

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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GOOD MORNING Wicker Park Lutheran Church! It's been about a week and a half now that I have been Vicar here. In that time, I've had the chance to share with several of you about my journey to seminary and my call to ministry. In these conversations I've just shared the bite-sized/nutshell version of this story. But in the longer version- and with more time- I would tell you about stormier times in my faith- times that I felt *hurt* by the church, and wanted to *abandon* the church all together.

In the gospel passage today, we see a group of Christ-followers in some stormy times as well. You see- Not only were they tested in that moment, on the choppy waters and strong winds- but this story comes in the middle of a series of stories where Matthew shows the disciples having to navigate the chaos competing visions for the world. They are navigating the vision of Jesus for the world- which is one that provides food for all who are hungry and cares for the widows, orphans, and sick- and the vision of the roman empire which values maintaining its power and control at the expense of other people.

This rag-tag group of Christ-followers is surrounded by the chaos of these competing visions in all aspects of their lives, and struggling to trust that God is as Matthew declares in the first chapter of his gospel- Immanuel, meaning "God with us."¹ In the boat or walking the open seas (as Peter

¹ Matthew 1:23

decided to do)- the disciples are challenged with the idea that God is present with them, *wherever* they are, no- matter how much fear and doubt they feel, and NO MATTER how nonsensical it may seem.

There were times in my life that I haven't been able to recognize God's presence with me in the church. There were times that I felt personally unsafe and invisible in church spaces. And in college, I started to reflect on how the church hadn't just hurt me but had many times been SILENT amidst the huge injustices of racism, of sexism, of homophobia. It became painfully clear to me how inadequate the Christian church (as a whole) had responded to confronting them. During these times, I wondered, did it even make sense to give time and energy to an institution and community that hadn't always responded out of their ***own self-professed*** ideals of love of God and love of neighbor?

If you are like me, you've also had moments of your relationship with the church being tested- either in the church in general or one church specifically. Perhaps you've had times away from the church- "a break" or perhaps a complete "break-UP." Or perhaps living through the pandemics of COVID and the second pandemic plaguing our nation—white supremacy which we know is another way of describing systems in which we participate that accept that "whiteness is normative and superior"—perhaps these pandemics have really gotten you questioning the role of the church at this moment in time. ² In the face of the tragedy and human

² *Disrupting White Supremacy from Within* Eds., Jennifer Harvey, Karen Case and Robin Hawley Gorsline. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004. pg. 287. in "Working Definitions ELCA Racial Justice/ Racism" https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Working%20Definitions.pdf?_ga=2.223497054.472974301.1596746098-201382632.1596589569

suffering that these pandemics have caused- you may be questioning if the church is part of the solution or the **problem**?

Especially now, we communities of faith are being tested like never before to live into our ideals of love and justice. And the world is watching. How will we as Christ-followers respond in the face of injustice and even amidst doubts about the church's role?

Many people try to answer this question by saying that Christians, unlike Peter who sank, we should just “have more faith, pray more, keep your eyes on Jesus (and definitely don't leave the church!)—but just have enough faith so that we can DO the IMPOSSIBLE- walk on water!” I was challenged this week, however, to think about this passage as not only a story about Peter's individual faith in Jesus, but ALSO a story about how **Jesus was relating to Peter** and *ALL the disciples* in the boat in the midst of chaos, doubt, and confusion.

We know from church historians that early believers came to identify with the image of themselves as a boat on stormy seas. What would **they** have thought if they heard this story about Peter getting **out** of the boat? Leaving the community of Christ followers?

They probably ALSO would have identified with Peter, crying out to Jesus in fear and doubt and wanting to draw near and find some stable ground and clarity apart from the boat in the midst of navigating stormy seas and when it didn't really seem like Jesus was in the boat at the moment.

As Matthew tells this story, however, Jesus is with ALL his beloved disciples, WHERE-EVER they were. He met Peter on the waters, responded to his desire to leave the boat to brave the rough waters AND

Jesus climbed into the boat where the other disciples were as well. And he did not let *anyone* sink. Matthew reminds his audience that no matter where they *feel* in terms of faith and trust in God (and even in the church)- God is present. And God is with them.

When I think about MY life and my relationship to the community of Christ-followers in the boat, there were definitely storms—times that I didn't see Jesus in the boat. Especially when I contemplate the times I had seen where the church fell short. As I stand here today- in seminary, as a vicar on a pastoral staff- and as I ALSO reflect back on those times that I was keeping the church and God at arm's length - I challenge myself to see God's enduring presence through EVERY moment of my story- past and present- and in every season of my life.

During the pandemic of COVID and the ongoing pandemic of white supremacy- will the church disappoint? I hope NOT, but it probably will. Will some people start drifting away? Maybe. But will God use the church despite its flaws – and in new and creative ways? I believe so- because God does not abandon Gods beloved on stormy seas.

Where-ever you find yourself at during these chaotic times, in relationship to the church or in relationship to God, I challenge you to also recognize and welcome God's enduring presence with you.

Dear folks at Wicker Park Lutheran Church, Even though we find ourselves separated physically and in very unusual times. I look forward to weathering the strong headwinds together and to listening to God's Word and discerning God's Spirit together.

In my life up until this point I have seen that God shows up in very unexpected places- including the church. God has not stopped using the church and I've seen in this short week that I've been Vicar, that God hasn't stopped using this community as a force for God's love and showing that **God is still in the boat.** God IS still Immanuel- that is- "God with us."

Amen.