

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

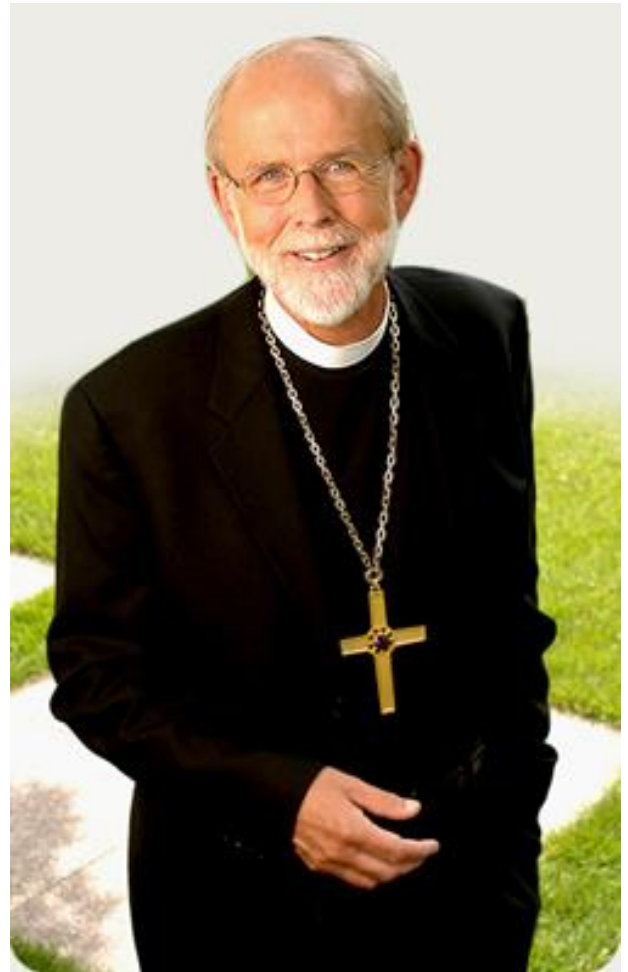
Greetings to you in the name of Jesus Christ,  
our Savior and Lord!

As we prepare for the 2011 Churchwide Assembly, we have much to celebrate. God continues to bring the new creation in Christ to our life together in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Confident that our hands are doing God's work, we are active and engaged throughout the world.

Working together, we are a church known for rolling up its sleeves and solving problems, for being a catalyst, convener and bridge builder. Recently, as I boarded a plane in Los Angeles, a woman pointed to my clerical collar and asked, "What church?" When I told her, she startled everyone by bursting out, "We LOVE Lutherans! I work for FEMA and we know that you're the ones who are there until the work is done."

Even in the midst of change, the ELCA is the church it has always been, one that is being renewed daily in the freedom that comes alone from Jesus Christ. The liberating power of the gospel releases us from our human limitations so that we may reach out in love to our neighbor. Thanks be to God! We are freed in Christ to serve.

"Freed in Christ to Serve" expresses the very heart of our faith. Freedom is God's gift that has been flowing to us and through us since the day of Christ's death and resurrection. Through word and sacrament, freedom flows to the center of our being, transforming our very life and making us into servant vessels of the Spirit's liberating work.



As the living water of the gospel flows into your synod and congregations, it flows out through your serving as everyday evangelists. When the Spirit's liberating power flows through us together as a church body we also serve the gospel as we plant new congregations and accompany global companions. Our work in the world is on a scale and scope that would be inconceivable as individual congregations or synods. The stories in the video shown at your synod assembly capture the spirit of a church that is freed in Christ to serve.

As we prepare for the assembly, I extend my gratitude for the creative and imaginative ministry of service flowing through this church -- through each of you, our more than 10,000 congregations, our 65 synods and our churchwide ministries. Together we share commitment to do God's work with our hands throughout the world.

In God's grace,

Mark S. Hanson  
Presiding Bishop  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

At the churchwide assembly

Perhaps one of the most powerful actions was that

Budget adopted

The way we spend money together

Is an act of commitment to mission

It expresses where our priorities are

As it is in our household budgets

A budget works when we

Limit our spending on ourselves

To make good on our commitment to each area

ELCA budget

80% of the money we will spend

Will directly help people throughout the world and here at home

Our money is limited,  
    so we must say no to some things and yes to others  
Our lives are limited,  
    So too we must decide how to spend our lives  
    Jesus calls us to spend our lives on love for others

In today's Gospel  
    Peter says no to Jesus  
    "No, you must not spend your life this way!"  
Jesus says, "Yes! I must!"  
    And I call you to come with me,  
        all the way to the cross  
        and beyond to the life that is truly life

