

“Pointing to Christ”

Sermon: Year A, Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Texts: Psalm 40 and John 1:29–42

Preached January 19, 2020 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

Awhile back, I got really interested in doing genealogy. I bought a membership in ancestry.com, and stayed up way too late on many evenings making discoveries about who my ancestors were, piecing together what they did. In learning things about them, I gained some insights into who I am, where I’ve come from. I learned, for example, that I had grandparents who died in one of the Jamestown Massacres, and the only survivor in the family was their three-month-old son whom they hid away, and who was found the next day by his grandparents who had come looking for the family. I learned also that I come from a long line of pastors on both sides of the family, with Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Lutherans all in the mix. One of my grandfathers way back in the 17th century was captured by Algerian pirates, and his Anglican priest dad had to take up a collection in the parish to ransom him ... and there it is, recorded in the parish register.

One big discovery was that my eighth great-grandfather on my mother’s side was a man named August Hermann Francke. I googled him. It turned out he’s actually on Wikipedia. And the first article I found about him was entitled, “Lutheranism’s Forgotten Hero.” Then I found a German postage stamp bearing his image. And when we toured the Luther sites in Germany two years ago, in one of the big Luther museums there was an exhibit about him that filled an entire room. I’m trying not to let it go to my head.

August Hermann Francke was a Lutheran pastor and was also a professor of theology, Greek, and Hebrew at the university in Halle, Germany. He had gotten very involved with establishing small-group Bible studies, and in those, he and his students wrestled with the question of what effects truly following Jesus would have on the way we live our lives in the world. He got so involved with that that they kicked him out of his wealthy parish, and sent him to a parish in a poor part of town. There he became concerned for the poor, especially poor children, many of whom had been orphaned or left with only one parent because of the Thirty Years’ War and its devastating, long lasting effects. Each week, August and his wife would hand out groceries to children who gathered at their doorstep. But he soon realized that simply running a food pantry was not enough. He saw the links between lack of education and lack of spiritual formation and the grinding cycle of poverty.

August and his wife, after much prayer and troubling of conscience, decided to take four orphaned children into their home, and within a few short years, that simple act of kindness had turned into a full-blown ministry to orphans. Then he felt called to start a program for seniors, and started one of the first retirement homes for the elderly poor—and included adult learning classes for them. Then he added night classes for the working poor. Then he added an institution of higher learning that taught Latin, modern languages, and natural sciences, such as botany, zoology, anatomy and astronomy, physics and chemistry. Within just 15 years, the orphanage had over 2,000 resident students and 100 teachers, along with almost 1,000 workers, and was housed in the largest building in Germany in its time. The ministries had come to include a hospital, residences for widows and elderly, a laboratory for the development and production of pharmaceuticals that were used not only to treat the poor but also were sold to fund the ministry, a publishing company for religious literature and Scripture, schools for the children of the nobility, the middle class, and the poor, continuing education for the burghers who never received a real education, a missionary training school—26 schools in all. From this grew the public school system in Germany, which is why he got a postage stamp. The printing ministry printed 100,000 German Bibles and 80,000 New Testaments between 1712 and 1719. Within 100 years, they had printed 2,000,000 Bibles and 1,000,000 New Testaments, at a time when printing presses were operated by hand. The Francke Foundation remains the largest charitable and educational foundation in Germany to this day.

Now why am I telling you all this? I’m telling you this not because I want to brag about my ancestor’s importance, but rather because I want to point to the powerful way that a simple ministry can explode into something no one could expect—by Bible study, prayer, and faith that God will do what God has promised.

