

Devotions – February 7-13, 2021
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CHRISTIAN FOREBEARS

Sunday, February 7, 2021

Text: Psalm 145:4

“One generation shall laud Thy works to another and shall declare Thy mighty works.”

Brita Skog was my maternal great-grandmother. She died in 1927, twelve years before I was born. I am amazed therefore what an amazing impact her Christian life and witness has on my life!

Brita and her husband Erik immigrated from Finland to Metropolitan, Michigan in the 1800's. They developed a successful dairy farm. They were also instrumental in luring many other Finnish immigrants to join them in the United States. It was said that when immigrants at Ellis island in New York asked their destination they said, “Box 42, Metropolitan, MI” which was my grandparent's box number. A very devout Christian and Lutheran church member, Brita was determined that the Christian faith would be cultivated among her immigrant neighbors.

In addition to a successful farm operation, Erik and Brita managed a boarding house for immigrant families. In her determination to cultivate the Lutheran families Brita set aside one bedroom for the exclusive use of visiting pastors. Brita secured seminarians and visiting pastors who conducted services, baptized, married, and buried residents of the community and provided instruction in the Lutheran faith.

In 1870, Brita, with her strong Lutheran commitment was instrumental in forming Zion Lutheran Church in Metropolitan, donating a part of their farmland for the site of the church. Scandinavian churches had the custom of suspending model ships in their church buildings to remind worshippers that the church nave, like a ship, was the vessel transporting our souls to heaven. In Brita's honor the ship was christened “The Brita.”

Brita prayed that one of her four sons would become a pastor and, failing in that, she sought to recruit pastors among her friend's sons. The spirit and commitment of Brita made an indelible impression on her descendants, including me. As I answered a call to ordained ministry, I felt great grandma Brita's spirit leading me.

Prayer: Heavenly Father we thank and praise you for our forebears who encouraged and nurtured us and others in our Christian faith and journey. May we, following their example, inspire others in Christian witness and service. Amen.



Monday, February 8, 2021

Text: Deuteronomy 6:6...7

“These are the words that I commend you... and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk in the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up.”

John V. Sundstrom was a garage owner in Felch, Michigan, but on Sunday he was my Sunday School superintendent. He has been dead for many years but his Christian witness still lives on! He was not polished or sophisticated, but he was a committed Christian and Sunday School teacher.

Having serviced cars, tractors and other farm equipment in his garage during the week he would invariably have a layer of grease under his fingernails on his calloused hands. This was coupled with a very strong Swedish accent when he stood in front of our Sunday School. I can still hear him saying, “Now boys and girls let us sing Jesus Loves Me” - which we did every Sunday.

He would tell us simplistic stories witnessing to the Christian faith which I still remember in my eighties. The stories conveyed a message of faith and trust in God.

- A little boy was lost. He found his way to a farmer’s barn where he repeated the alphabet. The farmer found him and asked, “What are you doing?” to which he answered, “I’m praying.” The farmer said, “That’s not praying!” and the boy answered, “I trust God to put the letters in a prayer to help me find my way home.”
- Another little boy was lost in a deep woods and prayed to God for help. God sent a little bird which the boy followed and he was led to safety.

Simplistic, Yes! Naïve, Yes!, but to me Mr. Sundstrom taught me that God was to be trusted. God loves us and He will lead us safely home. Visiting the Felch, Michigan cemetery, I pause at Mr. Sundstrom’s grave and say a word of thanks for his witness that taught a little boy about “Yeee... suss.”

Prayer: Dear God we thank you for all your Christian saints and witnesses. We include those whose faith, though seemingly simple and unsophisticated, still gave strong and lasting witness to your love, compassion and guidance. Amen.



Tuesday, February 9, 2021

Text: 1 Tim. 4:13

“Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching.”

Reverend Carl Pontus Peterson was my confirmation pastor. An immigrant from Scandinavia he was admitted to the clergy roster of the Augustana Lutheran Church in America and he served Zion Lutheran Church in Metropolitan, Michigan. Carl Pontus was a devoted pastor despite his strong Swedish brogue and routines honed in the so-called “Old Country.”

Frugality was one of the Peterson’s virtues that were observed with amusement by some of Zion’s members! It was the age of table coverings known as “oil” cloths and when purchasing a new one Mrs. Peterson simply placed it on top of the others on the table. When our confirmation class met around the parsonage kitchen table, we took delight in counting the number of cloths, one on top of the other. Mrs. Peterson also took any coffee that was left over from church functions and reheated it for their personal use. It was the age of “store string” and when the Petersons left Metropolitan, she has a ball big enough to last a lifetime!

