

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm sorry that Pastor Irma, NTNL Director for Evangelical Mission, can't be with us today. We will look forward to hearing her speak about mission in today's world on another day. Since I was granted this time unexpectedly yesterday, I decided to use some of it to give you all some update information on Forward in Faith, It's a New Day. Earlier this week I was asked how this whole capital campaign got started, kind of a "whose idea was this anyway?" question. The seed was planted quite a few years ago, when the leaders of this congregation began to notice that our building wasn't getting any younger, unlike its members. Repairs were cropping up with almost as much regularity as liturgical seasons. You may remember that at least 10 years ago I had a vision of this campus that included a park-like setting, an up-to-date well-kept building, plenty of activity throughout the year, and frequent interaction with the neighborhood. That seed germinated a long time; some things we were able to begin working on, and some not. Every time a new project was proposed, the excuses for not acting were, "that's too much money, we don't have that money, we're too small for that, we're just a little church." So many times we hear, "we need more members;" but in order to get new members we need to prepare a place and offer events that will compel them to enter.

Meanwhile, all this time our outreach to the community never languished. We have always been a church with a big heart for those in need, whether we were bigger or smaller at the moment the need presented itself to us. Whether it was someone among us, someone around the corner, or someone across the globe, we have always stood up and stepped up to do all we could to assist others. The message we taught our children was that God loves Everybody. The message we have demonstrated to the synod, the community, and even the ELCA is that this "little" church is not so little when it comes to doing God's work with our hands.

Also during these intervening years, our regularly worshipping membership numbers grew smaller. Consequently our income from regular offerings waned a bit, though not as much as you might suspect. So God began to send us some surprises, some unexpected income. God sent us first some money from a mineral rights buyout, then a cell tower lease, and then another worship group to rent the building. Always God provided for our needs, always. In spite of God's faithfulness, however, just like most human beings and human groups, our enthusiasm lagged a bit. Our self-image continued to be a little church with no means to grow; we lacked the vision that would support a vision.

But God heard our prayers, and last year the little seed began to sprout. The council seemed to develop a new spirit of adventure and enthusiasm. The group began to see the advantage of opening our minds to possibilities. We began to investigate how much it would actually cost to do some of the needed repairs, and to accomplish some updates to make this church appear more welcoming and to add some new programming so that more folks would come through the door and learn about the grace of God that lives here, the grace we want to share. We began to see that this church has plenty of vitality, and lots of potential. Some of that happened by my meeting people that I had no idea I would meet, at the Synod Assembly, and in my role as a mentor. I brought the ideas that I heard, the good news about raising capital funds, back to the council. The council gained that glimmer called hope. Enough hope to listen to new possibilities, and to imagine what might be. Enough hope by the grace of the Holy Spirit

to come up with a plan, and stand there on it. This was not easy—it took months of meetings, and conversations, and more meetings. It took each of us praying and considering what God is doing here. Finally we had enough confidence to propose the plan to the congregation. You may recall that congregational meeting last fall. People who had not spoken in a congregational meeting for years stood up and spoke, and offered their ideas and opinions. Pros and cons were revealed. Questions were answered. The vote was overwhelming to proceed. We would step out in faith, we would step out with faith, we would open our lives to the working of God here in this place. And we would open our pocketbooks to support God's work in this church. I'm telling you, this is the evidence for faith – God is doing something new here, something great – just as we heard in our readings from Isaiah and the Psalm.

Now we've begun. For those of you who thought perhaps we were almost finished, let me assure you that our fund appeal has just started. For those of you who think you've already got your mind made up one way or another, or on a specific amount, let me encourage you to hold on and be patient a bit longer. Allow the Holy Spirit time to move in your hearts, and in the heart of this congregation; allow room for God's surprises to startle us. It's already begun to work that way. The first donation we received was \$10,000 from someone who is not even a member of this church; it was from a couple who had visited a few times, don't live in this area, but were impressed with our dreams and visions for mission and ministry here. This week we got a check that covers the new printer we got to make the appeal materials, instead of having to have them done by others. We have had a lot of behind-the-scenes work happening up to now, then a big Mission Rally last Sunday. Now we will have a few more weeks of behind-the-scenes work, juggling around Holy Week and Easter, and the NTNL Assembly. Then there will be another big weekend May 3-5. You will receive notices and announcements about that. But for now, please set aside Sunday May 5 for church and a big fiesta lunch. Please don't let anything get between you and Faith that day.

There is a spirit of hopeful enthusiasm around here now; people who don't usually have much to say are contributing their ideas. There has been a question about interacting with the folks around us. Of course we will do that; but we can do that better when we feel better about our place, when we feel excited about what God is up to here. We don't need capital for relationships, but we do need a nice inviting place.

Last week in the Mission Rally potluck lunch, I shared that ever since I began to think in terms of a particular pledge, the devil has been wreaking havoc with my finances. So I may have to give more in order to get the devil off my back. Because you see that's how God works in my life; the more of my life and myself I give to God, to Jesus and his work, the less important other things are to me, and the less I am bothered by or concerned about those devilish setbacks that occur in my life. These speed bumps in the path of life are common to every human being on the planet. The problem is not the obstacles we face; it is that we see them as obstacles rather than opportunities to watch God work his miracles around us. You don't have to see to believe; you have to believe to see. For me, the treasure I have in Jesus Christ is worth whatever I have; that is my single greatest priority. Really, folks, think about it. Everything else is just stuff.

That was the case for Mary as well; this is Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha, not Mary the mother of Jesus or one of the many other Mary's in the Bible. What Mary

had found in Jesus was so good, so sweet, so wonderful that it did not seem extravagant to her to give something wonderful to honor him. Mary used a bottle of perfumed oil to anoint the feet of Jesus, those feet by which she had sat to listen to her Lord speak and teach. The cost of it was not important; the effect of it was priceless. The whole house was filled with the fragrance of the nard, just as her whole life had been filled with a sweet odor since she met Jesus. She loved Jesus and she wanted him and all those around him to know it. The cost was about a year's wages for a laborer. She would gladly work an extra year to serve Jesus this way. I can relate to that. I may have to work longer to pay for some of the things in my life; that's okay. As long as I'm working in God's kingdom, what I'm doing is not important. As St. Paul said, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on.

I remember when I was in Mexico City once with a church group; there were some who couldn't relate to the huge beautiful cathedral there. Why was that money used to build a big ornate building instead providing clothes and food for the poor? Why did the *campesinos*, the poor farmers, so willingly contribute to the building and its elaborate decorations? Here was the explanation from the poor farmer: in my life are good things and bad things. The beauty I see every day is in nature all around me; my home is not beautiful. But this beautiful monument to my Lord Jesus is partly mine as well; I helped to build it. The cost is well worth it to know that we all together share in this place to honor God. It is ours together, and my part is just as beautiful as all the others. There is good precedent for us to put some money into making the place that God has brought us into a beautiful setting for worshipping and welcoming others.

Let us come to the table today breathing in the fragrance of Jesus, our sweet Lord. Take a deep breath and be filled with the Spirit of Christ. Honor God with all your senses; remember as you taste and see that the Lord is good. Let the peace of God be all your desire. Live in steadfast faith, gentle love, and quiet heart. Be thankful for mercy and render unto God what service as you may. Amen.