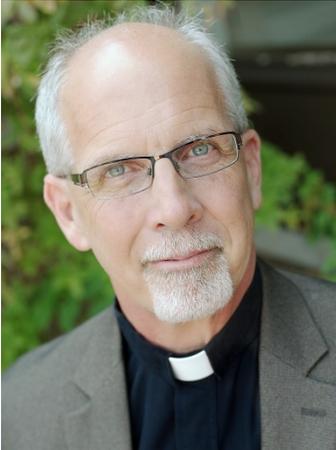


Bishop Hoyme's Sermon for Assembly Weekend (June 3, 2018)



First of all, thank you for sharing your pastor and leaders of your congregation with the greater church, and with the synod, as they gather in assembly at the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire to guide our synod but also to elect a new bishop. Thank you for that. Thank you for allowing me to be with you this morning in this way.

A few weeks ago I got to go to Iowa to spend some time with my grandchildren. Evie is 8 and Devin is 4. I had a few days where I could go down and be with them. I hadn't seen them since Christmas. My wife said, "You need to go".

What was unique about this trip was, I went by myself. I realized I'd never spent time with my grandchildren by myself. It was different-it wasn't "better"-it was just different.

One of things that was really different was that when it came time for bed, one of Grandma's jobs when we are there, is she goes to bed with Evie and reads a book or two. It used to be she had to read the whole thing and then eventually Evie was reading to her. But this time it was "Grandpa, are you going to come read with me?" And I did!

I brought for her a book that two women in our synod wrote and illustrated about the people in our companion synod of Malawi. Evie, our granddaughter, has learned about Malawi through us and she knows that Grandma and Grandpa went there a year ago. She's grown up with little carved animals (elephants, hippopotamuses) that she knows came from Malawi. She's played, since she was little, with money that came from Malawi. We've shown her pictures.

But I was able to lie in that little twin bed with her and one night read the first half of the book and the next night read the second half of the book. More importantly, to be able to stop reading and tell her stories about what the people of Malawi have meant to Grandpa. How I have learned from them and how they have allowed my faith to be greater than it ever would be by itself.

I was able to talk to Evie about Grandpa's faith. About **how** Grandpa believes and how important that is to me. I told her how I hoped someday she could go to Malawi and learn from those people about Jesus like I have.

I was driving home by myself. That long five hour drive on I-35. I was thinking back to my grandma and grandpa; specifically my mom's mom and dad, my grandma and grandpa Nelson. I realized that we never had those moments. First of all they had 27 grandchildren. But also, they never talked to me about Jesus or their faith. I can't even tell you if my grandpa went to church. I think he did. I know Grandma did. She had "the circle" come to her house and went to Ladies Aid.

They never talked to me about what they believed and why they believed and why it made a difference in their lives. I wished they had.

At our synod assembly, the theme is Growing Young, built around a book by the same title. This is a good book. It is based on research done in churches all over the country. Some of those churches are just like yours. They could be big, they could be very small, they could be in a city, and they could be very rural. But the thing they have in common is that they have strategies that are helping their congregations grow young, to reach out to the “Evies” but especially to reach out to kids between the ages of 15-29.

It’s what we are doing at synod assembly this year.

Ask your pastor, ask your deacon, ask your leaders when they come back “What did they learn”?

We are having four “Ted Talks”. These are short 4-5 minute talks done by churches from around the synod; from larger towns, in little tiny towns, in the north woods, churches that are big, churches that are very small, but the thing they all have in common is that these are churches that are growing younger.

They are going to share their stories about what they’ve learned and teach this to the other churches and other leaders so they can take that back to help their churches grow young.

In this book, they quote a man named Max DePree and he says this: “The first job of a leader is to define reality.”

Here’s the reality.

In the churches across the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin and all across this country (we are not unique) we have two things in common: church attendance is declining and congregations are aging, they are getting older.

That’s the reality.

Now how does that work when Jesus says (and you may have heard this in the readings today) “Let the little children come unto me.” Or the great commission: Go and make disciples of all nations; which I think if he said it today would not be about all nations especially, but perhaps go make disciples of all ages. When the reality is church attendance is declining and congregations are aging, that contradicts what Jesus tells us to do and to be.

We have to ask ourselves tough questions. As the authors of the book Growing Young engaged 15-29 year olds they found that every one of these churches was growing spiritually, growing emotionally, growing mission-ally, and **sometimes** growing numerically. (not always numerically, but sometimes) It’s important that growing numerically is last because you do not grow young to get bigger. You grow young because it will change your church and it will change the people in your church.

Pronunciation: Evie (short e)

They found that the young people in these churches had things that were in common. First of all, they felt like they were known in that church. They didn't find that in many churches, even small churches. But the young people felt like people knew who they were, knew about them, and the young people, 15-29, felt like they were loved.

These churches were innovative and had core commitments. The church I served before I was elected bishop was Central Lutheran in Chippewa Falls. One of the three basic, core commitments of that church (and it continues to this day) is: "we take care of our kids" and the aside to that is "and their parents". We need to do that as a church and it has to be at the very core of who we are.

When I was elected bishop, 5 years ago, at the synod assembly I remember speaking to the assembly before I was called, before I was elected to this office. I said, "This room is filled with parents and pastors who feel like failures because many of us raised our kids the way we were raised. My two daughters went to Sunday school every Sunday, they went to bible school, they went to bible camp, they went on youth trips in high school, they went to national youth gatherings, and frankly, it didn't work very well.

Now our oldest, Evie's mom, she goes to church. I didn't know if that was going to happen. The other one, our younger daughter, says; "well, she's not opposed to it, it just hasn't happened yet". She's thirty-two years old. But I have hope.

What I know is how we were raised, with grandmas and grandpas who for many of us never talked about Jesus because that was "the church's" job, doesn't work anymore. Our culture has changed. Our world has changed. We as the church need to change who we are and how we equip one another. We need to resolve to grow young. You, in your church, need to resolve that we will grow young and we won't stop until we figure out how to do it. Growing young takes everyone... always. There is no ½ way to this, everyone has to buy into this, and you have to buy into it every day.

What does it do? We know that churches that grow young are more vital, they have more energy, they do more service, they have more passion, they're more innovative, there's more money, (interesting that the money doesn't come from the young people and their parents) but it comes from people that are 64, 65, 75, 85, 95 who see what their church is doing and they give more! Remember...they are into it... always!

Pastor Erwin McManus says this, "healthy churches reach young people and young people make churches healthier."

So this is my challenge for you as a bishop, who in four weeks will no longer be your bishop, I ask you to resolve to grow young. To do what needs to be done to reach people like my Evie. There are Evies in every church, in every town, in every community, in every family and they are too precious, they are loved too much, to not share with them this Jesus who has made a difference in your life and the church that has made a difference in your life.

Call your grandbabies. Talk to your babies. Do what I did. Share the story so that **you** might grow young and **your** church. Amen!

Pronunciation: Evie (short e)