Mrs. Peterson served as the family chauffer and, being very short in stature, she would be observed staring through the car’s steering wheel barely visible by on-coming cars as she peered over the dashboard. My mother observed that the Petersons had an uncanny knack of arriving for an unannounced visit at mealtime. Church members perched on bar stools at Soberg’s Bar in Felch were startled when the Petersons marched in and ordered soda pop!

The forgoing is not meant to impugn the Petersons in any way as they served with unyielding faithfulness among the members of Zion Lutheran and in the surrounding community.

Pastor Carl Pontus was my confirmation pastor and he played an indelible role in my journey to ordained Lutheran ministry. One day when I came home from school my parents informed me that Pastor Peterson had visited and shared a startling message with them. He told my parents that, as my confirmation pastor, he saw strong qualities in me that suited me for ordained ministry. I was beyond amazement, but Carl Pontus sewed the seeds that ultimately led to my ordination in the Lutheran Church. I have now been an ordained pastor for

65 years. I pray that I, like Carl Pontus and Mrs. Peterson, despite my eccentricities, might serve God faithfully and also be remembered for my Christian witness, warts and all!

Prayer: *Dear God, we thank you that despite any eccentricities we might possess you can still use us as your witnesses and servants. We thank you for those persons who, while being human, venture to preach, teach and witness to the gospel. Amen.*



Wednesday, February 10, 2021

Text: Ecclesiastes 11:9

“Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that in all these things God will bring you into judgement”.

Stanley Helander was in my confirmation class at Zion Lutheran Church in Metropolitan, Michigan. He was not above challenging our teacher, the Reverend Carl Pontus Peterson. In one class he told Carl Pontus that Jesus turned an awful lot of water into wine at the wedding of Cana. Carl Pontus in his heavy Swedish brogue told Stanley, “But you know, Stanley, it was really like soda pop.” I’m not sure where that knowledge came from but Stanley countered, “If they only had soda pop in those days why were the disciples accused of being drunk at Pentecost?” I don’t recall where the conversation went from there!

Unfortunately, Stanley contracted inoperable and terminal cancer of the jaw in March of 1954. We were confirmed at Zion Lutheran in May of that year. Over the summer the cancer progressed and that fall Stanley was too weak to attend school. He stood in the picture window of his home weeping as the school bus drove by and he was unable to join his classmates.

One day Stanley had ventured out of his sick bed only to say to his father, “Daddy, I’m so weak and tired, can you carry me back to bed?” He died in his father’s arms.

Stanley’s confirmation class were asked to serve as pallbearers as we carried his casket into the white frame church on the hill for a final goodbye. Later, at home, my non-demonstrative father, took me in his arms with tears in his eyes and said, “Dale, I don’t know what I would do if it was you that died and not Stanley!”

That day I learned a lesson about life and faith far beyond anything in Carl Pontus’ confirmation classes. Now in old age, I often think about how blessed my life has been and I thank God and Stanley for the lessons I learned post-confirmation.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you for lessons in Christian life and faith whether they are learned in the classroom or on life's journey. Into your hands we commend all those who die before they have really lived and we pray that we will never take each day and year of life for granted. Amen.



Thursday, February 11, 2021

Text: John 2:14

“In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons and the money changers were at their business.”

Helene Palonen was a member of my first congregation, Grace Lutheran in South Range, Michigan. When I graduated from seminary in 1965 the national church leaders had taken a very strong stand against what they called commercialism in the church. They argued that it was not appropriate for congregations to compete with local businesses by hosting dinners, selling pasties and holding bazaars that competed with local enterprise.

To my dismay I learned that a very large portion of the church budget was raised by making and selling pasties! What to do? The congregation had never had a stewardship drive and a young and gifted member of the congregation agreed to chair an every member visit and pledge drive. The stewardship effort was monumentally successful, and the congregation had stronger financial support than ever before. Pasty making and sales were no longer necessary!

Then, however, the pasty makers began to complain! They missed the comradery and fun of gathering together to make, bake and sell pasties. (Truth was, they did make the best pasties in the area and I missed them too!)

I had an idea! Why not have a Father-Son dinner and let the pasty makers serve the dinner? The event was monumentally successful. Great attendance, fine program and DELICIOUS pasties.

