

**Sermon – Bethany Lutheran Church**  
**Sunday, August 19, 2007 (Pentecost 12 / Proper 16c)**

Let me greet you this morning with the salutation that begins the Letter to the Hebrews – today’s second reading:

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.”

I am honored and humbled to be invited to preach today – the 138<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bethany Lutheran Church. I am honored and humbled to stand in the pulpit where Olof Olsson and Carl Aaron Swensson once stood. I am honored and humbled to preach in the church that gave birth to Bethany College, especially on this special day; special, not only because it is your 138<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but because today the newest Swedes arrive on campus to begin their relationship with Bethany College and Lindsborg.

As you get to know me, you will find that I am not a big believer in coincidence. I am, on the other hand, a big believer in God’s active involvement in our daily lives. And that includes today’s reading from the Letter of Hebrews.

“... and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross ...”  
(Hebrews 12:1-2)

Is this reading coincidence, or God’s reminder of several key ideas? – the ideas of perseverance, pioneer, and perfecter.

Let me explain.

First, “let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” As I approach the anniversary of my third week as President of Bethany College, I – we – should all be reminded that we are running a marathon and not a sprint. Overcoming the challenges that are before all of us at Bethany College will take perseverance.

Twenty years ago, on the occasion of my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, I decided to compete in the Chicago Triathlon; at the time, the world's largest triathlon. As I trained, that spring and summer, for the 1.5 kilometer swim, 40 kilometer bike ride, and 10 kilometer run – and participated in three other triathlons to “get the feel” – I quickly learned that a 2½ hour to 3 hour athletic endeavor must be pursued with perseverance. You must learn strategy and patience – to learn and then accept your strengths and weaknesses.

When Olof Olsson arrived in 1869, I feel confident in saying he knew it would take perseverance to build a city and a church that would both long outlive his life on this Earth.

When Carl Aaron Swensson began, what would eventually become, Bethany College in 1881, I feel confident in saying he knew it would take perseverance to build a college that would long outlive his life on this Earth.

As pioneers themselves, Olsson and Swensson knew that the supreme pioneer and perfecter of our faith was Jesus Christ. You need go no further than the Latin phrase found on the Bethany College seal, “Domini, Domino,” which translated means, “Of the Lord, For the Lord.”

As I look to the next few years as we, together, build a better, stronger, bigger Bethany College, I draw strength from the perseverance and pioneering of Olsson and Swensson. But, more importantly, I know that what we will build together must be of the Lord and for the Lord. I firmly believe that with God's grace, a good plan, and hard work, there will be a Bethany renaissance.

I value and appreciate that Bethany College was founded by Lutherans and is rooted in Christ. As part of the mission and ministry of the ELCA, through the Central States, Arkansas-Oklahoma, and Rocky Mountain Synods, Bethany College must prepare its graduates, to the fullest extent possible, to live out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. We must help our students grow, not only in learning, but also in their faith.

As we build a better, stronger, bigger Bethany College, we must never forget that we must continue to be a college centered on its students. In all that we do, we must never forget it's all about the students and building the best possible total student experience.

To build on rock, rather than sand, we must build wider and deeper relationships – with our alumni, with the Lindsborg community, with the church,

and so on. Without a doubt, the College's future will be built on our ability to succeed in building relationships – making connections and re-connections.

Lastly, we must be focused on our guiding principles. These guiding principles will be, if you will, our North Star – keeping us focused and on path in the years to come.

Accordingly, over the next year, as a broad community – representing the campus, the community, the church, alumni, parents, and friends – we will revisit our mission and values, and either recommit to them or make them stronger.

We will develop a promise statement of what the Bethany Experience will strive to deliver to our students.

We will develop a vision statement looking out 10 years and 24 years to our sesquicentennial.

More importantly, and returning to today's second reading, it is important that we never lose sight of the pioneers who founded this city and, more importantly, this church. Olof Olsson, and his companions, like Jesus, ventured into the unknown and founded something quite remarkable.

I don't know about you, but I continue to marvel at the faith of all early pioneers and I frequently wonder whether I could have done it or not. Is my faith strong enough to venture into the unknown? Do I really trust God enough to know he will be my shepherd?

Then, I read this passage from Hebrews and am reminded I am a pioneer. Every day is a new adventure. I don't know what will happen or how I will respond. But I do know that God is there to give me my daily bread. And, likewise, we are all pioneers – albeit different from Olof Olsson – but pioneers nonetheless.

Finally, looking to Jesus the perfecter of our faith, it is important that we never forget that, in our imperfection, God's amazing grace redeems us and restores us. As we build a better, stronger, bigger Bethany College, we must never forget that what we build we build of the Lord and for the Lord. We strive for perfection as Jesus is the perfecter of our faith, we know that he endured the cross for our sins, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

Amen.