

Reformation Sunday October 31, 2021

John 8:31-36

Confirmands, I'm going to be talking to you right now, everyone else can just eavesdrop.

Here you are, 14 years or so into your life. A life that has been lived in some interesting times. You were born around the time of the Great Recession and the President you grew up with was the first African American to hold that office. You have only known social media and cell phones. Your transition from middle school to high school has happened during a (please God) once a century pandemic. You are an extraordinary group.

You are special to me because we have traveled with each other over the last five years. We've watched each other grow. Me as a pastor and you into your lives. I love the people you are now, and am excited to see the ones that you will continue to grow to be.

And here you sit, ready to affirm your baptism, to step fully into those promises your parents made and pledge to strive- for the rest of your life- to live in a community of faith, to attend to God's Word in scripture and in the person of Jesus and to be an active part of a worshipping community, to love others as Jesus did, to serve the world, and to strive for peace.

And even as you do so, you may very well be asking yourselves, "Why does this matter?" or even more specifically "What about church matters?" And it would be a good question.

Your generation is one that has service to others built into their DNA, and not just that, a focus on striving to fix the problems that give rise to the need for things like food banks, and shelters, and public assistance. You already strive for social justice, sometimes with a zeal that chagrins other generations.

So, what do you need church for? Why spend the time, energy, and effort to be here, together, on a Sunday morning? Why give of your time and resources to do ministry with a church?

I was raised in the church. St. Mark's in Charlotte, NC. We went to church every week- the 8:30 am service. My parents were active- ushering, teaching Sunday School, dad served as treasurer or on finance, mom helping with the choir. My sister and I were active in worship, choirs, and youth group.

Yet, I had a taste of church politics when I was a high school senior and served on the call committee for a new youth director. I had a pretty unsophisticated, naïve, view of the church and that experience turned me off. So, I went to college thinking- I have a good relationship with God- what do I need this church thing for? I can be a good Christian without it. I would attend services when I came home- willingly- but there were better things to do with my time on Sundays at college.

But by the time I reached the Christmas break of my Junior year, there was a restlessness in me, an empty feeling in my chest and I didn't know what that was about. Until I went home and was in the balcony on Christmas Eve. Surrounded by the assembly of believers, by the very force of their singing, the choirs and organ, and the story we heard together- an unbelievable story about a God- the creator of all that exists- who came to humans as a child- vulnerable, weak

because God loved us. God desires the best for us. Life fuller and more abundant than anything we could dream up . And God knew we couldn't do it alone. And it was then I decided I needed to figure out what a Christian who happens to be Lutheran is and if I was one of those. So, I went to seminary.

Long story short, the answer was, yes. I am a Christian who happens to be Lutheran.

You are all going through the process of figuring out who you are, what you will be. We all do it. God tells us who we are, beloved children. God tells us in baptism that we belong to God that we are children of God and that is the most important identity we can have. It is one that has kept me grounded throughout many difficulties in life, the divorce of my parents, my own divorce, moments where I was sure by the eyes of the world, I was a failure. I didn't belong. But those voices, whether they were inside my own head or coming at me from outside couldn't get a foothold, because I knew that I was a beloved child of God. Because my head was wet, and I was surrounded by a community that reminded me of that truth. And that I didn't need to do anything to earn that love, and that I could never do anything to lose that love. It just, was.

This world is good at showing us the perfection of what we ought to be- and it is killing your generation. You and your peers have higher rates of anxiety and depression which sometimes leads to suicide than any other generation. The world likes to make us think that what it brings is life, the best kind of life, but it really only leads us to death. But we're hooked, aren't we? Addicted to our phones and screens and it infiltrates our minds with images of what we must be like. The things we must believe, the way we must look.

Our text talks about how Jesus frees us. Friends, that stuff is not what makes you who you are. Listen to the voice of God who calls you beloved, who has given you a mixture of gifts, skills and talents unique to you. Follow Jesus and be free from all those voices in the world that seek to bind you. In this faith lies life. Real life- not some filtered, staged facsimile on Tik-Tok. Not some performative seeking of justice, but striving for true justice for everyone.

You know what it takes to get good at something. The hours of practice for football, basketball, volleyball, in a play, or learning an instrument. Time spent getting so familiar with what is going on that you can react without thinking, stringing together a perfect play, a flawless performance despite those hiccups that inevitably come. The equivalent in our faith is spending time in prayer, in reading scripture- God's Word to us- in worship with our fellow believers, in conversation with other people of faith about what that faith calls us to. When you have this faith in your muscle memory it is easier in the hard times. And there will be hard times. You have experienced the truth of this already in your lives. Having that muscle memory is the affirmation that even though the storm is raging about you, Jesus is in the boat with you. It is the knowledge that God walks with God's people through the wilderness, giving them what they need to live. That impossible promises of ancestors more than the stars can come true, because God promises that it will be so.

As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we understand the church as the assembly of believers gathered around word and sacrament. You are a digital generation, and you know how helpful those screens can be. You've lived through a time of being educated that way, connecting with friends that way,

worshipping that way. For a lot of things, it's easier. It can be a great way to meet or learn or connect. To extend relationships that already exist. But I think you are also smart enough to know its limitations. You have felt the difference (even if you can't quite articulate it) between being together mediated by a screen and being together in person.

While I agree that using Zoom and YouTube, and Facebook live are all things that the church ought to be doing to extend our ministry into the world and to our members, especially when it comes to worship, it is not the same. We believe Jesus is not just a great teacher, ethicist, philosopher, but that he is God's own Son. God made flesh, come down to us so that we might better understand God. If there were not something important about being present in the flesh, then why did God not just stick with messages to us mediated by the prophets? If there were not something different and meaningful in being physically present, then why does grandmas hug feel so good in person as opposed to seeing her online? We are still in a time where, for the safety of our siblings in Christ, gathering in the fullness of that fellowship is not something we can all do. But that does not mean we don't acknowledge that is the fullest expression of what God calls us to.

I pray that you will continue to be present with us, because we need what you have to offer, because in this community we strive to practice together what it means to live in the reign of God, because it is here that we strive to experience the fullness of what true community is- a place of being welcomed with open arms, given everything, expecting nothing.

This assembly of believers that is the church is not about perfect people gathering to do things perfectly. Far from it. We are all messy and imperfect people. We

are the hypocrites that is the charge flung at us often by the world. We say one thing and do another. We do not welcome all as we should. We confuse politics with God's will. We get it wrong. But in this assembly of believers on the corner of Walker and Rowley and through our worship and work together we strive always to be better, both for ourselves and for our siblings in Christ. Not because we'll get a gold star for our effort, but because it is in this striving that we find that fuller and more abundant life. And this is true at all these assemblies of God's people- First Presbyterian near Ely, Shueyville UMC.

There is so much more to this faith to discover. Things that will challenge you and heal you. Things that will open your eyes to new ways of seeing. A depth and beauty that you have only glimpsed in 14 years. You will be tempted to look elsewhere, and I get that. But as you do, remember to explore the faith you have been raised in- because I guarantee you that St. John Lutheran church in Ely IA has not exposed you to the depth and breadth of what the Christian faith has to offer, nor even of what the Lutheran expression of that faith has to offer.

For now, know that we are praying for each of you, we are excited to welcome you into this new phase of your faith lives, and to have you join us as we give thanks and praise to God and proclaim the good news to all the world.