

Devotions – August 23-29, 2015
Pastor Richard Likeness
Ascension Lutheran Church, Minocqua, WI

Sunday, August 23, 2015

Text: Luke 2: 29-32

²⁹"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

"I am just SO delighted at how this project is turning out!" Three of us - a pastor (me), Charlie – 84 years old and struggling with pancreatic cancer, and his son-in-law, Bruce - gathered in the room of a nursing home to share communion and a time of prayer. Charlie was a little confused – no surprise given his body's struggle and the treatment he was receiving. But he was filled with joy – "delighted!" - to gather for communion, for prayer, and to receive the body and blood of his Savior.

A few weeks later, Charlie died. And as I presided at his funeral and we celebrated this faithful man's life, I couldn't help but recall his words a few weeks earlier – "I am just SO delighted at how this project is turning out!" And I began to wonder if Charlie was less confused than I first thought. His life – perhaps the "project" that he referred to – did indeed end well. And ended in great faith. Even as he lay dying in bed after that communion visit, he always managed a smile and a word or two of gratitude. He departed in peace, held in the arms of his Savior to whom he had turned in faith his entire life. And he taught this pastor about dying well...

Let us pray:

Gracious God, you hold your saints of all ages in your arms. Help us who walk as yet by faith, to hold fast to the promise of your presence even in the darkest valleys. And when we close our eyes at the last, welcome us into your arms – that we may know joy and peace that will never end.

Amen



Monday, August 24, 2015

Text: Romans 8:38-39

³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I was a pastoral intern in Oconto, WI in 2001-2002. That fall of 2001, all our lives changed dramatically in a few hours. And while the nation grieved in shock and pain at the attacks in New York and Washington DC, there was also a sense of community togetherness that many experienced during those days after 9/11. The Friday after the attacks, President Bush invited us to take a moment to go outside and light a candle and stand in silence at a designated hour. As my wife and I stood in the driveway of the parsonage where we lived for that year, we looked around and noticed a group of 4-5 people gathered out in front of church with candles. We walked the half-block and joined them – not recognizing anyone gathered there. They were meeting in the church basement for an AA meeting, but took a break to come outside to remember the lives lost and to be in solidarity with this community as we all tried to make some sense out of what was senseless.

I believe God brought us together. For the 30 minutes or so that we gathered there – God was in our midst in a way that is hard to explain. We were strangers. At that time in my life I didn't know what to think about AA. And they didn't really know what to think about someone studying to be a pastor. But God showed up! We held hands, and we prayed together. We shared our stories a bit. And we were unified in our faith in a "higher power" that loves us and wants better for us in our individual and in our communal lives. As we walked back home a bit later, my wife held my hand and asked wonderingly, "What was that?" Well, that was God. Amazing and unexpected – God shows up in the strangest places and at the strangest times.

Let us pray:

Open our eyes to see you, O Lord. Open our ears to your voice. Open our hearts to your love. And open our lives to you and to your children that we might all be united in our care and love for the world that you love deeply enough that you sent your Son to share that love in surprising and unexpected ways. Amen



Tuesday, August 25, 2015

Text: Luke 10:36-37

³⁶*Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

Jacob wasn't the kind of young man who loved being at church. Confirmation "classes" were not his favorite activity. Jacob would much rather be hanging with his buddies from school – playing video games, maybe playing street hockey, often getting into mischief. His parents were concerned about him, fearing that he was on a path toward becoming a young "hoodlum". Our congregation sponsored a "multi-generational" mission trip to the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota the summer before Jacob entered the 7th grade. He decided he wanted to go – as long as Mom and Dad were NOT going. His parents reluctantly agreed, after making certain that we had plenty of adult chaperones to help "keep an eye on" Jacob.

What a shocking transformation and discovery we all made. As Jacob encountered the raw needs of people whose lives were broken and hurting, he was transformed! This "tough kid" who didn't

want much to do with religion became the hardest worker (youth or adult) in our group. He was tireless in giving of his time and energy. Flat tire on the trailer? “Can I try to fix it?” Pow-Wow grounds need to be mowed... “Where’s the lawn-mower?” Dinner served to people from the community? “Can I give them another serving?”

It was in the reality of human need and brokenness that Jacob found meaning in his faith. What a tremendous lesson and inspiration for all of us who watched that young man “come of age.”

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, you washed the dirty feet of your disciples as a model of service for us to follow. Remind us of the privilege to serve you and our neighbor, and strengthen us that we may show mercy and love when we encounter your children in need. Amen.



Wednesday, August 26, 2015

Text: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love never ends.

For much of my adult life I have struggled with a particular physical challenge. Those of you who know me are very much aware of this. I am overweight and have tried many weight loss programs – some with temporary success – only to go back to old patterns and habits and regain the weight I have lost. Recently, my beloved wife and parents said to me again, “We are concerned about your health. Please take better care of yourself.”

My usual pattern is to hear that with guilt and shame – make a change for a while – out of guilt and shame – but somehow that only fuels the basic problem that I started with. Shame leads to bad feelings – which lead me back to my old friend, “food”. But this time, I realized that what they are saying comes not from a place of anger or judgment, but it comes with great love. When I realized that – I wept. I am loved. Loved as I am. By God – and by others who care about me. Loved enough to be encouraged to repent – to turn around again. To stop trying to fill myself with the bread that will not satisfy – but to receive the Bread of Life that comes down from above – the bread of life that will sustain me. And that love is what compels me to try again – in hope – to turn toward the source of life and embrace a healthier path. That love – is patient and kind, not arrogant or rude. And it bears with me – even in my daily struggle with this particular “thorn in the flesh.”

