

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Vicar Sarah
February 10th, 2019

I was sitting in the passenger's seat as Ginny, the woman with whom I'd been working as her teaching assistant, the woman who had come to be a dear friend and mentor was driving. I was nearing the end of my year of living in Malaysia, and I was in the season that many of us in this room might know well. The season of sending out countless resumes and cover letters, countless applications hoping to hear *something*, anything, really. Any acknowledgement of my application would be great. I had just heard back from a potential employer, *finally* a response, informing me that they'd like to set up a time to interview me. I was sharing this exciting news with Teacher Ginny as we drove to go shopping, I was sharing with her the jobs I was interested in, the applications I had been sending out, all that I had been doing, and I shared my excitement that something had *finally* happened!

We were driving down the road as I was telling her this, and the next thing I knew, Ginny was pulling out of traffic to stop the car. She stopped the car away from the cars passing by, turned to me and said, "We need to pray about this." I was a little caught off guard, I must say. Prayer interrupting daily patterns of life had become a pretty regular thing I had come to expect, between the Christian women I worked with in the mornings, stopping to pray for a child who was sick, or to give thanks for joyful news or the Muslim women in the afternoons stopping their daily work to go and pray. But stopping in the middle of traffic to pray still somehow surprised me. Before I knew it, she was holding my hands and giving thanks to God, celebrating with me this job interview that was in the works. In her prayer of Thanksgiving, she

said, “We know it is only by your grace that we are serving you. Be with Sarah, empower her with your words and with your Spirit as she moves into this interview.”

The prayer was much longer, but as she wrapped up, she turned back, buckled her seatbelt, pulled back into traffic, headed on our way, and began talking about what we might like to eat for lunch.

I’ve been thinking a lot about prayer lately and about this story in particular. This might be for a few reasons. As we just moved through Chinese New Year this past week, I thought a lot about my friends in Malaysia and what they taught me about being constantly in prayer. It is here that I learned the power of actually praying with someone, even more powerful than assuring someone you will pray for them. As we’ve begun to introduce the Ecumenical Prayer Cycle into our life together, praying for countries around the world, I’ve thought a lot about what it is that prayer actually *does*.

I don’t think that it is this prayer on the side of the road with Teacher Ginny that ultimately got me the job that contacted me for an interview, the same job that quickly after beginning, I realized was not at all what I was called to be doing, the same job that I left to begin seminary. I don’t think that praying with Teacher Ginny on the side of the road changed God at all. I do think that what Ginny prayed reoriented me to how God might be working in and among those countless applications I was sending. It reminded me to give thanks for the gifts that were eliciting responses from potential employers, gifts that were God-given. Most of all, praying with Ginny assured me of God’s grace that was present with me in the midst of so much uncertainty—God’s grace manifested in people like Ginny who rejoiced and hoped with me for what lied ahead in the unknown.

If you don't know, or it has been awhile since you've heard it, Lutherans are big on God's grace reaching us and meeting us in unexpected places. The Apostle Paul is an example of God's grace, and he testifies to this grace in his letter to the Corinthians we hear today. Again and again, Paul reminds the Corinthians that it isn't by his work, but by God's grace active in his life that he came to be the apostle he was. He recognizes his unworthiness, and insists that there is no way that without God's action in and with him that he would be the person he became. Paul is so marveled at God's action in his life that he names God's grace three times just in verse 10 alone!

So if we take Paul's experience of grace, the unexpected and miraculous experience of being known and loved and restored to God—we take the lens of grace to today's gospel, we encounter some disciples who are met with God's grace in Jesus. Jesus shows up in a boat, commands the disciples to let down their nets, and in the wake of catching an enormous load of fish, he asks the fishermen to leave behind what they know, what their livelihood depends on, and follow him. You all might know something about leaving behind what is familiar, what you can count on for something that is uncertain. I wonder, though, if Jesus's action right before calling these disciples serves in some way as Teacher Ginny's prayer or Paul's testimony. The disciples hadn't caught anything all night, right? It wasn't until Jesus showed up and told them to let down their nets that Simon and James and John caught an enormous load of fish. I wonder if it wasn't Jesus's intention to remind these men of the source of all that they have. And if God can provide in what we have always known, then certainly God's faithfulness extends into that which we do not know.

Jesus acknowledges that what he is calling the disciples to is scary and uncertain, and so he says what we hear so often in scripture, "Do not be afraid". He says, "Do not

be afraid, from now on you (the collective you, as my people would say y'all), y'all are going to be catching people." It is this collective call that I want to make sure we hear today. God's grace is a gift that pulls us from isolation into community; it is a gift that reminds us that *never* are we separate from God's love.

Back in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, I wonder if the beginning of the passage today stuck out to you as something familiar, you can turn in your bulletin and look at it if you'd like. "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures..." Does this sound like a creed, a statement of faith that we say together from time to time? Last week in our WPLC basics class, Pastor Jason made a really powerful point that I'd like to share so that more people hear it. When we say the creeds together, sometimes we might not be fully on board with everything we are saying, *and that's ok*. We might have doubts or concerns sometimes, *and that's ok*. Because what we are doing when we say the creeds in unison is reminding ourselves of the community into which we have been called—out of isolation by God's grace into a community to freely give and experience God's love. This is something else I learned from Teacher Ginny—that when I couldn't pray or I couldn't hope, there is a community who can do it for me. There is a community to which we belong that carries us in God's abundant grace.

Today as we feast on God's grace at this table, it is our prayer that you experience a gift of love that is given with absolutely no strings attached. As you take the bread and the wine, remember that you are joined to a body that is bigger than yourself, who rejoices with you and laments with you. God's gift of grace has the power to transform this place, this community, and this world—only by God's grace and always

by God's grace. "Come and follow me" is the call from Jesus even still. May we respond to the call trusting in God's never-ending grace.

May we never forget the source of this radical love and may we live our lives testifying to the one who gives it freely.