

140th Anniversary Sunday
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Bishop Wayne Miller
August 25, 2019

Good morning. It is so nice to be with you this morning for many reasons.

Wow! 140 years old. There aren't very many congregations in this synod where I can say "you are twice as old as I am." But you are!

It's hard to imagine that when this congregation was settling into its first worship services Rutheford B. Hayes was President of the United States, having succeeded Ulysses Grant. The first mobile home was built that year, towed from one place to another by a very strong or very tired team of horses. But help was on the way, because George Seldon also filed the first patent for a gasoline-driven automobile that year. It was a big year for musical theatre, seeing the premiere performances of Gilbert and Sullivan hits, "HMS Pinafore" and "Pirates of Penzance." A man named Richard Rhodes invented the first hearing aid in 1879, which could have been helpful for your first preachers, I suppose. And milk was sold in glass bottles for the very first time. Do you all remember when milk was sold in glass bottles?

It is interesting to step back on a day like today and think about all the history you carry in your bones. Actually, it is interesting to think about the history I carry in my own bones these days. Tomorrow I celebrate my 35th anniversary of ordination. And as you know, this is my last sermon before retiring as synod bishop, an event that is provoking a lot of questions about, what comes next in that ongoing history.

Which, curiously enough, brings me to what I really want to talk about today.

Because today, I am wondering...

(The preacher at this point takes off his wrist watch and places it on the pulpit and then stands in silence for a full minute, occasionally shuffling papers and clearing his throat but saying nothing... then...)

Today, I am wondering... just how long I could keep you in suspense before you either got up and walked out or started throwing something at my head.

It is amazing, really, how long and how uncomfortable a minute can seem when you are there in that place of suspense.

And yet, it is a feeling well-known to us in many areas of our lives...

Suspense is the feeling you have in that moment just after you have said, "Will you?" with the diamond ring still in your hand, wondering if the next word you hear will be "yes" or "no."

But then a few years later, suspense is what you feel when you kiss your daughter goodbye and send her off to college, wondering, as you gaze lovingly at her purple hair and that body all pierced and bejeweled in the most interesting places, wondering what sort of person this will become.

Suspense is what you feel at the end of a long overseas flight just after you hear the engines cut off but just before the wheels touch ground and the passengers break into spontaneous applause for reasons unknown.

Suspense is what you feel in that moment, when you call the doctor's office for your test results, just after the nurse says, "Hold on, please. The doctor would like to speak with you."

And even in our life together as a Church, now, there are so many congregations that live in that terrible moment when there is so little money and so many responsibilities, and the days when everyone went to church are behind us, and we live each day, as Joseph Sittler used to say, with both feet planted firmly in mid-air, and no name for this place we are in except, "suspense."

However it comes, you see, suspense is that awful moment when wisdom and learning, security and certainty are all swallowed up in the great cloud of unknowing, when time, and movement, and breath itself all stop, and in that stillness, "now" becomes "eternity."

So, suspense also calls us relentlessly forward, if for no other reason than that staying in the suspense is unbearable.

And yet, we LOVE it! Like moths to the flame we run to our bookstores and libraries and Kindles filled with acres of volumes all labeled "Suspense."

Our eyes are drawn irresistibly to Masterpiece Mysteries and endlessly proliferating re-incarnations of Sherlock Holmes and the diagnostic conundrums of House MD, all of which are required to suspend us for as long as possible to the very last second. Because who, after all, wants a suspense with, well, with no suspense?

In the end, it would seem, "suspense" is the very thing that theologian Rudolph Otto

had in mind many years ago as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery that terrifies and fascinates.

The religious authorities in today's Gospel selection wanted none of this, of course. They were authorities. They were used to being the ones who knew, the ones with answers, not questions, the ones who carried comfortably the vocation to solve all the mysteries, assemble the puzzles, reduce the complexities, reconcile the ambiguities.

For them the idea of suspense might have been terrifying, but it was hardly fascinating. And they had little patience and no trust for a teacher who would leave them hanging there with both feet planted firmly in mid-air, in suspense.

But Jesus would not quite let them down from that place in the air, perhaps because this teacher who taught with more questions than answers and who spun parables that so often seemed more perplexing than elucidating, perhaps because this teacher knew that it was precisely the stillness and discomfort of that place of suspense that might force them to listen, to listen for a voice not quite audible in the world of noise and motion and business and self-sufficiency.

Perhaps he understood that it was precisely in the stillness of that moment of suspense that they might hear and recognize the voice that patiently and persistently calls us back to whom we are and why we are here.

So that same voice calls to you here, sisters and brothers, right now, speaking to you, as it once spoke to them, in your moments of suspense, when you cannot rely on your own wisdom or understanding, your own capacities and resources, your own certainty or vision. It is just here that you are most free to listen and then to respond to the

voice that calls you back into remembrance of the cornerstone set in place at the beginning, that most basic identity given to you on the day of your baptism, that foundation of truth in each time and place, and that all that I am and all that I have comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

And in the echo of that still small voice, you are also set free to follow the relentless but exhilarating call forward into the work of inviting others who are still living in suspense, into a deeper and closer relationship with this God, through the love of Jesus, by the power of the cross.

It is a voice that reminds us again that despite all our efforts to reduce the paradox, or know the unknowable, or settle the question, there has never been a time in the historical bones of the Church, this Church that lives suspended between the God who walked among us and the God who will come to restore us, there has never been a time when we have not been in suspense. There has only been the steady voice and the strong arm of the one who does not come to keep us out of suspense, but who comes to keep us while we are in the suspense.

It is a worthy remembrance, people of Wicker Park Lutheran, it is a worthy remembrance on this day as you celebrate 140 years of walking through two world wars, and new hopes for peace, through a great depression, and a financial meltdown, through political leadership with the audacity to hope and political leadership with the audacity to Tweet, and then to keep us in a little more suspense than any of us were hoping for, through times of joy and sorrow, plenty and want, energy and discouragement, grief and re-birth, 140 years of returning to this lovely dwelling place of stillness week after week, month after month, year after year for a fresh encounter with the now that is eternity.

Because it is in this remembrance, it is in this listening that you will rediscover the love that has embraced you completely exactly as you are and the voice that is calling you now from the security of that embrace to enter the world of occasional terror and perpetual fascination, that world of wonder and mystery, of adventure and possibility, in order to become, to become, to become something more than you have ever been before.

Amen.