

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany February 4, 2024

1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ.

I was called to be your pastor seven years ago on January 8. I started almost exactly seven years ago today. We have been through a lot together over those seven years. We have laughed and cried together through funerals and baptisms, sweltering VBS evenings and frigid Christmas Eve's. We journeyed through COVID and changing times. We have grown older together, grown in faith and understanding together.

You have walked with me and my family through the death of my stepson Erik, Karen's mother, and now the death of my parents these past few months.

I cannot think of a community that I would rather be living this life of faith with during these past seven years than this one. Every day I give thanks to God for this community and all of you who are part of it.

I have said to many of you that I have felt something of the same spirit towards the end of 2023 that we had coming out of 2019. A stirring of the Spirit that has seen a number of you stepping into ministries with renewed vigor. A stirring that has drawn a number of new folks to join us both officially and unofficially as they walk their faith journey. A general stirring of this assembly of believers that reminds me of the warm-up of a runner before the race. A coiling of energy and effort that only needs to be pointed in a direction for the race to begin.

I have seen stirring of the Spirit in the generous response to our Capital Campaign Giving to Serve. One that has been successful thanks to your efforts. This is something we can celebrate- an accomplishment that took all of us to achieve. I have seen this stirring in the growth in those who regularly gather around Word and Sacrament in worship, in the generosity of this community to those who are most vulnerable through our Dorcas Quilters who sent a record 66 quilts to Lutheran World Relief and our VBS that served 56 children from our community free of charge.

Even as we rightly celebrate those achievements. The ways in which the Holy Spirit is stirring in this assembly of believers on the corner of Walker and Rowley. I hear the words of Paul today and the reminder of Jesus.

You can find this text from 1 Corinthians in a cross stitch on my office wall. It is one my sister did for me when I was commissioned as an Associate in Ministry in the ELCA in 1997. I had heard this text in worship at Augustana Lutheran in Chicago, IL during my time at LSTC and used it in my commissioning service. A text that jumped out at me partially because I was to be commissioned and it had that word in it, but also because it defined for me what it means to be called. Not just as an Associate in Ministry, or a Deacon, or a Pastor... but as a follower of Jesus.

We proclaim the gospel that in Jesus the reign of God has come near to us. That in and through him we are reconciled to God, are freed from all that binds us, are made new again. We proclaim this gospel not so we can be holier than thou and sit here feeling secure in our better-than-you-ness. Not because we get something from it. God is not transactional in that way.

We do so, because there is a compelling need for us to proclaim that gospel to others. Just like when you get so excited about a new movie, or this new way of growing your flowers, or a tool that has made your life so much easier and you just have to share it. Even to the point of being annoying!

We proclaim the gospel because that is who we are. And we do so in a way that all kinds of people can hear. Paul expressed it this way. To a Jew, he became a Jew, to the weak, he became weak. He did this so that they might better hear the gospel of Jesus. He didn't change the gospel, he just changed how he approached those around him. Sought to understand who they were and then spoke the gospel truth to them.

The gospel of Jesus is life changing. I have heard both first and second hand how an encounter with God through Jesus has changed the trajectory of people's lives. Nadia Bolz-Weber and other addicts who have had their own heart-felt encounters with the risen Jesus that gave them the power to do what they had to do to corral their addictions. Authors like C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, both veterans of WWI, whose minds as well as their hearts were captured by the gospel.

For those of us who were raised in the church, have not dealt with any out of the ordinary problems like addictions or wars, we can sometimes feel, left out a bit. Perhaps we have had those moments, but often it is just that the gospel has always been there. Like your favorite coffee or chair. Something you use every day but don't really notice.

And perhaps that is what is needed. To take a moment and really look at this thing that has been an important part of our lives. To take the time to fully

examine and exercise our faith. So, one of my challenges to us this year is to grow as a community and in our faith practices.

I would encourage us all to find a ministry or group at St. John. To intentionally find a place and group of people at this place to build deeper relationships with. It could be bell choir, or hosting our worship regularly, or making bread for communion. To fully be the body of Christ, we need one another. The variety of gifts and experiences we each bring. We need each other to practice what it means to truly be in relationship with one another. To learn to listen well to one another. To find the things we love in those we don't always agree with. To learn how to ask for forgiveness when we mess up and to give that forgiveness. To be accepted for all that we are, including our messiness. When we experience this, practice this in a safe community, we become more aware of the reality of God's reign around us. We really begin to embody it.

I would encourage all of us to deepen our faith practices. Read carefully (together) the book of Colossians this Lent. To take home the free devotionals we offer and use them. Would you join me in a weekly text study of the coming week? Or a time to just pray together? To take even 5 minutes each day to intentionally sit with the Word. To intentionally focus on God. To ponder what God has done and continues to do for you.

As we do these things, as we experience more for ourselves how God is at work in our lives, we can more clearly and authentically proclaim that gospel to others. Because we see what it really means to us.

Jesus in the Gospel reading today actually gives us a warning as a community. Having healed the man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue, then Simon's

mother-in-law and all that crowd who gathered around the door, he goes out to a deserted place to pray. Even God's Son needs to take time to be in communion with God. To bathe himself in God's presence. He is hunted down by Simon and Andrew with James and John. Their desire, come back to town and do all this again. Basically, they and the town want to keep Jesus as their own personal healing machine. After all, it works for them! To keep him to themselves.

But what is Jesus' response? Let us go to the neighboring towns and villages. For that is what I came out to do.

The healing, the grace, the love that comes to us through Jesus Christ is not something to be hoarded or kept for ourselves. I wonder if, like manna, when we try and keep it to ourselves, it doesn't begin to rot and decay.

Instead, we are called to share this wonderful gift with others. I would invite us this year to ponder how we might grow as a presence in this community. To ponder what collective action we might take to make a difference to everyone in our community- regardless of whether they are part of this fellowship or not. To go out into the neighboring towns and proclaim the good news there also.

In my experience, every preacher has a vocabulary for their particular understanding of the gospel. In seven years, you've probably figured out mine. The good news of God in Jesus Christ is that God loves us in all our messiness, that God makes us new, and that God then sends us into the world to call other messy people to come follow Jesus too. Faith is an action word. It is playing follow the leader with Jesus- and trusting that he will never take us somewhere we are not equipped to go.

Friends in Christ, in this year ahead, I pray that the Spirit would continue to stir in us. I look forward to sitting with you as we discern where it is calling us, pushing us, leading us. And I am excited to see who God will call into our community and what amazing things God will do through you. Each of you. As we work together to grow in faith towards God, Love of one another, and Generosity to all.

For that, is what God calls us to do.