Francke wrote many books, one of which contained his description of how the orphanage came to be. Finances were very tight, especially at the beginning, and from one week to the next he had no clue where money would come from. But somehow, God kept providing. And my grandfather tells story after story of that providing. Here’s one, where he describes a tough time during the building of the orphanage:

“About Michaelmas, we were again reduced to great need; but the weather was so fine and invigorating that it gladdened my heart, and I felt like even exclaiming, ‘How good it is to have nothing, and to rest entirely on God and his constant providence!’ I was entirely confident that a way would be opened to us out from our place of need, and felt perfect repose in my spirit. The master-mason who had come once before to inquire whether I had any money to pay off the workmen with, and asked, ‘Is anything come yet?’ I answered, ‘No, but I have faith in God.’ Scarcely had I said the word when a student came to me with thirty dollars in his hand, which he said came from a donor who wished his name to remain unknown. I went at once to the master-workman and asked him how much money he needed to pay off the men. He answered, ‘Thirty dollars.’ ‘Have you no need of more?’ I asked. ‘No.’ I told him then how wonderfully God had remembered us, providing just the sum needed; and the incident served for the strengthening of his faith as well as mine.”

The book I’m quoting from is called *Faith’s Work Perfected*, and the entire book is focused not on what wonderful things my grandfather had accomplished, but instead, recounts story upon story of what *God* had done ... all those surprising things, great or small, that had come together to make something happen that was beyond anything anyone, including my grandfather, could have imagined at the beginning. And his purpose in telling the story was to stand and point—not to himself, but rather to stand with wonder and awe and point to those things that had occurred and say, “See, this isn’t about me, that was the Spirit of God at work!”

Today’s gospel lesson reminds us that this life of faith is not about us, and it’s certainly not about pointing to ourselves and saying, “Look at the great things we’ve done.” Rather, like John the Baptist, like those very first disciples, our job is to point to Jesus and identify for others where we see the Spirit of God present and at work in our lives, to name that for one another and for others, to tell the stories of what we’ve experienced. We don’t have to understand everything about who Jesus is, and we certainly don’t need to be able to give lengthy arguments to others about why they should believe in Jesus. All we need to be able to do is to point to what is going on in our lives and in the world around us, and say, “See? That’s not me. That’s God at work. This is about Jesus. This is about God’s Spirit active in the world.”

Look at the words of today’s psalm. It’s all about telling the story and pointing to God. “Great are the wonders you have done, O LORD my God! In your plans for us, none can be compared with you! Oh, that I could make them known and tell them! But they are more than I can count.” And “I have not hidden your righteousness in my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your deliverance; I have not concealed your steadfast love and truth from the great assembly.”

I believe with all my heart that God has great plans for Immanuel, great plans that aren’t about me, but about what the Spirit of God is doing here among you, and is going to do in the future. I earnestly believe that my task here among you more than anything has been to point to Christ Jesus, to encourage you to look around you and notice the ways God is working in your life and in the world around you, and to urge you to tell those stories, to point to God’s gracious actions. And I believe that out of that pointing to what God is already doing, and telling the stories to one another, that you will unleash great power in this place, power that might astonish you in how simple things can grow.

I’m excited that a number of you have begun telling your stories to one another on Sunday mornings in the adult spiritual growth group. I’ve also noticed that individuals are becoming more comfortable telling your stories of the day-to-day encounters you have had with God’s Spirit. We need much, much more of this. I think you could benefit greatly from the same approaches my grandfather stumbled on 400 years ago: Bible study and prayer in small groups where you make the connections between the Good News of Jesus and the needs of your neighbors, earnest prayer that God will act, sharing of your stories of how you see God acting, and developing the trust that God is going to provide if you simply step out and do something for the good of your neighbor, no matter how small it may seem. Wait patiently on the Lord. God will always find a way to redeem.

My eighth great-grandfather knew that it is when we stop and point away from ourselves, when we stop and name where we see God’s Spirit moving in both the extraordinary and the ordinary events of our lives, and share that insight with one another, when we remind one another that God’s activity in the world did not stop in the days of Jesus of Nazareth, but continues in power today, that is when even greater things begin to come about. God has great plans for Immanuel that may seem hard to imagine today. Keep praying and studying, keep working, and above all, keep pointing others to the Lamb of God. Thanks be to God! AMEN