

Consecration Sunday 2009

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
Denver, Colorado
October 11, 2009**

About a hundred years ago or more, a little church in rural West Virginia was having a big celebration: a Homecoming in observance of its 50th anniversary which occurred in the middle of summer. They made every effort to emphasize the importance of this day, contacting all they could think of and reach extending to them an invitation to be present for this very special event, to come home and celebrate. The members of the congregation planned a weekend of activities which, of course, included a big worship service on Sunday morning followed by a lunch on the church lawn.

They wanted to have a “draw” for the weekend – a name that they would recognize and a person who had a connection to the congregation. All the former pastors who were still alive were considered, but that did not quite satisfy their desire to have a person who had “made a name for himself.” In those days, it would only have been a male who would have been considered.

Everyone knew of this one gentleman, who still had relatives in the congregation, who had gone off into the world and become very well known and wealthy. When contacted months before the weekend of celebration, the very busy and engaged former member was touched, but did not feel inclined to accept. It was the telephone call from the chairperson of the planning committee, a woman who had been very close friends with his mother, that caught him at a vulnerable moment which made him say, “Yes, he would be there and he would be glad to give his testimony as the message of the day at worship that Sunday.”

The day arrived. The church building was as clean as a whistle, candleholders shining, furniture polished, lawn cut and trimmed. All were really excited to have a famous hometown person return from the big city and be part of the celebration. The church building was packed to capacity, extra chairs set up, all the windows wide open, everyone handed a fan to ward off the thick, warm air. The fans had a picture of Jesus on one side and an advertisement from the local mortuary on the other, furnished, of course, by the mortuary.

Then came his turn to speak, to give the sermon of the day. He began by thanking everyone for being present, giving him such a hearty welcome, sharing memories, and making him feel even more appreciation for his formation in this community and congregation. His words made them all feel good as he recounted his early years and the impact this town and church had on him, giving him a foundation that was with him throughout his life. He named names of neighbors, Sunday School teachers, pastors, and friends which caused all to picture those people in their own minds. He offered thanks to

God for all these saints who help him integrate enduring commitments and values into his own life that, he said, have guided him throughout his career.

He was getting to the end of his testimony and recalled for everyone that his first job was delivering newspapers. On one collection stop, he was paid with a silver dollar which was overwhelming and became for him a precious keepsake. He thought to himself, "I'm going to keep that coin forever."

He continued by telling them of a particular sermon that really touched his heart, given by a visiting missionary describing his work and the great needs on the mission field. A special offering was taken that morning, and this young boy with the silver dollar in his pocket wanted to help that missionary, but he did not want to give up his special coin. He told the congregation, "I very reluctantly reached into my pocket and put my treasured silver dollar in the offering plate. I am convinced that the reason God has blessed me richly is that when I was a boy I gave God everything I possessed."

The congregation was silent, spellbound, and truly impressed by this son of the congregation who talked so powerfully about what this congregation meant to him in his life. In the silent pause, an elderly gentleman near the front stood and simply said, "Friend, I dare you to do it again."

How like Jesus telling the man with many possessions, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." The man in the text from Luke "was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

The encounter between Jesus and this wealthy man seems so clear, plain, and direct in its meaning and application. Some Biblical scholars, however, think that what Jesus is saying to us is that the charge to "sell all" is not directed to us but it was for that man in particular, for he is the one who had made a god out of his goods, his possessions. So it does not mean we are being challenged to sell all our possessions and give the money to the poor. Just that man.

Another scholar conjectured that it would be enough for us to declare our willingness to sell all and give the money to the poor if the situation called for that drastic step. The challenge is reduced to a question of willingness.

Yet another writes that Jesus statement about "sell all you have" is another example of Jewish hyperbole. Hyperbole means "obvious and intentional exaggeration" and "a figure of speech not intended to be taken literally."

Isn't it comforting to be off the hook? All these interpreters tell us what Jesus meant and are able find away around that which seems so clear, plain, and direct. Do we hear Jesus speaking to us? I try, and when I do I admit, or I confess, that I have not done what Jesus challenged the man in the text to do. The words of Jesus do penetrate and pierce, just like the reading from Hebrews this morning: "Indeed the word of God is living and active,

sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit...” (Hebrews 4:12). We know that – we are found out and “laid bare” (Hebrews 4:13) by the Word of the Lord. We also know that the Lord is gracious, kind, and full of compassion, “let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Yes, we are sinners, and, yes, the Lord is gracious and merciful.

Because God first loved us, we want to thank the Lord for all his love. The only sacrifice we can make is not our money, nor our time or talents – those are not sacrifices. We are not required to make the sacrifice of burnt offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings. The only sacrifice is one of thanksgiving. God in Christ Jesus made the only and the complete sacrifice when Jesus, the Son of God, died on the cross; Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Thank you, and help me to grow in my thanks-giving, not only with my lips but with my life and living. Lord God who made and saved us, please help us to increase first our trust in you and then our thanksgiving for you. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the forgiveness of our sin and for the many blessings we enjoy. Receive our praise and thanks giving. Amen.