After the event was over, Helene Palonen, one of the pasty makers, broad as she was tall, stumbled out of the church kitchen, slumped in a chair and said, “I’m so exhausted!” I said to her, “Aren’t you glad, Helene, that you don’t have to make pasties every week?” Her reply: “Humph, if you hadn’t stopped it, I wouldn’t have gotten out of shape!” MORAL OF THE STORY: Pastor you may not have the last word!!!

Prayer: Dear God, deliver us from the desire to always have the last word and help us to be charitable and loving with those with whom we might disagree. Amen.



Friday, February 12, 2021

Text: Ephesians 3:14-15

“For this reason I bow my knees before the father, from whom every family in heaven and earth is named.”

Anita Jane Skogman/Lantz/Johnson was my sister whom I dearly loved and she felt the same way about me although we were twelve years apart in age. Anita married, unwisely, when she was just seventeen years old. The difficult marriage lasted twenty years and bore three children. The marriage ended in divorce due to infidelity, alcoholism and abuse. Devout in her Christian faith, Anita had sought counsel from her pastor who said divorce is wrong and forbidden by our faith.

A student in college, heading to seminary, I disagreed with the pastor’s counsel and felt God would not confine anyone to a marriage devoid of love and compassion. Financially strapped as I was, I stepped forward to assist Anita in leaving the marriage and finding sustenance for her and the three children.

Anita never forgot my kindness and over the years the bond between sister and brother grew ever stronger. I was truly inspired in the way Anita modeled a faithful Christian life. Prayer was the life-blood of Anita’s life, sustained by faithful participation in the life of her Christian community.

When I was ordained into the Lutheran ministry and consecrated as a bishop, Anita was by my side. She wrote a tribute to me that I still cherish recounting with love, honesty and great insight the paths we had traveled and shared in our journeys. I still have and cherish her loving reflections.

Anita was blessed in a second marriage to a man who shared her convictions and they shared nearly thirty years together before his death.

Anita experienced major health challenges in her later years and with grace provided a model to be followed by all who knew her. Anita has been dead nine years and she still lives on in my thoughts, daily endeavors and witness. Each day I miss and thank God for her.

Prayer: We thank you, Heavenly Father, for our families. We are grateful for those who love us, pray for us, and share our Christian faith, conviction and service. May we, following their example, also provide role models for those who walk in our footsteps. Amen.



Saturday, February 13, 2021

Text: Galatians 8:6

“Let him who is taught the word share all good things with those who teach.”

According to an old proverb, “The small rural parish is the cradle in which many an infant pastor is laid to be raised to maturity.” This was certainly true for me. Ordained in 1965, I was assigned to the South Range Lutheran parish and it was then that my training as a pastor really began.

In June, 1965 I made my first hospital call at St. Joseph’s hospital in Hancock. The first patient I called on was Lauren Tuisku, a handsome, vibrant young man of Finnish heritage. Lauren appeared to be the picture of youthful health and I couldn’t imagine why he was in the hospital. As I quizzed Lauren, he told me his story. Lauren, age 22, had just been discharged from the U.S. army. Prior to discharge he had noticed a growth under one of his arm pits and fearing it would interfere with his discharge he had not shared the information with the medical officers on the base. Now he was going to have a biopsy to determine the status of the tumor.

When I called on Lauren a couple days later the news was terrible! The tumor was malignant, had spread into his lymph system and was inoperable. Lauren, the only child of his parents, Arvo and Ingrid, was under a death sentence. Dale age 25, was now placed in the position of ministering to a contemporary only three years younger than him. It was the beginning of a long journey. As the cancer spread through Lauren’s body he was in and out of the hospital. The cancer spread and cut off circulation to Lauren’s left arm which became swollen, infected and hung like a grotesque appendage at his side. Lauren’s condition was so frail that surgical removal of the arm would prove fatal.

Lauren went home by ambulance for Thanksgiving and was in the hospital for Christmas. In the following days I was called to the hospital many times as it appeared Lauren was dying but his youthful body refused to surrender to death without a valiant flight. One dark and snowy night in January I sat with Lauren’s mom at his bedside After midnight it appeared that Lauren was not ready to die and at 2 a.m. I went home. As I arrived home my phone was ringing and Lauren’s mom said, “Pastor, can you come back, Lauren just died.” As I arrived at the

hospital Lauren's mom said to me, "Pastor, as he was dying Lauren's last words were, 'Tell Pastor Skogman everything will be alright.'" Thus, began the true making of a pastor!

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for those persons who teach us how to truly love, minister and care for one another! Amen.*

