

“Thanks Be To God For My First Congregation As She Celebrates 100 Years in Christ”

Rev. Dr. Alfonso O. Espinosa

(the 11th regular pastor of St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church from June 16th, 1991 through July 31st, 1996)

I. I would like to extend my personal apologies for missing the anniversary dinner last night due to my dad Robert Espinosa entering into hospice care the day before. I am very tired and have a heavy heart as my dad has entered his final days on earth. Please pray for my dad Robert.

II. But having shared that with you, I want you to know that – in spite of the circumstances – I am genuinely absolutely thrilled to be here! My spirit is full of joy as I praise the Lord for this congregation, St. John, Covina. It was from this congregation that I learned to be a pastor. Seminary taught me a lot – more than I can say – but seminary doesn't compare to what I learned here. You were my first teachers of actual ministry. You taught me that a pastor must humble himself and be a leader that while certainly being uncompromising when it comes to the Word of Christ, must emphasize Christian liberty whenever possible. You taught me to be hard as a rock when it comes to the faith (unmovable), and yet pliable and bendable like Gumby when it comes to matters of love. I learned all of this here in my first parish. Vern Dettman and Gene Wiebold taught me the importance of good stewardship, Harold Fangmeyer and Bill Anderson demonstrated faithfulness as elders, Steve Cusson showed me that service in ministry could be characterized by joy, dedication and excellence, Arlene Rick held up the priority of Sunday School, the Alsops taught me the definition of commitment to their church, the Bolings just taught me how to love and to share, James Holder showed me that a Christian is ever eager to receive the Word of Christ, the Lukes and Carrigans helped me to learn organization and leadership, Carol Gardner taught me kindness, the DiLiberto's showed me that the church family *is* family and I was never alone, Jerry Bejcek taught me to treat children of the day school and vacation bible school as our children period, I can go on and on. I was forged in this congregation. Everything else I've done in ministry since was because

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of the formation I received here. I praise God for this congregation! Oh yes, and Kerry [Boling] Findley was one of my best confirmands. She gave me this little pastor troll as a gift when she was only in 8th grade and I've had it in my study ever since. My favorite part of it is that it is always smiling...it reminds me of the true joy we have in ministry even through trials. We rejoice because the Lord is with us! From the joy of serving little Laura Meredith (little at the time) to incredible seniors like Lucille Mammen, to working with fellow servants like Jan Lundgren, I was quite simply blessed to be the 11th pastor of this wonderful congregation!

III. You were my first congregation and when I came (Ben Sayler who was either head elder or president at the time) gave me a heads up: he told me that I was entering a baptism by fire. The congregation had already seen what had been for the most part strong years of ministry and growth right up until the end of Pastor Strelow's ministry in 1984. At that point the congregation was already 73 years old. What followed was a tumultuous season and in the next few years, half the congregation left. So, in order to handle a very delicate set of circumstances, the congregation wisely decided to call a pastor who had experience; someone wise and learned (in other words, not me). Well, you called once, twice, three times, four times, five times, six times, seven times, finally the eighth call was answered, but just when we got our hopes up that candidate was disqualified from the ministry and St. John was back to square one in 1991. It was then that you gave in and decided to call a candidate out of the seminary. I was just 25 years old when I arrived to this congregation, 25! I had just recently learned to tie my shoes.

IV. I will never forget having just moved into my study, I walked out to see one of our most dedicated trustees, Harry Gillham of blessed memory (who was about 80 at the time) sweeping the parking lot. I went out to introduce myself and Harry wasn't exactly the most friendly welcoming committee. I loved Harry because he spoke the truth, he didn't mess around. I always knew where Harry was at in his heart and mind. He told me that the truth of the matter was that he didn't agree with the decision to call me. He knew we needed an

older man; not someone still green or wet behind the ears. I listened to him respectfully and then told him that that was why I needed his help. I needed his experience, I needed his wisdom and I asked him that day if he would help me. We shook hands and he helped me, just like the rest of the members did. And with that launch we grew, we doubled in size, we experienced more and more unity replacing the old wounds, and again, I learned to be a pastor.

V. As I'm very limited in time, I want to highlight one event in particular: Thanksgiving Eve, 1993, at our 7 pm service I preached on the text from Deuteronomy 8:3: *"He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."* We spoke of how the Lord permits us to experience humility through suffering so that we learn to depend on His Word. What happened next was a total and complete shock to us all: fire! and over a half a million dollars in damage to our sanctuary in a devastating arson fire. I will never forget gathering together in the middle of this sanctuary that was blackened and in ashes; our hearts filled with indescribable grief. We stood in the middle and held hands in a circle that night and we prayed, we prayed thanksgiving to the Lord that we just knew He would turn this around and bless us, we prayed for the arsonist and testified to the entire Covina and San Gabriel Valley community that this is what a Christian congregation does, and God blessed us, boy did He bless us! St. John was back and we rededicated this sanctuary on May 15th, 1994.

VI. This is the epitome of what we learn here and it touches on Luther's theology of the cross. Experience and reason so often say, "God is nowhere to be seen." We could have complained, "Where was God when the arsonists broke in, why did He allow it?" And while our Savior Jesus was on the cross, He cried out "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) This is the secret to the ways of God. He spends our lives teaching us as St. Paul said, "We live by faith, not

by sight." (2nd Cor. 5:7) Cast experience, sight, and reason aside and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, come to the receive the body and blood of Jesus every Sunday and abide in God in this world of sorrow; in this way the joy of the Lord will do more than sustain you! It was here in this church, in this sanctuary, that God taught me that I would for the rest of my ministry offer the Sacrament every Sunday. It was Vern Dettman the Sunday before he went to heaven, who struggled up these steps as weak as he was, and then I saw his face when I gave him the Sacrament. He took so much comfort in the Lord's gift, I saw him renewed and lightened. He was joyful and confident. Then later that week I received one of those 1-2 am phone calls. I arrived to the Dettman's when they were closing the ambulance doors, Vern had gone to heaven after a heart attack. When I held onto Jane as we rocked back and forth, she finally spoke and the first thing she said was how glad she was that he had been able to be in church and receive the Sacrament. In this Church, in the ministry that happens here, that has happened here since 1956 and overall for 100 years. This is what we celebrate: through St. John's, Covina the Lord has been coming to His people to serve them, to comfort them, to empower them...so that there is no darkness in this world which can overcome the light of Christ received in this blessed congregation. Rejoice! And I again I will say Rejoice! The Lord is here! He has been here for 100 years; He will continue to be here as you are faithful to His Word!