

Sermon: July 5 / 12, 2020
Global Church Sunday, Grand Canyon Synod
John 17:15-23

Hello. Bonjour. Salaam alekum.

I am Pastor Kristin Engstrom and I would like to thank Bishop Hutterer for inviting me to preach with you - the congregations of the Grand Canyon Synod today.

I am joining you in worship today from southern Minnesota, where I have been since the ELCA called me back to the United States in March. But in “normal times”, I serve as an ELCA missionary in Senegal, West Africa. Senegal is on the continent of Africa, it is the furthest Western country, right on the Atlantic Ocean.



In Senegal, I coordinate the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission or YAGM program - where ELCA young adults between the ages of 21-29 serve with our 2 companions in Senegal: Senegalese Lutheran Development Services and the Lutheran Church of Senegal.

Now, if you are wondering why I, a missionary in Senegal, was invited to preach today, it is because you – the Grand Canyon Synod – are the companion synod with the Lutheran Church of Senegal. And as an ELCA missionary called to serve in Senegal, I can give you a glimpse of God already at work in your companion synod in Senegal and help expand your relationship with your sisters and brothers there.

But first, let's look at our gospel reading from John today, where we overhear Jesus praying before he is arrested and then crucified. We don't hear Jesus' whole prayer today, only a very particular part – the part where Jesus prays for his disciples of all times and all places.

Jesus prays:

“As you – God the Father – have sent me into the world, so I have sent them – the disciples – into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. I ask not only on behalf of these disciples here, but also of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.”

That they may all be One.

It sounds nice. It's a nice sentiment. That they may all be one.

But it seems very far from reality. Very different from how our country, our church, and possibly even how our families and ourselves often function. Especially now, as we as a country and the world face a global pandemic, renewed awareness of how racism continues to destroy lives, loss of jobs, and more.

I hope Jesus is still speaking this prayer into existence, because we need his eternal vision, his confidence, and his Spirit within us at work still today. We still need Jesus to pray for us.

But I also believe that we DO get glimpses of Jesus' prayer in action in and around us. So today, I would like to testify to hope and to the power of the gospel already at work in this world to transform lives and churches and communities. And in particular, the power of God at work through our ELCA relationship with our companions in Senegal. So that we may all be One.

For the past 4 years, our Senegalese sisters and brothers in mission have welcomed ELCA young adults into their offices, their communities, their homes, and most importantly, into their lives through the YAGM program. Today, I would like to share 3 of their stories with you.

Collins, one of those young adults, arrived in Senegal unsure of himself and his call in this world. But each day, as he was received by his colleagues with joy and hospitality both on his good days and his bad ones, and through open, faith-filled conversations with his Senegalese pastor, Collins came back to health and came back to himself. As he was encouraged over and over to tackle the difficulties of living in another country and culture, he experienced that he is indeed a beloved child of God – no matter his failures or successes.

And then Maddie, who arrived in Senegal having travelled outside of her home state in the US a few times. The consequences of racism, gender justice, and global warming hadn't seemed all that real to her. But as she was welcomed into villages and heard stories from young women in the family planning and community organizing program she served with – she saw the life-diminishing consequences of these systemic global sins in the lives of people she knew and loved. In response, her supervisors and her host family challenged her to continue to use her life and her actions to affect change, not just in Senegal, but even more so in her community in the US, and in the ELCA.

And finally, Connor, whose brain could comprehend seemingly any financial system and perceived the world through cost / benefit analysis. Not surprisingly, he served in the microcredit finance program. Every day, Connor and his supervisor would squish into a shared taxi to visit the market women's association to collect daily loan repayments. Almost daily, Connor stumbled through language and cultural and gender and financial blunders during those market visits, but with the grace and trust of his supervisor and the women at the market, Connor gradually discerned how to respect and be respected within the vulnerability of women's financial concerns.

As you heard in Collins' and Maddie's and Connor's stories, the reality is that to be sent as a missionary – whether to Senegal, like me and the YAGM – or as you are in your very own city – is also to be received. To be in mission, to be as One as Jesus prayed, is to be both sent AND received into relationships that transform both the missionary and the people who welcome us into their community and their lives.

This mutual sending and receiving that transforms lives and churches is what we call accompaniment in the ELCA. As sisters and brothers, children of God who live together in the same town or on different continents, we walk together in mutually life-giving and life-sharing relationships. Or, as Connor put it, “the relationships in Senegal with my colleagues, my host family, and my community got me through the day as we lived into the unknown together.”

This mission of accompaniment. Of sending and receiving one another. Of living and working as one is why I am so glad that our Senegalese companions welcome ELCA young adults in the YAGM program each year. And is why I can't wait to see how God continues to work in your companion synod relationship with the Lutheran Church of Senegal.

No matter if you are sent by God to another country, or sent as a congregation into your community, or sent as an individual across the fence to your neighbor, it is when we respond to Jesus' prayer to send all his disciples into the world - that we are also received by God who is already alive and at work in the world. So that we will be One, diverse, life-transforming body of Christ bearing forth God's love for the world. So that we may all be One. Amen.