

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Grace to you and peace from God, our creator and our risen Savior, Jesus Christ, amen. Good morning! It is a pleasure to be with you, in whatever form or medium you are partaking. My name is Jason Fugate and I want to begin with a brief word of gratitude for all of the Wicker Park Lutheran community. I am in my final year of seminary as I continue to train and study in the hope and anticipation of becoming an ordained minister in the ELCA.

I have been extended a pastoral residency to serve here at Wicker Park Lutheran during this final year of my studies and I am so incredibly grateful. In a time of uncertainty and change, you continue to support others like me outside of your community and bring them in. I know that this coming year will be filled with the blessings that God extends but again, I just want to express my thanks and excitement for all that is to come.

The last time I preached was several weeks ago while I was on internship in Omaha, NE. I shared with the congregation that I was really excited about the Gospel reading which was from John 6 where Simon Peter being asked if he will turn and leave Jesus responds, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." I noted that this is a high moment for Peter in the scripture and that there are other times where he struggles greatly.

Fast forward a few weeks and few states and here we are. It didn't last long before looking at a text where Simon Peter is putting his foot in his mouth.

"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus says to Peter.

It's a not so "nice" or polite wakeup call. Jesus confronts Peter over his rebukes regarding the teachings of the great suffering that the Son of Man will come into. Jesus is a teacher and this lesson is one that comes up time and time and time again.

Where do we put our trust? Where do we believe power dwells? Do we rely on ourselves and the world or do we go to Jesus? Peter is such a wonderful person to read about in the Bible because he so clearly wrestles with the challenges that we face again and again. His faith is in Jesus but he is human, outside forces sway him and he challenges his teacher. Jesus unflinchingly reminds Peter that He is the way, the truth.

Jesus turns to the crowd and proclaims that even with all the riches and knowledge of worldly things, this means nothing when we face the reality of death. No, we must go with Jesus who extends, in his suffering, death, and resurrection, eternal life. Those ways of the world will mean nothing when standing up to the power that Christ has.

Peter continues to learn and struggle, just as we do, and he eventually begins the church that has persisted all the way through today. Living our lives together, through all things, is how we can persist in our love for Jesus and when we fail, we are in a community that models the grace and love that Jesus has for each of us.

We find strength, power, and knowledge in a community committed to our faith in Christ.

This lesson is an important one as we look at our theme in this season of Creation. How can we live into Jesus' challenge to take up the cross and follow him? Training our hearts and minds on Christ comes with the consequence of actively letting go of the need for accumulation and excessive consumption, instead looking how we, moved by the Holy Spirit, can care for our neighbor.

The world is happy to teach us different narratives about what this means for us. The locus of who our neighbor is continues to shrink and shrink. First, it only extends to humans, and then, as we know, this quickly limits us to which humans count as our neighbors.

This is thinking that is necessary to continue our consumption patterns, when we see the devastation that climate change brings to those all over the world. Everyone has already become vulnerable to more and more frequent instances of extreme weather but eyes are still fixed on some future event that will REALLY signal that the Earth is in distress.

The Earth cries out to her inhabitants, in need and distressed. The inhabitants of Earth lose their lives and livelihood in events of cruel and random chance, subject to tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, and more extreme weather, egged on by indifference to our neighbors who are most vulnerable. It will never be bad enough until the prevailing narrative of the world no longer insists that it "must" be this way.

If we learn this lesson that Jesus taught Simon Peter, to put our trust in Jesus and not in our own understanding, we can be more open to lessons from all of those around us, even the lessons the Earth is screaming out to us.

While many cultures have been intentional about their care for the environment, the academic movement for environmental ethics in the west was pioneered by a professor from Wisconsin, Dr. Aldo Leopold.

Leopold's writings about the environment challenged the narrative in his time and continue to influence the conversation of environmental ethics. Leopold argued for the expansion of the view of community to not just the people that inhabit it but the land it also resides upon. The soil, the trees, the air, are inseparable from the community and thus they should be treated with the same love and respect we would come to know in a community. He called this the "Land Ethic."

Leopold also made the case that we could never fully understand, as part of the ecosystem, the ramifications of our actions on that ecosystem. Due to this, we should be extremely cautious and observe carefully what comes of the way we use the land around us.

This is in lockstep with what Jesus teaches. The land is not something to conquer or extract from but something to treat with dignity and love as we are a part of God's creation. This means extending love out to all those that cry out in need.

Taking seriously the needs of the Earth and the call to take up our cross and follow Jesus still leaves us with the predicament of what is next. Where do we go from here?

Faith communities when practicing the welcome and love that Jesus extends, are transformational places. They can shift, adapt, and outright change, to meet the needs of their neighbor and to call more people into that space. Cultivating these communities means setting aside the assumptions of the ways of the world and continuing to learn and grow in ways to transform the community.

Rooted in God, anything becomes possible. The kingdom of heaven on Earth is no longer something that is unimaginable, instead it becomes a hope, a vision, and a goal. Learning and living in harmony with the Earth as part of the community. The task may seem impossible but the burden is not placed squarely on our own shoulders. Our community can carry much more together than any one can carry apart, all through the power of the Holy Spirit.

When hope for the future feels dim, remember, that instinct comes from within, not from God. The reading from Isaiah is an example of when times were grim for the Israelites. This most likely was written during a time when both the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had been conquered by other empires. The people had become prisoners and slaves, often forced to leave their homeland in fear. Hope is not something that would feel present in this time.

The scripture is a reminder that God does not give up on God's people. Isaiah 50: 8-9 says, "...He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?"

Even when the devastation is around us and the machine of consumption continues to press on, hope is never lost. The calculus is not of the world, for our Creator and our Protector is present to provide the growth in all the good in this world.

While we may be small scatterers of the seed, God as the Gardener can produce more beautiful and wonderful things than we can imagine. Do not lose hope in the face of crisis and pain, for God always supports and loves creation. Taking up the cross and following Jesus may mean some form of sacrificing our comfort, our wealth, or our lifestyle, but these things are nothing for what we gain in Christ Jesus.

I often close the message with a prayer and I'd like to know invite you into prayer with me. Dear God, bring us into conversation with all of your creation and remind us that our community is a shared one. Allow us to be humble and learn to hear and react to the needs of all in our community. When we lose hope, assure us of your presence and love. Lead us out as we seek to scatter seeds of faith. Amen.