Last weekend we heard Peter confess to Jesus  
    "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."  
    Just a few verses later  
        As the sound of Peter's words are still fading  
        Jesus showed his disciples a startling plan:  
            That he was going to suffer and die  
            And be raised on the third day  
    First Jesus had called Peter a "rock"  
    Now as Peter confronts him over this startling plan of the cross  
    Jesus calls him "Satan"  
    From "rock" to "Satan" in one brief moment  
There is a strong connection between Peter's confession  
    And Jesus' revelation of the coming cross  
    Peter does not realize it  
    But part of being the Messiah  
        Is taking on this death  
        Suffering this act of mercy  
            That Jesus' death would become  
No one knew it yet  
    No one but Jesus  
No one knew it yet

But soon it would become the hardest step of faith  
That the disciples would have to take  
They would have to walk with him into the garden  
And discover that it was really happening  
The betrayal  
The suffering Jesus would have to endure  
The leaders of the faith mocking him  
The soldiers scourging him  
The disciples would not be able to bear it  
For the most part they scattered  
And watched from a distance

We live on this side of the cross  
We know it happened  
And we have come to accept it  
Even though it is strange and horrifying  
And even though it's cost is beyond our understanding  
We have come to understand it and accept it  
We have even become so comfortable with it  
That we make jewelry in the form of the cross  
One father said, his eight-year-old daughter  
Stood beneath a picture of the crucifixion  
And she could not understand  
how humans could do this to another human being

Before the cross happened  
If we had been there  
If we had known anything about the cross  
We would have vehemently opposed it  
If we had any regard for Jesus  
If we had any love or felt any kindness  
We would have thrown our bodies in front of him  
There's no way we could have come to accept it  
And say  
"Well, Jesus, you know what you're doing."

“You know what’s best.”

“Everyone’s got to chart their own course.”

After Peter said no,

Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan”

Get out of my way

You have become a scandal, a stumbling block to me

To suffer and die

Is not so much a decision the Messiah had made

But a necessity

It is part of being the Messiah

It is part of being God-with-us

In our need for redeeming, transforming, holy powerful love

That need is so great

There was no other way for God

Peter did not understand the implications of his own words,

His confession, spoken moments before

That Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God

He couldn’t know that this meant Jesus would have to die for us

Peter refused to believe this was necessary or good

He quietly took Jesus aside

He turned on Jesus

He opposed his plan

Peter had joined Satan,

Jesus had been tempted by the devil in the wilderness

Now Jesus was being tormented by a friend

tempting him to depart

from the message he was sent to deliver

A message lived out in his dying on the cross

A message spoken through actions

A message revealed through sacrifice—powerful love

This is the merciful step Jesus took

And because he died for us

We can learn to follow him into a life of the cross

Jesus didn't turn away from Peter

But he invited him and the other disciples into life in the cross  
"Take up your cross and follow me."

Deny yourself

Lose your life for my sake

Put your faith in me and my death

Rather than in the things of this world

Things that are temporary

and not worth giving your life for

find the true life

in joining me in my death

Even though we have the advantage over Peter

Of living on this side of the cross

And knowing the power of the resurrection

To make us alive

We would still prefer to skip over

The dreadful message of the cross

And live a life of simple ignorance

Blissful peace of mind

A Christianity stripped of the difficulty

But that faith takes away the cross

And denies who Jesus is—the Messiah who dies for us

We have trouble living this life of the cross

Even when we're convinced it is the true life

We find it difficult to say no to ourselves

There's a conflict going on inside each of us

The self that loves God

And the self that says no to God

Only Christ can set us free

His death and resurrection are only things strong enough

To free us to live in him

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor and theologian

Discovered what he called costly grace

He lived during the years leading up to World War II

He actively became part of the German resistance movement  
And was arrested  
he ended up in Buchenwald Concentration Camp  
and finally in Flossenburg  
executed there by hanging at dawn on April 9, 1945,  
just two weeks before soldiers  
from the United States 90th and 97th Infantry Divisions  
liberated the camp<sup>1</sup>

while he was in prison  
he wrote letters of faith and trusting in God  
and soldiers smuggled his writings out to his friends  
life with other Christians inside the camp was precious to him

Bonhoeffer wrote about costly grace  
Contrasting it with cheap grace

*Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness  
without requiring repentance,  
baptism without church discipline,  
Communion without confession,  
absolution without personal confession.*

*Cheap grace is grace without discipleship,  
grace without the cross,  
grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate.*

*Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field;  
for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has.*

*It is the pearl of great price to buy  
[For] which the merchant will sell all ... his goods.*

