sees them as beloved and precious in God’s sight.

And so, Jesus calls....YOU! Who, me?! Yes, you! God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah was to extend to all nations, all people forever after, by faith--because of the One crucified and risen. And if you are tempted to limit God’s love and grace and mercy, remember how that grace came to you:

At one time, maybe a long time ago—or not so long ago—Jesus reached out to you and me—not perfect people, broken, a sinner, good as dead in our sins—and spoke a word.

“Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the + cross of Christ forever.”

The artwork before you for tomorrow’s worship points you back to that water & those words of promise, and > forward into a new way.

There may be many days when we think WE are terrible, no good, the bad apple not worthy. But Jesus says, “*I came NOT to call the righteous, but sinners*”—and make them NEW. And his words, “Follow me” are so powerful that they accomplish their mission simply by being spoken. Jesus, who:

- called a tax collector to become a disciple;
- raised the dead to new life;
- healed a woman on the margins; and
- began to form disciples, a community, a church, with a word.

“Individual seeking... transforms into collective hope.”

This new way was actually an old way—the way God has always acted, *giving life to the dead and calling into existence the things that do not exist*. So that you, too, may walk by faith, “grounded in hope.”