Let us pray:

O God, each one of us is broken and in need of you. For me, the struggle is with food. For others, it may be alcohol, or gambling, or work, or... Thank you for those who reflect your love

to us. Fill us with love enough – even for ourselves – that we may turn around and walk toward the abundance of life that you wish to give. Amen.



Thursday, August 27, 2015

Text: Luke 8:48

⁴⁸*He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."*

Marlene had been ill for a while, but her illness did not seem life-threatening. She was “Mom” to many in the congregation – a truly gifted cook who could make a soup-pot absolutely “sing” – but who could never tell you a recipe – it was always just “a bit of this and a little of that”. Her daughter was a nurse who watched over her mother with love and care, and when I received the phone call that Marlene was in the hospital and her condition was very serious, I didn’t waste any time getting there to see her.

She had been feeling bad the day before and so her daughter took her to the ER – and shortly after arrival her heart stopped. They revived her, but it took some doing – and some time. As we were visiting the doctor came in and told Marlene what had happened the day before. “Marlene, your daughter brought you into the Emergency Room and shortly after you got here – your heart stopped beating - at which point we performed CPR and used a defibrillator to get your heart started again, but you actually were dead for a minute or two.”

Marlene’s response? “Oh, I couldn’t have been dead. I didn’t see any lights!” We all laughed about that a bit – it was her innocent way of saying it that made us all love her even more. Months later when her heart stopped again, and this time was not re-started, we recalled her words. And the deep faith that lay behind those words. That was how she lived her life – certain that when the final moment came – she was going home to be with her Lord. She would “see lights.” And I trust that she did...

Let us pray:

Loving God, help us, even in the midst of questions and doubts, learn to trust with the faith of a little child, that you will always be present in life and in death. Amen



Friday, August 28, 2015

Text: Luke 17: 15-16, 19

¹⁵*Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.* ¹⁶*He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.* ¹⁹*Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."*

“Welcome to Reformation! God is good! All the Time!” Donald was a very large man – intimidating in some ways, a big teddy bear in others. He welcomed us into the church in a part of the city with many boarded-up row houses and broken glass on the sidewalks. It certainly didn’t appear to be the safest part of the city.

“Don’t you worry about your car now; we’ll just leave that in the Lord’s hands!” Uh-huh. Well, okay, I guess. I don’t have much choice anyway, do I? He led us down a church corridor into a small meeting room. There we met with Donald, several other members of Reformation Lutheran Church, and their pastors.

“How have you come to be here today?” This was the question that was asked of all of us to share. And we heard stories. Wow! Did we hear stories! See, these folks at Reformation didn’t hold anything back. They told us about LIFE! And I mean the raw, hurting, human side of life that we all share. No masks in that room. Donald told his story of drug abuse and prison and release and gang membership and drug abuse again and a shooting on the street corner. He was left for dead. But a “good Samaritan” found him. Got him to a hospital. Got him to a rehab facility. And got him to church.

And in time he became that church’s sexton. He beamed with pride as he showed us his key ring. The church trusted him – TRUSTED HIM! – with the keys to that building. Each day was a new day, a new opportunity to praise the Lord. A new day to give thanks for Jesus and for the healing and forgiveness that Donald had found at Jesus’ feet. By the time we left that building I no longer cared what had happened to my car. But Donald was right, the Lord had taken care of that too, and I needn’t have worried.

Let us pray:

O God, how wondrous are your works! Too often we become so consumed with the small matters of life that we can tend to forget about the blessing of each new day. Give us hearts like Donald, and like the cleansed Samaritan, who return to your feet to give thanks for life and the abundant blessings of your love. Amen



Saturday, August 29, 2015

Text: 1 John 4:7-8

⁷*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.* ⁸*Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*

Several years ago, I was invited by a pastoral colleague to participate in a three day spiritual retreat. I had a few days of continuing ed time left that year and I was feeling a bit “empty” spiritually, so I accepted his invitation. There were perhaps 12-15 of us who gathered together for that retreat. And, as sometimes happens in a context like that, we connected in meaningful ways.

We heard each other's stories of struggle and hardship, pain and hope. It was a rather diverse group – men and women, young and old, strongly faithful Christians and seekers who were not certain about their faith.

One night we were invited to participate in a Lakota “sweat”, although unlike an authentic “sweat” we were all clothed. As part of that particular ritual, we crawled into a dome-shaped structure into which no light could penetrate and red-hot stones were placed in the center of the small room as we sat in a circle around the perimeter. Our leader began to chant, inviting us to join him in voice as he did so. If he used actual language, it was certainly unknown to us. No discernible words were chanted, but that didn't mean there was not great sound.

In complete darkness – we could not even see our hands in front of our face – we joined in song. And as we chanted together, something unexpected happened – we began to harmonize and make a melody together. No sight at all, yet somehow the sound in that small enclosed space connected us and our voices melded together, as one.

I believe that God has created us for connection with one another. I believe that this is deeply written in our souls and that when we are in connection with creation and other human beings, sometimes God shows up in surprising and unexpected ways. That night, God was present in the connection of sound and music. In worship this happens at times as well, doesn't it? As we gather around a table with Christ at the center, God's love fills us, connects us as Christ's body in the world, and sends us forth to share and invite others to come and join the feast.

Let us pray:

God of love, you are the One who gives life to the world. In you we are connected to one another and all of creation. At the center of your very being we find the essence of Christian love. Fill us with this love that we might be a blessing for the sake of a broken and hurting world. Amen

