

True Life and the Family of God
The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
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Earlier this year, when we were looking at the need to trust the Lord, I went back to the devotional book we had assembled during Lent of 2007 to find a devotion written by Steve Ross. The date was March 17, 2007. Steve's meditation recounted the challenges he faced when the Timken Company bought his former employer, the Torrington Company, which led Steve to wonder whether his job would pay the price and cover the costs of the supposed "*synergies*" that Timken would enjoy with its new acquisition. As it turned out, Steve's job was safe, and Zion was blessed when Steve and Linda (along with Nicole and Matt) moved to North Canton, with Steve assuming a new position with the Timken Company, and their family finding a new church home with Zion.

This month's newsletter offers a nice introduction to some of the ways in which we have been blessed, as the Rosses have been involved in virtually every aspect of our congregational life – Church Council, coed softball, the Chancel Guild, youth programming, our three mission trips to New Orleans, the Men of Zion, the Food Pantry and Clothing Closet, stewardship drives, temple talks, worship skits, the witness team, Sunday School, church dinners, serving as worship leaders, as a part of our weekly transportation crew, occasion workday crews, renovation projects.... Wow! That's quite a list, which only touches the surface ... because to know the Rosses is to enjoy working alongside them. They lift the spirits and add to the laughter that abounds among those with whom they've worked and served in contributing to the life of the church.

In that Lenten Devotional Guide way back when, Steve found strength in the Scriptural principle that we should *render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's*. Here's how he put it: "It's hard to draw the line, but I learned that we are not to overly rely on things like coins, or the things that provide us security or comfort. There are things in life that are God's, where "*rendering unto God*" requires putting our trust in Him, following the example set by Jesus. It's hard to say exactly where the line is, but that's why I give my time, and my talents, and my money to the work of the church, because I am trying to render to God what is God's." (2007 Lenten Devotional Guide, *Why We Give*, March 17, 2007) Trusting the Lord, rendering to God, working alongside God's people: in all these ways the Rosses have been a great witness and a wonderful resource in our mission of *growing in love and service by grace*.

I got a great sermon this summer out of Steve's Lenten meditation several months ago (actually on the first day of summer on June 21st). Today I'm going back to that well, because I knew, since I am the editor of all of our great devotional guides, that Steve offered meditations in our most recent Lenten Devotional Guide for 2009, and before that in our Easter Devotional Guide back in 2006, that focused on the issues that are raised

with this morning's gospel text. "A man ran up and knelt before Jesus, so that he might garner Jesus' attention, and ask him this question, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit true life?'" (Mark 10:17) That's quite a question. It forces us to think about the key to being truly happy. What is the full and abundant life our Lord promised? In raising these questions, many use words like meaning, purpose, contentment, beatitude, life as God intended it, or the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The quest for true life goes by many names, but the man in our Gospel text asked the question as well as any. Steve's meditation back in 2006, when we were celebrating our Lord's Resurrection with a book of personal stories on *Why We Worship*, picked up on this question. "Life, for me," he wrote, "has been a quest ... dreaming and planning for true happiness. Most of those dreams involved accumulating wealth and maximizing pleasure, but my quest has changed as I've grown. It's been rerouted by a job and family and all of the demands that they bring. The search for true happiness seems to have been refined into a search for peace and contentment, with a focus on our loved ones, and community, and the work around us." (2006 Easter Devotional Guide, *Why We Worship*, May 29, 2006)

"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" First, you've got to have a good idea of what that is. It's not just a matter of longevity. It's not just about the length of our lives, as in quantity. It's also about quality, what fills our lives, how we fill our lives, what we're aiming for, what life's aim is. Just think of what that might mean for Steve. He grows up in a nice suburban community in New Jersey. He keeps his nose clean, heads off to college, gets a degree, a job, marries a wife, earns another degree, has a family.... Just look at the record: he works hard, plays by the rules, excels where he can, hones the key virtues at work and at home, with friends and with family, conscientiousness and compassion, loyalty and faithfulness, determination and persistence, you're a good friend, a nice guy, with a helping hand, and a lot of heart. It's like Jesus going down the list of all the commandments, throwing in the wisdom of the ages, and even a few hints from Heloise. Yes, yes, been there, done that. All these I have done since as long as I can remember. So, why'd that pink slip come to me? Why's my life on the line, my family disrupted, the future in doubt, and the present at risk?

Just think back for a moment to what our world has been like over the past several years. Everything's humming along. The markets were up, home values up, 401-Ks were getting fat, and folks were feeling flush. Like I said, everything was just humming along. Then, almost overnight, there's Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Lehman Brothers and Bears Stearns, bank bailouts and auto bailouts, mortgage-backed securities, credit swaps, and derivatives, with the bottom falling out of the home values, just when they have to sell theirs, the ceiling falling in with the credit crisis, just as they need to access some, profits were on the way down, unemployment is on the way up; and even though Steve's life was wrung through the wringer, he was one of the lucky ones, landing on his feet, so to speak, with a job in Poughkeepsie, Nicky at Kent State, Matt at Stark State, and Linda trying to tie together all the loose ends, if she can find them. It's not easy having the right

idea of what true life looks like, what the key to true happiness is, especially if you think that wealth and pleasure are the key ingredients.

Here's what Steve wrote in our 2009 Lenten Devotional with his meditation on March 20: "Through the commandments, and through the words that are written throughout the New Testament, we are compelled to love one another, to serve others, to be a 'good Samaritan.' The message is clear – selflessness and compassion for others are traits Christians should espouse. Jesus sets the ultimate example through the sacrifice he made on the Cross. Through the grace of God, we'll never be asked to make the same sacrifice, but we are compelled to follow this example. There are many examples of people acting out of love and kindness everywhere. At Zion, I'm an eyewitness to those expressions of Christian love and caring. On occasion, I'm even a part of it. Our church is a living, daily example of how people should act toward each other. Love for others is demonstrated in so many ways at Zion: in every handshake or hug shared on Sunday morning during the time when we are sharing the Peace; in the outpouring of support and concern when a member suffers an illness, an injury, or a death of a loved one; in the patience and attention given to youth of all ages; by the service and support we provide to persons in need in our community.

"As I observe fellow members of Zion in action, I feel admiration for their strength and compassion for their vulnerabilities. I feel pride in what we accomplish together, and joy from our success. I feel a sense of belonging at Zion that is grounded in our common faith. All these feelings create in me a peace and comfort that are among the most tangible signs of God's presence in my life. So, it's through the church that I witness the teachings of Jesus in action and feel the love of God. That's why I love the church", which was a great way to end his meditations, since, the title of our 2009 Devotional Guide for Lent was Growing in Faith with Friends and Family: *Why We Love the Church*. The meditation was perfect, and so was the prayer offered with it. "Creator God, Saving Lord, Holy Spirit, You have created us to live in a loving community, and You have taught us in Your Son that love fulfills the law. Through Your Spirit, empower us to love You with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves."

I think Steve's meditation, the story of the Rosses, or the Danners and LeBeaus, and so many others who have found a home in our church family, have helped us to understand what Jesus had in mind when he promised, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has sacrificed anything who will not receive a hundred-fold in this life ... and even more abundantly in the life to come." (Mark 10:29-31) The key to true life is not the wealth we've accumulated, or the pleasures we've enjoyed. These can be unsteady anchors and illusive goals. This morning we thank God for the Rosses, and for all the families that have found something special at Zion. You see, eternal life, true life, the abundant life, however you say it, isn't something we have to ourselves alone. It's something we share together. It is living in a loving community, where God's love and ours come together, as we gather for worship and go forth to serve ... in Jesus' name. Amen