*It is the kingly rule of Christ,  
for whose sake a man will pluck out  
the eye which causes him to stumble,*

*it is the call of Jesus Christ  
at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.*

*Costly grace is the gospel  
which must be sought again and again,  
the gift which must be asked for,*

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia

*the door at which a man must knock.  
Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow,  
and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ.  
It is costly because it costs a man his life,  
and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.  
It is costly because it condemns sin,  
and grace because it justifies the sinner.  
Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son:  
"ye were bought at a price,"  
and what has cost God much  
cannot be cheap for us.  
Above all, it is grace  
because God did not reckon his Son  
too dear a price to pay for our life,  
but delivered him up for us.  
Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.<sup>2</sup>*

We as a church seek to be faithful to our God  
Who has given so much for our redemption  
Mark Myers has shared with us some of the work we have done  
Through the larger church  
The ELCA  
I am amazed at what God is up to  
Through the work we are doing together  
The money that congregations have sent  
For our work together through the ELCA  
That money has been dramatically cut  
As a result of the economic downturn  
And because some congregations have left the ELCA  
And the general loss of a central role  
That the church once held in our culture  
But the ELCA has kept outreach as its priority  
The budgets passed by the assembly  
And adjusted by the council

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship

Have cut deeply into personnel and church programming  
But have insisted on continuing  
a strong, sacrificial love  
for the sake of the world

Our own congregation has made some difficult decisions in the past

These decisions gave us a stronger ability  
To serve the Lord through our greater church  
we used to give 10% of our contributions to the ELCA  
to our work together

During lean years we shrank that giving to 1%

Now we are back to 2½%

Sacrificial giving of our money and time

So that others may find life in Jesus

That is what our lives are all about

One day St. Augustine was accosted on the street

by a former mistress

some time after he had become a Christian.

His life used to be much more colorful

When he lived for his own pleasure

When he saw her he turned and walked the other way.

Surprised, the woman called out, "Augustine, it is I."

Augustine as he kept going the other way, answered her,

"Yes, but it is not I."<sup>3</sup>

In Christ's costly grace

We become a new person

Whose life is all about the love of Christ

The precious love

That the world needs more than anything else.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Fairchild, "In the Way or on the Way"

### Taking Risks for Faith

It doesn't seem to me that many of us are risking very much for our faith. I once heard someone describe the average Christian today in terms of a person dressed in a deep-sea diving suit, oxygen mask firmly in place, marching resolutely into the bathroom to pull the plug out of the bathtub. An old slogan says: "Expect great things from God; Attempt great things for God." We're pretty good at the first; not so hot with the second.

Remember the words of Shakespeare: "Our doubts are traitors, And make us lose the good we oft might win, By fearing to attempt." (Measure for Measure, I, iv.) Peter at least dared to attempt.

Donald B. Strobe, Collected Words, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com)

### Your Place is Behind Jesus

One of the early church fathers, a man named Origen, suggested that when Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan," what he actually meant was, "Peter, your place is behind me, not in front of me. It's your job to follow me in the way I choose, not to try to lead me in the way YOU would like me to go." Certainly what Jesus said immediately after his rebuke of Peter would support that interpretation. He told all of his disciples, including Peter, that not only did HE have a task that was set before him by God, but that THEY also had work to do. "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me," Jesus said. "Get on this new thrill ride with me. There will be many dangerous twists and turns in the tracks, but I promise you it will never be dull. It will mean putting someone other than yourself first, being concerned not so much with what YOU want, but what God wants for you. It won't be easy and sometimes it won't be much fun, but it will never be boring."

Johnny Dean, Life on the Roller Coaster

### Take Up Your Cross

In 1580, a Dutch Protestant leader named Klaes was arrested and condemned as a heretic. Eventually he was burned at the stake. When the tragedy was over, his dear wife took their small son by the hand and walked through the back streets of town to the hill where their loved one had perished as a Christian martyr. At the

place of execution, the bereaved widow gathered up a few of the ashes, placed them in her satchel, and hung it around her boy's neck, saying, "Son, I place these ashes on your heart, and on the heart of every son of these Netherlands in all eternity. Whenever and wherever in this world there is an injustice or wrong committed, these ashes will beat on your heart and you will speak out without fear, even at the fear of death."

G. Curtis Jones, 1000 Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching, Broadman, 1986, p. 89

When in a strange city

At the checkout I'm asked if I have a shopping card for their store

Do I belong to their valued customers' group

So that I can get discounts on the groceries I'm buying

Of course I say "no"—I don't belong, I'm not an insider, I'm an outsider

Often the clerk will take out a card from someplace underneath and scan it  
in

I'm treated like an insider—I save \$21